PLAY MATERIALS AND TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE OF GOALS OF PLAY IN PRE-PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN UYO URBAN, AKWA IBOM STATE.

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Abstract
The research study investigated play materials and teachers' knowledge of goals of play activities in pre-primary schools in Uyo Urban of Akwa Ibom State. Three research questions guided the study. The researchers adopted the survey design. The population of the study consisted of all the 685 teachers in all the 18 pre-primary schools in Uyo Urban. The sample of the study consisted of 60 teachers randomly drawn from the pre-primary schools in Uyo Urban of Akwa Ibom State. Frequency, percentage and rank order were used to analyze and interpret the data. The findings on the play materials showed pre-primary schools in Uyo Urban have materials for both the outdoor and indoor activities but their availability varies from school to school. The findings also revealed that teachers are knowledgeable about the role of play activities in children's creative and cognitive development especially on the physical development. This seems to suggest that play activities are not mutually exclusive; hence children's development should be considered holistically through play activities. The following recommendations among others were made, flexible outdoor play components needed by adding equipment and materials capitalizing on the natural features of the play space, creating interest area and active time block each day should be reserved for activities from which the children can select and suggestions for further research were made on the basis of the findings.
Keywords: Play, cognitive development, creative development, pre-primary education

Introduction

Teachers' task in working with young children is to provide an environment in which children's enthusiasm is nurtured and sustained rather than subdued or even destroyed. This is why schools will continue to emphasize the importance of engaging in developmentally appropriate practice. Young children are eager to learn (Essa, 2011). This is awesome responsibility on the shoulders of early childhood educators that can be met through careful and sensitive study and understanding of the characteristics and needs of young children. One of the commonest things among all children is the need to play which serves as a means of learning about and making sense of the world. But more than that, play is essential to all aspects of children's development. Arnold Gesell (1880-1961) cited in Essa (2011) underscores that, play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation, as well as for promoting language, cognition and social competence. Play promotes mastery as children practice skills; it furthers cognitive development as thinking

abilities are stretched; it involves language, encouraging new uses; it involves physical activity; it helps children work through emotions; its inventive nature makes it creative; and it is often a socializing event. In no way is play a trivial pursuit, but rather it is a serious undertaking necessary to healthy development for all children. Play is the way children come to understand the world (Steglin, 2005).

Play benefits children by allowing them ‘’to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, physical, cognitive and emotional strength’’ (American Academy of pediatrics, 2007). Children learn about their world through play when they can freely explore, practice adult roles, master their fears, and develop confidence and new competencies. The importance of play in pre-primary school education is also acknowledged in Nigeria’s National Policy on Education as it states that Early Childhood Care, Development and Education shall among its purposes be to ‘’inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and the use of toys; develop a sense of cooperation and team spirits; and teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes among others through play; (FRN, 2013).

Government plans to achieve the objectives of pre-primary school education by ensuring that the curriculum of teacher education is oriented towards play-way method as well as make provision in teacher education programmed for specialization in early childhood care and education and for retraining of teachers (FRN, 2013). It is important for teachers to be aware of the different types of play and to recognize that children develop increasing social and cognitive skills as they progress. Infants need appropriate objects, space and time for observation, manipulation, and exploration, which helps them to learn about the properties of their environment. Pre-scholars need sizable blocks of time to engage in self-selected play and many open ended materials that lend themselves to exploration and mastery for instance, clay, blocks, sand and water. In addition, time, space, and materials that lend themselves to social play should always be available, including dolls, dress-up clothes, and blocks. School-age children, while appreciating such open-ended materials, also enjoy some simple organized games with rules (Essa, 2011). A wealth of research supports the value of play (Steglin, 2005). Without the opportunities for play and an environment that supports it, children’s learning is limited. Early childhood programme that promotes and supports learning increase and enhance children’s opportunities for success in school and life (Morrison, 2001).

All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is innate. Play is a biological, psychological, and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development wellbeing of individuals and communities (Power, 2000). Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. Play is simply about having fun! (Ginsburg, 2007).

Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute for play, opines that play is anything that spontaneously is done for its own sake but appears purposeless, produces pleasure and joy, leads one to the next stage of mastery (Tippett, 2008). Jeanine Quellette refers to play as, "activity that is unencumbered by adult direction, and does not depend on manufactured items or rules imposed by someone other than the kids themselves" (Quellette, 2007). When children play, they are actively engaged in activities they have freely chosen, that is, they are self-direct and motivated from within. Play is free from time, space, and rule constraints and reward by inherent in play rather than dependent on winning.

Playing with toys can be pivotal to a child's development and toys that children enjoy playing with at different ages can assist in specific areas of development, for example, cognitive and language development. Outdoor play has obvious benefits for increasing levels of physical activity as well as other areas of a child's wellbeing and development including the opportunity to develop an understanding and respect for the natural world. Playtime at school could offer children a unique opportunity to advance their interacting skills and social cognitive resources through informal self-directed play. Play is vital part of children's development and is fundamental for every child (Ginsburg, 2006). Play is so important to children's development that the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights (1989) recognizes it as a basic right of every child.

Many experts agree that play provides the foundation for learning and later academic success. Research demonstrates the importance of child-initiated play in the development of language and literacy skills (Boddrova and Leong, 2007). A cross-national longitudinal study found that children's language performance at age seven was significantly higher when teachers had allowed children to choose their own activities at age four (Montie, Xiang and Swhweinhart, 2007). Developmental psychologists identify four types of child initiated play: exploratory play, constructive play, dramatic play and for older children, games with rules (Spiegel, 2008).

Guidelines from the Association for childhood Education International (ACEI) and the National Association for the Education of young children (NAEYC), two respected professional

associations, affirm that play is essential for all children's healthy development and learning across all ages, domains and cultures (Essa, 2011). Play does the following:

- Enables children to make sense of their world.
- Develops social and cultural understanding.
- Allows children to express their thoughts and feelings.
- Fasters flexible and divergent thinking
- Provides opportunities to meet and solve real problems
- Develops language and literacy skills and concepts

(Isenberg and Jalongo, 2010).

Children's growing sense of independence is supported when they can confidently and competently use equipment and when space and materials are arranged so they can see what is available and make autonomous choice. Children are more productively involved in activities when the purpose of classroom spaces is clearly defined and when play materials are developmentally appropriate (Shepherd and Eaton, 1997). A variety of interesting and versatile equipment should be available in the outdoor play yard. Such an area should provide activities and equipment that add opportunities for different movement and sensory experiences. Gentle swings and slides, safe places to crawl and feel new surfaces, places to push, pull and roll small toys and opportunity for other action activities should be available outside for the nursery school pupils (Wellhousen, 2002).

The early childhood setting should provide an environment in which these traits are encouraged and valued. Creativity has to be nurtured; it does not happen on its own. The teacher plays an important role in fostering creativity by providing a variety of materials and encouraging imaginative use of them. When children are allowed creative expression, each will produce a different outcome (Drew and Rankin, 2004). It is important in setting an appropriate climate for creativity to provide enough time for children to get involved in and complete their projects. Children need to have ample time block during the day in which they can explore and try out their ideas.

Creativity is, in fact, a part of cognitive development. As children explore and manipulate things, they try out new combinations of the things they already know about. By putting together what they know in new ways, they are being creative. The exploration of infants and toddlers is the prelude to creativity (Gonzalez- Mena and Eyer, 2007). In the infant and toddler programme

of Reggio Emilia in Italy, each facility includes well-stocked art studio and art teacher. In addition, each classroom incorporates an art centre with a range of materials for exploration, and creative construction (Gandini, 2005). By physical manipulating and changing objects, the child constructs knowledge about the objects and their relationships. This is an important point. Knowledge is not something that is ‘’poured’’ into children by some external source, such as the teacher, but something that the children have to construct for themselves. This is why Piaget’s theory is also called, a constructivist theory (Essa, 2011).

Children’s cognitive development is best promoted when they are in a safe, loving environment where their basic needs are met. Furthermore, such environment must be rich in appropriate stimuli and sensory experiences that help to explore and learn about their world. Science supports many of the intuitions about the benefits of play. Several experimental studies show that school pupils pay more attention to academics after they have had a recess an unstructured break in which children are to play without direction from adults (Pellegrini and Holmes, 2006). Studies also indicate a link between play particularly symbolic, pretend play and the development of language. For example, psychologist Edward Fisher analyzed 46 published studies of the cognitive benefits of play and found that ‘’sociodramatic play’’ what happens when children pretend together results in improved performances in both cognitive linguistic and affective domains.

Constructive and imaginative play has been identified as the most important for cognitive development (Health Council of the Netherlands, 2004). In early childhood it is important to support and encourage self –directed play activities even these appear meaningless to adults. Allowing a child time and freedom to complete self-directed play activities to their own satisfaction supports the child’s ability to concentrate (Elkind, 2007). Children with access to a variety of toys are found to reach higher levels of intellectual achievement, regardless of the children’s gender, race or social class. Play reduces the tension that often comes with having to achieve or needing to learn and in play adults do not interfere and children relax. In school settings play helps children adjust to new environment as well as giving them basis for extending their learning (Ginsburg, 2007). All in all, the foregoing observations show the importance of play in the development of the child. But without an empirical assessment of teachers’ knowledge regarding the development goals of play in pre-primary school education, there exists little basis for improving play facilities in per-primary schools. Teachers would have great reluctance to

change the status of their perception of play in educational system without adequate proof of need. It was against the background of helping teachers understand the developmental roles of play in pre-primary school education that this study identified play materials and teachers' knowledge of goals of play activities in pre-primary schools as the area of concern for investigation.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the importance of play in the developmental domains of children, many problems seem to beset the goals considering the availability of play materials and teachers' perception of play activities. Some parents and teachers perceive play as a trivial pursuit. Recess, creative activities and physical education have been decreased or eliminated for many children as schools face the pressure of meeting children's academic requirements in respect of literacy, numeracy, and the ability to communicate effectively. Test-taking rather than creative problem solving using play material has become the focus of educational institutions (Essa, 2011). In addition, many parents put pressure on their children at early ages to prepare for the future by spending more time on academic and less on free play (Morrison, 2001).

Teachers of young children often neglect play as part of children's development. Uninhibited gross motor activity is most likely to occur during outdoor play. The outdoor area and time children spend outdoors should be integral parts of the early childhood programme because of their many inherent values. Outdoor play is not just a time for children to expend excess energy while teachers take break. Well-planned outdoor activities can meet a range of developmental and educational objectives (Essa, 2011). But without empirical studies to find out teachers' knowledge of goals of play activities in pre-primary school education, the educational process of improving children's developmental domains the cognitive and creative through play may be misdirected or incomplete. Hence, the need to investigate play materials and teachers' knowledge of goals of play activities in pre-primary schools in Uyo Urban of Akwa Ibom State.

Purpose of the Study

The study investigated play materials and teachers' knowledge of goals of play activities in pre-primary schools in Uyo Urban. Specifically, the study aimed at the following objectives:

1. To assess the availability of play materials for outdoor and indoor activities in pre-primary schools in Uyo Urban of Akwa Ibom State.

2. To ascertain teachers' knowledge of children's creative development through play activities.
3. To determine teachers' knowledge of children's cognitive development through play activities in pre-primary schools

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study

1. What types of play materials are available for outdoor and indoor activities in pre-primary schools in Uyo Urban of Akwa Ibom State?
2. To what extent are teachers knowledgeable about children's creative development through play activities in pre-primary schools?
3. To what extent are teachers knowledgeable about children's cognitive development through play activities in pre-primary schools?

Method

This study was conducted in Uyo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. Three research questions guided the study. The researchers adopted the survey design. The population of the study consisted of all the 685 teachers in all the 18 pre-primary schools in Uyo Urban. The sample of the study consisted of 60 teachers randomly drawn from the pre-primary schools in Uyo Urban of Akwa Ibom State. The respondents were randomly drawn from pre-primary schools on the basis of six respondents from each of the 10 sampled pre-primary schools.

A researchers developed a questionnaire titled, "Developmentally Appropriates Practice Scale (DAPS)" was used to obtain information from the respondents. It is a 3 section questionnaire. Section A of the questionnaire has items on personal data of the respondents regarding name of school, gender of the respondent, and teaching qualification. Section B of the instrument deals with play facilities availability in pre-primary schools while section C which highlights the play activities for pre-primary schools is structured in a 4point scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Undecided and Strongly Disagree) to elicit information from the respondents regarding their views on play activities pupils perform in pre-primary schools in respect of creative and cognitive domains development. The items in the questionnaire were validated by 3 experts.

In order to establish the reliability of the instruments Section C of the DAPS, the instrument was pre-tested on randomly selected 30 pre-primary/primary school teachers who were not

participants in the main study. Spilt-half method and Spearman-Brown formula (Johnson and Christensen, 2004) was used to determine the internal consistency of the items on each of the two developmental domain variables (creative and cognitive) selected for the study. In this method, the instrument was administered once to the respondents. The research instrument, "Developmentally Appropriate Practices Scale" was administered to the respondents by the researchers in each of the sampled schools by courtesy of the school head teacher. Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage and rank order) were used to analyze the collected data.

Results

Research Question 1: What types of play materials are available for outdoor and indoor activities in pre-primary schools in Uyo Urban of Akwa Ibom State?

Table 1a: Frequency counts, percentage and rank order of outdoor play materials in pre-primary schools in Uyo Urban by teachers (N=60).

Items	outdoor play materials	Availability		Not Available	
		f	%	f	%
1.	Swings	36	60.00	24	40.00
2.	Seesaw	24	40.00	36	60.00
3.	Merry-go-round	32	53.33	28	46.67
4.	Climbing aids	36	60.00	24	40.00
5.	Ladder and tunnel	25	41.67	35	58.33
6.	Slides	23	38.33	37	61.67
7.	Balls	53	88.33	7	11.67
8.	Skipping ropes	38	63.33	22	36.67

The data in Table 1a show that among the eight types of outdoor play materials identified for assessment by 60 teachers in terms of availability, 53 teachers (88.33%) ticked "balls", as the most available play material followed by "skipping ropes" identified by 38 teachers (63.33%) while "swings" and "climbing aids" were respectively ticked by 36 teachers (60.00%). The least available type of play material is "slides" as was identified by only 23 teachers (38.33%). The implication of the finding is that there are different types of outdoor play materials in pre-primary schools in Uyo Urban but their availability varies from school to school with the most available type being "balls" as against the least available outdoor play material type being "slides" as identified by the respondents (88.33% vs. 38.33%).

Table 1b: Frequency counts, percentage and rank order of available types of indoor play materials in pre-primary schools in Uyo Urban by teachers (N=60)

Items	Indoor Play materials	Available		Not Available	
		f	%	f	%
1.	Nature Corner with (e.g. stones, gravels, shells, bones, etc).	37	61.67	23	38.33
2.	Creative Art Corner with (e.g. drums, flutes, rattles, blocks, puzzles, bell, saw).	46	76.67	14	23.33
3.	Mathematics Corner with (e.g. abacus, shapes, charts, bottle caps, counting sticks, clock etc).	55	91.67	5	8.33
4.	Science Corner with (e.g. aquarium, charts showing human skeleton, types of fruits, electrical appliances, lengths of objects, teeth and heart structure, etc).	47	78.33	13	21.67
5.	Shopping Corner with (e.g. toys, crayons, flowers, spoons, plates, jumbo, pens, phones tricycle, etc).	47	78.33	13	21.67
6.	Language Corner with (e.g. desktop computer, mobile phone, radio, alphabet cards, letters of the alphabet chart, picture books, etc).	42	70.00	18	30.00
7.	Water-Play Corner with (e.g. water, cups, funnel, jerry can, basin, bucket, bowel, plates and pouring containers etc).	34	56.67	26	43.33
8.	Sand-Play Corner with (e.g. containers, shovels, spoons, toy trucks etc).	34	56.67	26	43.33

The data in Table 1b indicate that among the eight types of indoor play materials highlighted for information in respect of their availability by 60 teachers, 55 teachers (92.67%) identified “mathematics corner” and its equipment as the most available play corner, jointly followed by “science” and “shopping” corners as were ticked by 47 teachers (78.33%) respectively. The least available type of indoor play materials are “water-play” and “sand-play” corners which were identified by 34 teachers (56.67%) respectively for each of the two types of play materials. The above findings show that there are provisions for different types of materials regarding indoor play activities in pre-primary schools in Uyo Urban. But the availability of the indoor play materials vary from school to school with the most available types being the “mathematics corner” as against the least available indoor play material types being “water-play” and “sand-play” corners as assessed by the respondents (91.67% vs. 56.67%).

Research Question 2: To what extent are teachers knowledgeable about children's creative development through play activities in pre-primary schools?

To answer the Research Question 2, respondents' ratings of the creative developmentally appropriate practices based on a 5-point scale were collapsed into three groups of "Agree", "Undecided" and "Disagree".

Table 2: Respondents ratings on their knowledge about children's creative development through play activities in pre-primary schools.

Items	Statements	Agree		Undecided		Disagree	
		f	%	f	%	f	%
1.	Play materials which can lend themselves to various uses help in children's creativity development.	53	88.33	5	8.33	2	3.33
2.	A variety of art materials, blocks, puppets, musical instruments and multipurpose outdoor equipment can support creativity among children.	49	81.67	9	15.00	2	3.33
3.	Books calling for colorings "within the lines" hinder creative expression of nursery school children.	27	45.00	9	15.00	24	40.00
4.	Availability of materials such as crayons, Marking pens, pencils and chalk such Become the favorite materials for drawing.	53	88.33	6	10.00	1	1.67
5.	Children playing drums and singing songs are probably the most common music activity in early childhood education.	50	83.33	7	11.67	3	5.00
6.	Children putting together what they know in new ways express their development of creativity.	53	88.33	6	10.00	1	1.67
	Average % responses		**79.17**		**11.67**		**9.19**

The responses to the statements regarding children's creative development as indicate in Table 2 show that items 1,4 and 6 respectively were positively endorsed by 88.33% of the respondents, while 83.33% "agreed" with item 5 and 81.67% "agreed" that item 2 statement is an aspect in children's creative development practice. Less than half of the respondents (45.00%) indicate that item 3 was a creative developmental practice statement. The average percentage responses are: "agreed" (79.17%), "undecided" (11.67%) and "disagreed" (9.16%) respectively.

Research Question 3: How knowledgeable are teachers in children's cognitive development by play activities in pre-primary schools?

In order to answer the Research Question 3, respondents' responses to the 5-point scale items were merged into three groups thus: "Agree", "Undecided" and "Disagree". Frequency, percentage and rank order statistics were employed to analyze the data as show in Table 3.

Table 3: Respondents rating on their knowledge in children's cognitive development by play activities in pre-primary schools.

Items	Statements	Agree		Undecided		Disagree	
		f	%	f	%	f	%
1.	Comparing, grouping, counting, matching or placing objects in logical order encourage and enhance mathematics concepts.	53	88.33	5	8.33	2	3.33
2.	Children learning to throw the ball hard so as to make it go further (force) and rolling objects faster down a steep incline (gravity) are acquiring the scientific Vocabulary of physics.	45	75.00	11	18.33	4	6.67
3.	When children observe that soap and water result in bubbles, water added to sand makes sand moldable while sugar or salt becomes invisible when stirred into water, they are dealing with the scientific vocabulary of chemistry.	46	76.67	12	20.00	2	3.33
4.	The use of puppets as actors is another way to present stories for children.	47	78.33	7	11.67	6	10.00
5.	Charts, lists, labels and notice boards that surround children in the classroom contribute to print awareness and literacy development.	47	78.33	8	13.33	5	8.33
6.	Books with simple pictures and few words are suitable for supporting language literacy development in nursery class.	48	80.00	11	18.33	1	1.67
			79.44		**16.67**		**5.56**

The data in Table 3 show that 88.33% of the participants in the study "agree" that item 1 supports children's cognitive development, while 80.00% lent positive support to item 6 and 78.33% "agreed" with items 4 and 5 respectively. It is interesting to observe that 76.67 of the respondents in the study "agreed" that item 5 has a part to play in the cognitive development appropriate practice for children. Seventy-five percent of the respondents (75.00%) indicate that item 2 was a

play activity statement about children's cognitive development. The average percentage responses are: "agreed" (79.44%), "undecided" (16.67%) and "disagreed" (5.56%) respectively.

Discussion

The finding in Table 1 revealed that there are different types of outdoor play materials which include skipping ropes, climbing aids, balls, slides, swings. Their availability varies from school to school. This finding is in agreement with Wellhousen (2002) which opines that a variety of interesting and versatile equipment should be available in the pre-primary school environment. There are a number of reasons that can be offered to explain the present study. The pre-primary school setting should provide an environment where certain traits are encouraged and nurtured. This is also in assonance with the opinion of Essa (2011) that well stocked pre-primary school programme should be full of materials that have multiple uses for optimum development of a child.

Furthermore, the finding in Table 2 revealed that there is a high level of teachers' knowledge of children's development through play. The finding is consistent with that of Essa (2011) who states that by physically manipulating objects, pupils construct knowledge about objects and their relationships. Many reasons could be advanced for the findings of this study. When children constantly use materials like building blocks, they tend to build the spirit of creativity.

Finding in Table 3 revealed that 83% of the teachers agree that children's cognitive development is enhanced through play. The finding is in consonant with the finding of Elkin (2007) that allowing a child time and freedom to complete self-directed play activities to their own satisfaction support the child's ability to concentrate. To explain this, when children are allowed by the teachers to freely manipulate objects, children learn vocabulary, concepts, problem solving which are indices of cognitive development in children.

Conclusion

The study investigated play materials and teachers' knowledge of goals of play activities in pre-primary schools in Uyo Urban. It was concluded that there are different types of play materials available for outdoor and indoor activities in pre-primary schools in Uyo Urban of Akwa Ibom State. Play materials are available for both indoor and outdoor activities in pre-primary schools and the materials vary from school to school in terms of quantity and types. Teachers are

quite knowledgeable about the developmental role of play activities in children's creative and cognitive development.

Recommendations

In the light of the findings made in this study, the following recommendations are made for the effective management of play materials and children's play activities.

1. Give feedback – As children interact with materials, they should receive feedback on the success of their actions.
2. Multipurpose – Materials or combination of materials should suggest many possibilities for play. Children's problem solving skills and imaginations will be enhanced by multipurpose materials.
3. Active Time block each day should be reserved for activities from which the children can select.
4. Early Childhood Educators have roles in promoting play.
5. Flexible outdoor play components needed by adding equipment and materials capitalizing on the natural features of the play space, and creating interest area.

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