

Research Article

Early Grade Education Practitioners Perspectives of Using Play Base Learning as a Pedagogy in the Central Region, Ghana

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Abstract

While play-based learning was practiced by educators nearly a century ago, the use of play in Ghanaian children's education was only emphasized when the National Early Grade Education was made compulsory in 2007-2008. Play is important in children's learning since it is a rich time for the growth of meaningful learning, expansive knowledge, universal skills, creativity, imagination, and enjoyment. There is a need for more study on play-based learning activities conducted in Ghanaian early grade education to offer more recorded support for its use and efficacy. This qualitative investigation by observation and interview approaches to 50 early grade teachers who taught children who were 4 and 8 years old was to address three aims: the type of play most commonly used by teachers in their classrooms, teachers' perception on utilizing play in their classrooms and teachers' resources on designing lessons for children. Dramatic play was found to be rated highest in the type of play favourable teachers prefer. All teachers observed have positive views on the use of play in the classroom, and finally, teachers' resources are rooted in observation of the children's play interests closely, from works of literature and the internet. The positive perception and implementation of teachers on play-based learning contribute to their professional background, such as the experience of teachers, knowledge, level of education, and how well they get support from the school's principal.

Keywords

Sociocultural, Play-based Learning, Early Grade Education, Types of Play

1. Introduction

According to related research, play is one of the central components of early childhood development [1, 33]. As a result, it is highly important to incorporate play-based approaches into education to support children in terms of cognitive, social, physical and emotional development. Pediatricians understand that play is a key factor in healthy brain development [3] (and occurs naturally in almost every child).

Vygotsky (1967), cited in [7], imagination begins to blossom

through play; imagination is missing in its absence. Imagination is also a key driver of creativity, creative thinking ability, and curiosity, all of which are central to learning. Movement while playing also encourages fine and gross motor skills that are beneficial for tasks such as holding a crayon or pencil or running or jumping [23]. Play allows one to practice language and social skills as well. In their play opportunities, children are provided opportunities to express feelings,

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think critically, create, play outside the box with ideas, experiment and engage in problem solving, and negotiate a solution to issues [9]. Furthermore, the benefits of play can be attached to emotional development as a means of nurturing a healthy relationship with people as well as self-esteem [9].

In a state such as Ghana, where academic achievement is very important, parents are increasingly motivating their children from a young age to achieve their educational potential [2]. Many worried caregivers start teaching their children reading and writing skills before the norm. Furthermore, teachers feel that they should prepare their preschoolers for entry into the formal education system [18]. Although it seems clear that young academically successful children tend to thrive in areas such as language acquisition during their formative school years [10], there is substantial evidence showing that those who initially struggle may eventually catch up and reach roughly the level of children considered "high achievers" later in their academic career. However, pressing even very young children to learn skills too soon has a negative impact on their natural learning trajectories. Through repeated drilling methods, they can be put under the shadow of rote memorization, which could detract from the general learning experience [29]. In contrast, children play on their own learning opportunities, independently discover concepts, engage meaningfully with ideas, and have a stronger grasp of critical skills as well as creativity and imagination [11]. This approach has become increasingly popular in early grade educational settings in Ghana. The literature surrounding this topic is limited in the country [24], although current studies highlight the benefits of implementing play-based teaching and learning interventions to improve child development and educational outcomes.

Mohd, A. et.al. investigated the use of play-based learning among three Chinese-ethnic early grade teachers in a private preschool classroom [23]. Their goal in doing this was to understand the interrelations between teachers' knowledge, attitudes and practices toward play-based learning by focusing on teacher and child education through case studies. Through self-report assessments and observational data, the authors observed that teachers' knowledge had a stronger effect on their use of play-based learning than on their attitudes about play-based learning. Teachers' comprehension of play-based learning could impact the extent to which these strategies are incorporated into their teaching. Practitioners could easily see play as separate from learning if they have not previously learned play-based approaches and therefore think that it obstructs educational activities. [19] investigated the role of play-based education in Ghanaian early-grade education contexts. These pedagogies substantially improved children's engagement, creativity, problem-solving ability and social skills. The study argued that supportive environments, trained teachers and proper tools for play, along with appropriate materials for play, are essential for appropriate play-based learning interventions. Here, another examination of attitudes toward play-based learning by Ghanaian EGE teachers was conducted by [16].

These findings highlighted the extent to which teachers understand the importance of play in supporting children's cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional development. However, it also identified teachers as dealing with obstacles, including lack of resources and academic pressure to achieve academic results, to the full implementation of play-based approaches. To clarify this, a qualitative study that seeks to resolve the following questions as to why a growing trend has been observed in promoting play-based learning at Ghanaian EGE is appropriate:

- 1) What kinds of play-based activities do EGE practitioners generally use in their classrooms?
- 2) How do EGE practitioners understand play-based activities and play a role in learning and teaching processes?
- 3) What tools do EGE practitioners use to create play-based activities?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Popular Types of Play for Teachers

EGE classrooms teach children which types of play they should engage with to learn new things and develop. There are a few types of play that one would witness in an EGE context. Therefore, pretend or dramatic play is a kind of play where people participate in imaginary scenarios and act out characters such as doctors or superheroes. This kind of play promotes the development of creative thinking abilities, problem solving skills, and social skills among children [17]. It is the kind of interaction with art that is generally called 'creativity', and the other thing you use is it is drawing or painting or sculpting play. It motivates children to practice motor and sensory thinking, self-expression and imagination [25].

Additionally, physical play—running, jumping, and climbing—is necessary for gross motor development, coordination and physical health [8]. Manipulative play, in which objects and materials such as puzzles, blocks, or building sets are used for manipulation, contributes not only to children's cognitive development but also to their problem solving and fine motor skills [6].

2.2. Teachers' Perspectives on Play-based Learning

The impact of play on teachers' attitudes toward children's use of play in EGE learning has been examined in the literature. Studies show that teachers consistently have positive perceptions of the inclusion of play in early grade education. These factors are regarded as important for facilitating the holistic development of children in terms of their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical senses [4]. According to [12], not only is play an activity for children themselves, but it is also possible for teachers to work with them and thus help to build an understanding of the important skills children will also

need throughout their lives in the context of teaching to enhance positive engagement. Moreover, teachers see play as a means to foster productive relationships among children and between children and their teachers, thus enhancing the cultural aspect of their classroom and creating an open atmosphere for learning based on support [20].

2.3. Resources in Designing Play-based Activities

Essential tools and preparation for educational materials can be used to engage children in play activities. In the case of early-grade education, this is the practice of intentionally selecting materials for play-based activities so that children can be playful and engaged through play and engagement with the material for young children. Another study highlighted the importance of open-ended materials, which include loose parts and natural materials, allowing a free and open-ended environment where children can play, manipulate, and act outside of the box [14]. They also develop problem-solving and critical-thinking skills and give children some control over their play. Through a developmentalist lens [13], researchers have explored teachers' levels of knowledge about children's development and their learning theories to generate learning opportunities. Teachers with knowledge about pretend play, constructive play, sociodramatic play, etc., can select resources accurately and build on that for imaginative play, playfulness, problem-solving ability, and social skills [13]. Similarly, teachers' experiences and reflections about play-based activities help guide resource choices. Such experiences can suggest to teachers where particular resources, materials, and play arrangements might be leveraged for positive use, providing them with information on possible strategies to refine and more carefully choose what resources they would like to use [26].

2.4. Play and Theory of Childhood Learning

Play has been a key component of early developmental encounters in education. The developmental roles of play have been demonstrated in most of these studies—a phenomenon that is extremely relevant and has been considered in past research. Piaget's cognitive theory provides insight into how play-induced cognitive advantages in early childhood appear in young children. [15] plays is what children learn through constructing knowledge, solving problems, and learning about abstract concepts through their own discovery and playing. This is because play reinforces symbolic representation, imaginative thinking, and creative problem-solving skills in children, which fosters cognitive skills [21]. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory explains play and its importance in early education in children's brains. In the zone of proximal development (ZPD), the zone in which children play together, theory has focused more on how social interactions and support interactions increase [32]. Play is the learning moment in which children learn, and social

and language development takes place where children involve themselves in learning shared by shared experiences based on play [32]. Drawing on these theoretical findings, previous studies have reliably shown positive associations between play and several childhood learning tasks. [27] emphasize the positive effects of play on the acquisition of social skills, particularly not only in terms of how to communicate but also in terms of how to cooperate and take perspective. Furthermore, play fosters the development of problem solving skills since it is an imaginative play in which children encounter scenarios when they need to think creatively about solutions to developing ideas and helping them solve problems [27]. Indeed, there is strong evidence that play augments executive function development [22], such as self-regulation, working memory and attention. Contemporary theories of play, such as ecological systems theory, suggest that play may be important for early-grade children's learning. It is centered around the child, environmental and peer aspects and the social space of play [27]. It acknowledges that all play takes place in different circumstances, houses, schools, and neighborhoods, which all bring their own affordances and boundaries. [12] says that offering different settings for diverse play and supportive climates enables children's interest to be drawn out, encourages socialization within the environment and provides participation in social environments that do not deviate from their cultural and societal values [12].

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Setting

Using a purposive sampling technique, the research setting was identified; this setting comprises selected public early grade centers in the central North region of Ghana. The centres use play in teaching and learning; thus, these centres were selected as the research setting. The headteachers in some of the said centres had degree in Education, and others had degree in diploma from the University of Education, Winneba and the University of Cape Coast. The training of the various headteachers were reflected in the EGE they used. There were five classrooms in each of the centres for children aged 4 to 8 years. Each classroom contains a designated area for play and play paraphernalia. Teachers are given the freedom to design their own lessons using the National EG Curriculum Standards as guidelines. Parents of the children attending these early grade centres cut across all socioeconomic statuses of citizens in the nearby communities of the region.

3.2. Participants

The participants in this research were fifty teaching staff at the selected centres aged between 35 and 40 years. One of the respondents, Teacher Abena, is 35 years old and holds a diploma in the EGE. The second participant, Teacher Veronica, aged 30, has a degree in early-grade education. Last, Teacher

Rose, at 25 years old, completed her degree in early grade education. With 13 years of teaching experience, Teacher Abena stands out among the group, whereas Teachers Veronica and Rose each have less than five years of experience. All three educators have received certification for early grade teaching in Ghana by successfully completing their diploma and degree programmes in the teacher college of education, which is the minimum certification required for those who intend to be teachers in the country.

3.3. Research Design

This qualitative study used observation and interviewing methods to collect the data. The study involved fifty EGE teachers who had worked with children aged four to eight years. After obtaining permission from the centres headteachers, the researcher carried out observations over a period of four weeks, with a total of fifty observations across the 10 selected centres. All the observation sessions were conducted over 2 hours per day, culminating in a comprehensive three-week observational phase. Initially, for the first week, the researcher focused on acclimating to the space and the subjects. The naturalistic observation technique was employed to avoid disturbing the environment and its participants' relationships. As defined by [5], naturalistic observation is defined as a method in which the researcher observes individuals in their natural context, documenting their actions, speech, and social interactions. This approach will provide a deep understanding of the actions or events that arise within day-to-day life. The researcher maintained an unobtrusive position at the back of the classroom to observe the teachers and children. Field notes and checklists were utilized as devices to record these observations. After each session, face-to-face interviews were held with the participating teachers. The researcher sought to create a supportive and nonthreatening environment in these informal interview sessions, which facilitated open exchange and yielded in-depth data. [30] describe informal interviews as "casual conversations with participants that contain open-ended questions" that researchers can use flexibly to explore themes for some insights or suggestions. The EGE teachers were interviewed for ten to fifteen minutes to gain insight into what makes them care about play-based in their centres and the kinds of materials that exist. The interviews were audio-taped with the consent of participants for archival and reference purposes.

Teachers were provided with an informed consent form before participating in the observation and interviews. Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any point in time, and the researcher ensured that the study did not disrupt the classroom activities of selected schools during the observations and interviews. The researcher ensured anonymity of participants and schools in reporting the findings. Data was analysed using thematic analysis or content analysis to identify patterns and themes. The researcher coded data, identified categories, and drew out key themes related to the research aims.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Types of Play Frequently Used in the EGE Classroom

Utilizing observation and checklists as evidence forms, the majority of classroom teachers preferred to integrate dramatic play, followed by creative play, physical play, and manipulative play. The teacher Abena was hands-off and let her class do whatever they wanted. There is so much at her disposal in her classroom that she would serve imaginative play. The researcher has seen Teacher Abena establish a few themed stations: a post office, clinic, house, and shopping center. Additionally, in the classroom, there is the "mini town" where children can engage with one another through role play, such as by doctors or restaurant staff. We circle approximately 10 a.m. and say that Teacher Abena, as the teacher, chose physical activities for outdoor play on the playground based on five different observations. As a result, dramatic play is commonly used in the classroom, which greatly benefits kids because it allows them to play. Additionally, dramatic play has been gradually added for daily use in Teacher Veronica's class. The theme this week is "my community", so the children on these days dressed it up wearing different dresses usually used by members of the community. By looking back at these three consecutive days of circle time for creative play, the researcher realized that the teachers were actively trying to decorate the classroom with this pirate theme, something they had not done previously. After using cut-out shapes of pirate accessories and watercolors, kids were incentivized to plan pictures of the environment. Teacher Rose's classroom demonstrated the ability to have a balanced approach to play programming. One station specializes in dramatic play with kitchen sets, dolls, and costumes. One has manipulative activities where children build with Lego sets and blocks. There's even a writing center where children can practice and write letters as well. The kids engaged in physical play three times per week. These results are in agreement with the findings [12] who suggested that most (although not all) young learner practitioners favored the use of dramatic play as an effective learning tool. The experience and training these teachers have had, therefore, is likely playing a role in their preference for using dramatic play techniques as a learning tool. A good number of practitioners who understand the importance of implementing forms of play, including this, in their classrooms are well equipped to guide children in Ghana [12].

4.2. Teachers' Perspectives on Using Play in Learning

The responses of the three teachers suggested that they understood play as part of a process of development and learning. Abena: "It is through play that children learn and create an appreciation of the world around them." Veronica wrote that "Children open new doors, create new opportunities, learn to

work, cooperate and learn from one another via play.” In conclusion, playing teaches children to tolerate each other and to be a group. To work together as one unit. Rose also views play as a good vehicle for creating skills in social communication, suggesting, saying, “I think that in general, play helps increase self-esteem and self-concept for the children are always ‘somebody’ in that play.” [1] argues that play is certainly not the only way children learn; the fact is that it is an effective way of learning. The results for this research aim support [32] argument that children’s play is an early mode of creativity; for play to be creative, one must recast or otherwise reimagine previous experiences into new worlds rather than just replicating reality. In addition, [32] argued that imagination is the internalization of children’s play; creativity is the fusion, adaptation, and creation of something new; and imagination is fundamental to creative behavior [32].

4.3. Resources in Designing Play-based Activities

When searching for resources to produce lessons from play, Abena said, “I would see what play the children are having with their friends. From there, what are they interested in.”

Similarly, Veronica said, “The kids in my classroom work hard at coming up with new ideas for what to play. Once they were quite interested in superhero, so we invited a superhero party just to celebrate this.” On her own, Rose said, “Teachers need to be observant in the classroom. Be well versed with what the children might be interested in. Hence, you can build activities accordingly. To honor their interest, because that generates their interest in discovering things.”

In addition to watching the children, teachers mentioned that they would look on different websites and read books for new ways of exploring ideas for improving the children’s play experience. For example, in the school of Veronica, since children are highly interested in pirating when they have already finished the book ‘Peter Pan’, Veronica decided to add class decoration, teach students to make pirate hats, encourage their drawings, and color for the ocean; these are the features that should make kids’ education more enjoyable.

By citing a website specifically aimed at EGE and learning, she is able to propose this idea. All those who answered said the education, training and experiences they had received helped tremendously for them and how they could start to think about designing an idea and incorporating play into their classrooms. The principal’s feedback and analyses of the activities they designed with their students improved their understanding of how to implement play-based learning. This finding indicates that, without teachers’ involvement and efforts to help improve their experience, play itself might be less meaningful. Children are never only children who are playing and not learning. [31] highlighted the importance of designing meaningful play-based learning experiences for children. Proper training and knowledge of the various types of play and reflection on children at play with their teachers on the part of

observing children when they play are lacking [28]. Play-based learning, without proper training and understanding, is difficult to implement. As all the teachers observed were trained into play through the workshops held by the SABRE Education, who said the principal, more than five years of experience working in the EG centers, and some individual teachers (Abena with Diploma in Early Childhood Education), it can be assumed that everything has given them an opportunity that is significant and meaningful to provide the lesson with play-based learning experience for the children they are teaching.

4.4. Implications of the Study

This research will hopefully contribute to the literature on how early-grade education practitioners perceive play to enhance children’s learning. This research also examined the type of play frequently used in EGE centers and teachers’ resources in designing play-based activities. Perhaps by understanding all these findings, suggestions on effective ways to implement play in the classroom could be made.

5. Conclusion

The results indicated that dramatic play was preferred as a teacher activity in this study. More importantly, all the teachers had a positive opinion of introducing play into the classroom. Among the resources teachers needed to create were closely monitoring children in their actions (observing them playing), reading books, and accessing online materials. Experienced teachers’ experiences, knowledge, education, background, and support from school leaders positively influenced their perceptions of play-based learning and influenced their practices and engagement with different play approaches. Exploring these findings raises several questions that come to mind:

- 1) What are the obstacles for teachers to plan lessons?
- 2) What do parents think of play-based activities?
- 3) Parents’ stance on play-based activities: How do they view them?
- 4) Is it an educational or a fun way to play an activity?
- 5) How can we make use of play-based learning effectively in the classroom, and how can teachers manage it?
- 6) What dramatic play materials are available in the classroom, and how do they play a role in social development?

Abbreviations

EG	Early Grade
EGE	Early Grade Education

Author Contributions

Thomas Nyaabila Abugre: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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