

TO ASSESS HOW TEACHERS USE PHYSICAL PLAY MATERIALS AS A PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH IN TEACHING AND LEARNING LITERACY IN PRE-PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates how teachers use physical play materials as a pedagogical approach in teaching and learning literacy in pre-primary schools. Anchored in John Dewey's Progressive Theory of Education, the study emphasizes experiential learning through play. A review of literature highlights the role of physical play in enhancing children's literacy skills such as letter recognition, vocabulary development, and phonemic awareness. The study aimed to assess teachers' integration of physical play materials in early literacy instruction. A qualitative approach was adopted, using a phenomenological research design. The target population included ECDE sub-county coordinators, public primary school head teachers, pre-primary teachers, and lead teachers in Kisumu West Sub-County. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the ECDE sub-county coordinator and head teachers, focus group discussions with pre-primary teachers, and classroom observation protocols for lead teachers. Ethical procedures were followed, including permissions from relevant authorities. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. Findings revealed that while teachers acknowledge the value of physical play materials, challenges such as limited resources and sufficient training hinder effective implementation. The study concludes that physical play is essential in literacy learning and recommends enhanced teacher training, provision of play resources, and supportive policies to strengthen play-based pedagogy.

Keywords: Pedagogical Approach, Physical Play, Pre-Primary Teachers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education plays a crucial role in laying the foundation for lifelong learning, especially in literacy acquisition. Play-based learning has been widely recognized as an effective approach for promoting language development, cognitive growth, and social interaction among young learners. Among the different types of play, physical play which involves activities that engage children's bodily movements and manipulation of tangible materials offers a unique opportunity to foster literacy skills in engaging and developmentally appropriate ways.

Globally, scholars such as Piaget (1951) and Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the importance of hands-on, interactive experiences in children's cognitive and language development. More recently, Dewey's progressive education theory has reinforced the idea that meaningful learning occurs through doing- making physical ply and ideal tool for early literacy instruction. However,

while developed countries have embraced this approach in policy and practice, its implementation remains limited in many developing contexts, including Kenya.

In the Kenyan pre-primary school setting, curriculum frameworks acknowledge the importance of play, but there is limited empirical research exploring how teachers practically use physical play materials to support literacy learning. Observations suggest that despite the availability of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), many teachers struggle with planning and integrating physical play activities into literacy lessons due to lack of training, resources, and institutional support.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in John Dewey's Theory of Progressive Education, which emphasizes experiential learning as central to effective teaching and development. Dewey (1938) advocated for education systems that focus on the child's interests, experiences, and interaction with their environment. He viewed learning as an active process where knowledge is constructed through doing rather than passive reception.

Dewey argued that play is natural and valuable context for learning, particularly in early childhood. According to his theory, physical interaction with materials enhances children's understanding and retention of new concepts. In literacy development, physical play- such as manipulating in movement-based storytelling – supports not only fine motor skills but also phonemic awareness, vocabulary growth, and comprehension.

In the context of this study, Dewey's theory provides a foundation for understanding how physical play materials function as tools for literacy learning. It highlights the importance of integrating child-centered, activity-based approaches into classroom practice. By assessing how teachers use physical play in literacy instruction, the study aligns with Dewey's vision of an education system that values learning by doing. Creativity, and meaningful engagement with real-life materials and situations.

Thus, Dewey's framework supports the investigation of pedagogical strategies that connect play with literacy development in pre-primary settings and underscores the importance of reflective teaching practices that consider the needs and experience of young learners.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of physical play materials as a pedagogical tool in early childhood education has increasingly gained scholarly attention due to its effectiveness in supporting emergent literacy skills. According to Bodrova and Leong (2007), physical play materials such as building blocks, puzzles, sand trays, and letter tiles foster fine motor coordination and cognitive engagement, which are essential for reading and writing development. These materials allow children to interact with their environment, promoting learning through active exploration and manipulation.

Vygotsky's (1978) social cultural theory underpins this approach by emphasizing the importance of hands-on experiences and social interactions with the child's zone of proximal development. Similarly, Piaget, (1951) proposed that children in the preoperational stage construct knowledge through physical manipulation of concrete objects, reinforcing the pedagogical value of play materials in literacy instruction.

Globally, studies have shown that integrating physical play materials into literacy instruction enhances learning outcomes. For instance, Neuman and Roskos (2005) reported that children exposed to literacy-rich play environments with physical materials demonstrated improved

phonemic awareness and vocabulary acquisition. Fleeer (2010), in an Australian study, observed that structured play using physical materials helped children build stronger connections between symbols and meanings.

In the African context, Ng'asike (2012) highlighted that while traditional African play is rich in learning opportunities, its application in formal early literacy teaching is underutilized. This underuse is often attributed to rigid curriculum demands and insufficient teacher preparation. In South Africa, Pyle and Danniels (2017) found that the effective use of physical play materials contributed to improved learner engagement and literacy development, provided that teachers received appropriate training and support.

Kenyan studies echo similar findings. Muthoni and Nyaga (2018) established that although the Kenyan Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) advocates for play-based learning, the actual use of physical play materials in classrooms remains limited. This limitation is often due to large class sizes, inadequate resources, and limited professional development opportunities for teachers. Oyier and Mwoma (2019) further emphasize that success of play-based literacy instruction depends largely on the availability and the teacher's pedagogical knowledge.

Despite the existing body of research, a significant gap remains in localized studies focusing specifically on how pre-primary teachers in Kenya, particularly in Kisumu West Sub-County, implement and perceive the use of physical play materials in literacy instruction. This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring practical classroom applications, challenges faced by teachers, and the perceived impact of physical play materials on literacy development in early learners.

Goal of the Study

The goal of the study was to assess how teachers use physical play materials as a pedagogical approach in teaching and learning literacy in pre-primary schools in Kenya.

3. METHODS

Research Design

A research design refers to the overall strategy that research chooses to integrate the different components of the study in a coherent and logical way, thereby ensuring that the research problem is effectively addressed (Kothari, 2004). This study adopted a phenomenological research design to explore teachers' use of play materials as a pedagogical approach in teaching and learning literacy in pre-primary schools. Phenomenology focuses on understanding the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals (Creswell, 2013). In this case, the design was suitable for gaining in-depth insights into how pre-primary school teachers perceive, interpret, and implement play-based approaches using various play materials in literacy instruction.

The choice of a phenomenological design was guided by the study's objective to capture the subjective experiences of teachers, including their beliefs, practices, and challenges in using physical, object, socio-dramatic, and games-with-rules play materials. The design also allowed for rich, and cultural factors influencing teaching practices in Kisumu West sub-county.

Through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions, the phenomenological approach facilitated the collection of qualitative data that reflects the authentic voices of the participants. It also enabled the researcher to interpret patterns and meanings within their experiences, aligning well with the interpretivist paradigm underpinning this study (van Manen, 1990).

Study participants

A target population is defined as the entire group of individuals, events, or objects having common observable characteristics to which a researcher intends to generalize the results of the study (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). In qualitative research, defining the target population is critical in ensuring the credibility, relevance, and applicability of the findings. For this study, the target population consisted of key education stakeholders involved in the implementation of literacy instruction in early childhood settings within Kisumu West Sub-County.

Specifically, the target population included pre-primary school teachers, pre-primary lead teachers, public primary school head teachers, and the ECDE sub-county coordinator. Pre-primary school teachers were targeted because they are the direct implementers of pedagogical strategies in literacy learning, including the use of play materials. Lead teachers were included due to their role in offering professional guidance and support to their peers, and often act as curriculum champions at the school level. Head teachers were involved as they oversee curriculum implementation in their respective institutions and influence resource allocation and pedagogical practices. The ECDE sub-county coordinator was also part of the population, given their administrative role in monitoring, evaluating, and supporting ECDE programs across the sub-county.

Research tools

Combinations of instruments were used to collect data for this study. With the guidance of research objectives data was collected from opinion based, semi - structured, open ended interview schedules, focus group discussion and classroom observation protocol where pre-school lead teachers had their interpretations, professional opinions and practices observed and recorded. The instruments are discussed in details below:

In-depth Interview Schedules for ECDE Sub-County Coordinator

IISFSC was used to collect qualitative data from one ECDE Sub-County coordinator. One Sub - County coordinator was interviewed on one-on-one basis. Semi structured in-depth interview with seven guiding questions were used to collect data regarding teachers' use of play materials as a pedagogical approach in teaching literacy in pre-primary school in relation to teacher preparation, actual teaching, development and use of play materials pedagogic approach integrated content activity areas in classroom and play materials integrated assessment. The current study adopted an in-depth semi structured interview schedule because they were useful in collecting information that could not be directly observed or difficult to put down in writing, (Kothari, 2004).

In-depth Interview Schedules for Primary School Head Teachers

IISPSHT was used to collect qualitative data from 8 primary school head teachers. Out of 13 primary school head teachers anticipated to participate in the interview only 11 responded positively who were interview on one-on-one basis. Semi structured in-depth interview with seven guiding questions were used to collect data regarding pre-primary school teachers' perspectives on use of play materials as a pedagogic integrated approach in relation to teacher preparedness, actual teaching, use of pedagogic integrated content activity areas and assessment. The current study adopted an in-depth semi structured interview schedule because they were suitable in exploring perspectives of respondents and were useful in collecting information that could not be directly observed or difficult to put down in writing (Kothari, 2004).

Focus Group Discussion Guide for Pre-primary School Teachers

Focus group is understood to be a group of people who have similar characteristics or have shared experiences that may be needed in a study (Hatch, 2002). The purpose of the focused group is to stimulate dynamics that provoke thoughts and ideas to surface through the interaction of group discussions that otherwise could have remained dormant in the individual interview (Hatch, 2002). Three focused group discussions were formed consisted of 7, 7, and 6 respondents respectively. This was informed by Morgan (2008) who noted that, the ideal number of focused group discussion is between six to eight people. FGDGFPST aimed at eliciting pre-primary school teachers understanding and use of use of play materials as a pedagogical approach in teacher preparation, actual teaching, used of play materials integrated activity areas and assessment of teaching and learning consisting of eight questions.

Classroom Observation protocol for Pre-primary school Lead Teachers

COPLT were used to gather data through observing lessons thus actual teaching of integrated lessons, development and arrangement of learning areas, and use of content activity areas in classroom and assessment methods. Hatch (2002) describes field notes as the unaltered data that are written down at the moment they are observed by the researcher. During the lesson the researcher made notations of all aspects of the lesson and the classroom environment. Observation checklists were used because they exposed the researcher to the real world of respondents and when data could not be captured through interview but by observation. Observation bridged the gap between what people say and what they actually do thus theory and practice, (Oso and Oneni, 2008).

Procedure

Data collection procedure refers to the systematic steps followed by a researcher to obtain relevant information from respondents in the field (Creswell, 2014). This process ensures that data gathered is accurate, ethical, and suitable for addressing the study objectives.

Before data collection, the researcher followed a structured process to obtain the necessary approvals. First, an authorizing letter was obtained from the Director, School of Post Graduate Studies at Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology (JOUST). This letter introduced the research and clarified the purpose of the study.

Following this, an approval letter to conduct the research was issued by the Division of Research, Innovation and Outreach - JOUST Ethics Review Office, confirming that ethical requirements had been reviewed and cleared. Subsequently, a research permit was acquired from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), granting legal authority to conduct field research.

Additional approvals were obtained from the County and Sub-County Education Offices in Kisumu West Sub-County to inform local education authorities about the study. Furthermore, the County Commissioner's and Sub-County Commissioner's offices were notified to ensure full transparency and security compliance at the local administration level.

The researcher also sought informed consent from individual participants including pre-primary school teachers, lead teachers, head teachers, and the ECDE Sub-County Coordinator. Consent ensured participants were aware of the purpose of the study, their voluntary involvement, and their right to withdraw at any point.

Upon obtaining all permissions, the researcher visited selected pre-primary schools in Kisumu West Sub-County to build rapport with staff and familiarize with the school environment. This was done to reduce intrusiveness and encourage cooperation during data collection.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved organizing, interpreting, and making meaning from the qualitative data collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations. The study adopted a thematic analysis approach, where responses were transcribed, coded, and categorized into emerging themes aligned with the research objectives. According to Creswell (2013), thematic analysis in qualitative research allows for identification of patterns and meanings within the data. Member checking and triangulation were employed to ensure credibility and consistency of the findings. This systematic approach enabled the researcher to draw meaningful insights regarding teachers' use of play materials in teaching literacy in pre-primary schools.

4. FINDINGS

The study assessed how teachers use physical play materials as a pedagogical approach to teaching and learning literacy in pre-primary schools. From the collected data various recurring views concerning use of physical play materials pedagogical approach emerged. From the coding process, three major themes evolved: (1) schemes of work and lesson plans were perceived as hectic and tiresome, (2) lack of training for the teachers in planning pedagogically, and (3) improved mastery of content for the teachers when they schemed and lesson planned.

Pedagogic Scheming and Lesson Planning was a Hectic and Tiresome Work

Hectic and tiresome in this case refers to the state of being tedious, boring and confusing. From the collected data through the use of in-depth interview majority of the informants said that the scheming and lesson planning pedagogically was quite involving and that it took more time compared to single subject approach as represented by the following extracts. During an interview with the primary school head teachers, INT8 had the following to share:

“Pedagogic means learning based on themes capturing various activity areas. Pre-school trained teachers do make schemes of work and lesson plans but not regularly. They repeatedly use the same schemes and lesson plans without updating them citing that the approach is quite involving. Making both schemes of work and lesson plans is a long and tedious.” (INT8)

The ECD pre-primary school coordinator as the officer in charge of pre-primary school curriculum implementation shared similar sentiments that pre-primary school teachers found pedagogic integrated use of physical play materials approach teacher preparation too demanding.

“In my regular visits with pre-primary school teachers during meetings and at their respective working stations, they openly express their disappointments on pedagogic integrated planning terming it as too demanding. They explain that they only have ECD syllabus and Handbook which only gives themes and learning activities for various lessons. So it is upon the teacher to generate objectives and teaching learning aids making regular planning very difficult.” (INTSC)

Findings from Focused Group Discussion also revealed that majority (16 out of 20) of the trained pre-primary school teachers understand the meaning use of physical play materials pedagogically approach but echoed that physical play materials integrated preparation was very tedious.

Another informant from FGD1 lamented that:

“Physical play materials integrated approach learning is organized under themes and all activity areas are connected during learning process through selection on learning activities. While planning I find it difficult connecting the lesson with some activity areas. For example when I was handling the topic utensils and am expected to link it with the body fluids in life skills or prophets in Religious Education; it is real difficult.” (FGD1)

Another informant from FGD2 interjected the colleague with a frowned face and sustained that:

“It is not easy lesson planning daily. It is too detailed and the fact that you have to relate it with other activity areas make it cumbersome. Pedagogically physical play materials lesson plans demand a lot of creativity in connecting activities, composing songs, looking for right tunes and rhymes with poems is too much.” (FGD2)

During classroom observations (OB1), it was observed that quite a number of lead teachers had pedagogically physical play material integrated schemes of work and lesson plans prepared by TAYARI program. Only 4 out of 11 pre-primary school lead teachers own prepared current schemes of work and lesson plans.

In another classroom observation, (OB5) the respondent availed old schemes of work and lesson plans which seemed to have been in use for a long time since they were worn out. On asking, the informant argued that, schemes of work and lesson plans have been in use for three years claiming that the classroom population was large (65 learners). This increased the workload making it difficult for the teachers to regularly prepare schemes of work and lesson plans. The respondent added that, there was no cause to worry since learning activities are always repeated so nothing had changes in the content to be taught.

The representative statements are clear that majority of informants understood the approach but expresses fear regarding scheming and daily planning noting that it is tiresome and too demanding on creativity in generating objectives per lesson and connecting activity areas. The respondents felt that pedagogically physical play materials integrated approach is too detailed and therefore it consumed a lot of time. Consequently, pre -primary school teachers neither schemed or lesson planned regularly as only 4 out of 11 lead teachers had updated records. This sentiment had been echoed by Mijeong (2008) in Korea who argued that, planning took a tremendous amount of time and energy, which makes the teachers feel overburdened. Shana (2014) in Florida and Mligo, Mitchell and Bell (2016) in Tanzania also acknowledged that teachers showed a lot of concern on the extra time and the level of creativity needed in planning and teachers did not plan pedagogically physical play material integrated approach since they felt that connecting some activity areas was almost impossible.

Lack of Training for Pre-primary school teachers using pedagogic approach play materials integrated preparation

Lack of teaching refers to lack of knowledge and skill pertaining to pedagogic physical play material integrated teacher preparation which entails scheming and lesson planning. From the

collected data, cases of pre-primary school teachers' inability to plan pedagogically physical play materials come up from quite a number of informants.

The in-depth interview informants championed that pedagogic physical play materials integrated scheming and lesson planning required proper training for one to be equipped with necessary knowledge and skills to be able to be prepared appropriately. An informant had the following to say:

"I did ECDE Diploma and honestly, I can confirm that without undergoing the training one cannot scheme and lesson plan pedagogically physical play materials, due to lack of knowledge and skill. It is a technical approach that needs training", (INT2)

The ECD pre-primary school coordinator as an administrator had the following to say concerning the training of pre-primary school teachers,

"For effective pedagogic physical play material integrated scheming and lesson planning is appropriate that one is to undergo training to be able to do it well. It is unfortunate that, there are some pre-primary schools in my area of work that hire form four school leavers who lack knowledge and skills to teach these young learners due to understaffing. Under such circumstances the obvious is that only trained teachers are capable of preparing physical play materials." (INTSC)

In Focused Group Discussion, the trained teachers who were the majority understood what pedagogic physical play material integrated means. Concerning their experiences on physical play material integrated scheming and lesson planning the informants confirmed that lack of training of some of their colleagues hindered teacher preparation. When asked one informant in FGD2 shot up and explained that,

"I am the only trained teacher here so I understand pedagogic physical play material integrated approach. I do prepare pedagogic physical play material schemes of work and lesson plans which I use in teaching my learners. One colleague is undergoing training and sometimes can use my lesson plan. One colleague who is not trained finds it difficult to understand and use the schemes of work even though I try to guide but still I think it would have been better if the teacher was trained." (FGD2)

Another informant in FGD3 slowly confessed that,

"I am a form four leaver who learnt here and I come from around. I offered to come and assist these learners since the head teacher requested so. I don't pay much attention to pedagogic physical play material integrated method of teaching. Once I have the idea of what is to be taught I simply teach. I don't know how the pedagogic physical play material integrated schemes of work and lesson plan are made, (FGD3).

During classroom observation it was noticed that teachers had the schemes of work and lesson plans which were pedagogic physical play material integrated though not updated. And when asked their experience, out of ten informants. Seven tallied that pedagogic physical play material integrated scheming and lesson planning is complex requiring training.

It is apparent that, pedagogic physical play material integrated planning requires one to undergo training and acquire knowledge and skill on how to plan. The response is connected to the

philosophy of Frobel (1782-1852) who emphasized the training of early childhood teachers saying that teachers need to be trained so that they are given knowledge and skills to handle young children.

Improved Content Mastery for Pre-primary school Teachers who Scheme and Lesson Plan Pedagogically

Many of the participants agreed that pedagogic planning is quite involving because it is a daily activity, very detailed and that it requires high levels of creativity rendering it hectic and tiresome. Interestingly, during the interview, six out of 10 informants through interview debated that the creativity and extra effort required when preparing led to increased understanding of the content to be taught by the teachers hence a more successful lesson. The informants had the following to say concerning the same;

“As a teacher I think that the more time and effort taken in scheming and lesson planning should promote mastery of content making teaching of the lesson flow, enjoyable and more productive. In fact, by the end of the day, when a teacher starts teaching, the teaching flows the whole day finally saving more time.” (INT4)

Another informant argued that:

“Lesson planning is meant to give teachers a chance to get acquainted to the content and foresee any obstacle in its implementation and address it in advance. If a teacher takes a few minutes and makes sketchy schemes of work and lesson plan, then it simply means that the outcome may not be good. But by the virtue that, in pedagogic play materials integrated approach, normally the schemes of work and lesson plans are lengthy and detailed, then to me pre -primary school teachers who regularly planning, are even more and better equipped to have a successful lesson.” (INTSC)

Data collected from Focused Group Discussion revealed that some respondents agreed to point that, pedagogic play material integrated preparation improved mastery of content. Four out of seven respondents in FGD1, five out of seven in FGD2 and four out of six agreed that it promoted mastery of content. In FGD1 one informant confessed that:

“Even though, pedagogic play material integrated scheming and lesson planning take a lot of time and is very involving, when one prepares them well and regularly, it makes the teacher understand the teaching and learning activities well and this promotes effective learning.” (FGD1)

During classroom observation (OB7), it was noted that the teacher taught without constantly referring to the available lesson plan. This was evident that, the teacher had a good mastery of content to be taught; a point attributed to the fact that, proper and regular preparation of schemes of work and lesson plan led to the improved content mastery. This made the lesson to progress smoothly in a flowing manner.

From the in-depth interview, focused group discussion and classroom observation one can deduce that, even though pedagogic play material integrated preparation is demanding in time and creativity, it is crystal clear that, regular and proper pedagogic play material integrated teacher preparation improves mastery of content hence quality teaching and learning outcomes. Gichuba, Opatsa and Nguchu (2010) support this by saying that, good planning takes into account the

availability of learning resources, other events within the school calendar and the interrelation between various activity areas and this enhances good time management in relation to work load.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study concluded that; not all pre-primary school teachers understood use of physical play materials pedagogical approach in teaching and learning literacy because some pre-primary school teachers were not trained. Most of the informants echoed that physical play materials integrated schemes of work and lesson plans were long and detailed making them tedious and boring to prepare. Based on these findings, the study concluded that, pre-primary school teachers in Kisumu West Sub-County did not regularly use physical play materials integrated schemes of work and lesson plans. The study recommended that the County Government, to employ enough trained and qualified pre-primary school teachers who are conversant with the use of play materials as pedagogical approach in teaching and learning literacy. To SQASO and pre-primary school managers to continuously monitor on how pre-primary school teachers prepare play materials integrated schemes of work and lesson plans and advise them when necessary to ensure regular preparation of the documents that are updated and current.

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