PERCEIVED INFLUENCE OF PLAY ON LEARNING ACTIVITIES AMONG PUPILS IN ANAMBRA STATE

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Abstract

The study examined perceived influence of play on learning activities among pupils in Anambra State. Descriptive survey research design was used for the study. Three research questions and three hypotheses were formulated to guide the study. The population of the study comprised all the 128 teachers (77 males and 51 females) from the 33 public primary schools in Njikoka L. G. A. of Anambra State. The reliability of the instrument was obtained using Cronbach Alpha method which yielded 0.82. An item structured questionnaire was developed and used for data collection. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions while t-test was used to test the null hypotheses. The null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance. Major findings revealed that play is one of the essential ways pupils learn problem-solving skills, develop their self-confidence, develop their cognitive skills by introducing them to new ideas, absorb experience into existing schema and develop mental capacity to improve learning performance. It was therefore recommended among others that Anambra State Government, through the academic planners should integrate appropriate play such as structured, unstructured and risky play in their curriculum development to enhance learning. Teachers should also be exposed to training on learning activities in order to up-date their skills and knowledge on organizing play suitable for pupils.
Keywords: Perceived influence, play, learning activities, pupils

Introduction

Play is an essential part of early years' education and development. It is a powerful and important activity. It is through play that young children learn concepts and skills, including social skills, physical skills and language skills. It is vital to integrate play into the lives of children and set the foundation in facilitating and maintaining healthy and active lifestyles (Zeng, Ayyub, Sun, Wen, Xiang & Gao, 2017). In other words, children can learn through play by offering them a chance to ask questions, work collaboratively and conduct structured experimentation. The best learning happens when children play.

Play is one of the main ways in which children learn and develop. Researchers from Education & Psychology have suggested that play is a sturdy mediator of learning various skills throughout a person's life. This is in correspondence to Piagetian, which has significantly influenced

developmentally appropriate practice. It includes the perceptive that children learn naturally through play with the teachers facilitating opportunities for play in the environment they are exposed to. Obviously, children are born naturally curious and ready to learn. Ashari and Husharri (2018) stated that play is a natural activity for children as they tend to be very creative and resourceful when playing independently or with peers. Play activities is an important medium for children which allows them to use their creativity while developing their imagination, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength (Kenneth, 2007). According to research on brain development, play actually shape the structural design of the brain. Lester and Russell (2019) emphasized that play creates a brain that has increased flexibility and improved potential for learning later in life. Also, play is valued for its role in learning**,** however, play can be built into everyday routines, classroom and outdoor activities.

Play takes different forms for different children. Having choices is important since an action that appeals to one child may be of no interest to another, and the child's interest is likely to change throughout the play period. In general, there are three forms of play for children: Structured, unstructured and risky play (Sarah, 2015). Each has unique benefits and is important for optimal child development.

Structured play is any type of activity that has a set of rules or instructions with a goal. Structured play, also known as goal-oriented and guided play, generally involves using logic to solve problems (Sarah 2015). Structured play helps pupils to develop their personality in emotional, social, cognitive and physical aspects. It involves teacher scaffolding and intervention. In structured play, teachers may ensure children focus on certain games. However, within the set confines, they encourage children to direct the flow of the activity. Examples of structured play are puzzles, organized sports, construction toys, sorting games and building blocks. Similarly, if teachers or parents ide 1 toys or games children gravitate to when they are allowed to engage in free play, consider subtly removing those toys from the environment to encourage children to use their creativity to come up with new activities. Some plays without teachers' intervention is known as unstructured play.

Unstructured play is the kind of physical activity in which pupils established their own objectives. Unstructured play might be called free play, unguided play, spontaneous play and adventure play. Thiessen, Gluth and Corso (2013) stressed that during unstructured play, children can learn how to work together, adapt to different situations, experiment, explore and solve problems, construct meaning and also begin to learn what they like, what they are good at and how to express their

individuality and develop a positive self-concept. Thiessen et al added that if children are not provided with the opportunity for unstructured play by pursuing their own play tasks, they may not only lose the opportunity to learn vital skills linked to social interaction but their creative development may also be inhibited. In unstructured play environments, children need to make their own decisions on how to make use of their surrounds.

A playground without rules can be a nightmare and without set rules, children are given a blank slate. Sandseter and Kennair (2011) defined risky play as a thrilling and exciting play that can include the possibility of physical injury. The categories of risky play include; climbing, swinging, or jumping from height, high speed, (swinging, sliding, running at speed), playing with dangerous tools (e.g. knives, axes, ropes), dangerous elements, (moving water, edges, fire), rough and tumble (wrestling, play fighting, sword play) and disappear/get lost (hiding, playing alone, outdoors and exploring new areas. Although children are actually learning something very important, they should also be properly guided as they engage in such a challenging play to avoid injuries.

Every learning activity should be intentional, meaningful and useful. The teacher's fundamental task is to get children to engage in learning activities (building blocks, painting pictures) that are likely to result in achieving the intended learning. Learning activities as the name implies are activities designed or deployed by the teacher to bring about, or create the conditions for learning. It is a range of activities promoted to achieve learning, such as dissemination activities, discussion activities, discovery activities and demonstration activities. It refers to advances in mental processes associated with perception, memory, reasoning, problem-solving, language-learning and other aspects of brain development that occur with increasing age (Rao, Sun, Wong, Weekes, Shaeffer & Lee, 2014). Play influences all areas of development, it offers children the opportunity to learn about the self, others, and the physical environment.

Gender is an element of identity that young children are working hard to understand and a topic that early childhood teachers are not always sure how best to address (Jamie, 2016). It was believed that male characteristics is associated with power, opportunity and prestige. The gender roles that children assume, as defined by our culture, affect their role from determining the interests to deciding how to play and how to use the materials (Meier & Henderson, 2007). For instance, boys are more active, physical and play in larger spaces than girls. In contrast, girls are more complaint and play closer to adults than boys. More so, play activities taught at school age has the goal of enhancing the academic

performance of the pupils particularly when such plays are integrated in the lessons; such participation and academic performance is different for both boys and girls where boys are observed to perform relatively better than girls. (Dinella & Weisgram, 2018). However, it provides opportunity for learners to improve on their learning activities irrespective of their gender.

Nevertheless, it appears some primary school management in Anambra State pay more attention to academic activities and prevent pupils from engaging in play in order to avoid distraction. This creates academic monotony and boredom which adversely affect learning activities of pupils' in primary schools in Anambra State and this prompted this study.

Statement of the problem

It is said that 'all work and no play makes a child a dull child and all play and no work makes the child a merry toy'. Learning occurs when children play and the teacher awareness of the learner audience is an essential element. To say the least, this will help to contribute to the cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being of pupils.

The writer however observed that learning through play cannot be practiced well due to the constraints faced by teachers, the perplexities in controlling children in the classroom, time constraints, lack of play materials, lack of creativities and ideas, and the absence of conducting learning through play in a systematic way. This therefore creates a gap in knowledge among the pupils who did not learn through play. Among other things, it may have some certain implications on children's ability to store new information as children's cognitive capacity is enhanced by change in activity. It is against this backdrop that this study is set out to examine the perceived influence of play on learning activities among pupils in Anambra State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study;

1. What are the mean scores of male and female teachers on the perceived influence of structured play on learning activities of pupils in Anambra State?
2. What are the mean scores of male and female teachers on the perceived influence of unstructured play on learning activities of pupils in Anambra State?

3. What are the mean scores of male and female teachers on the perceived influence of risky play on learning activities of pupils in Anambra State?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

1. There is no significant difference in the mean scores of male and female teachers on the perceived influence of structured play on learning activities of pupils in Anambra State.
2. There is no significant difference in the n mean scores of male and female teachers on the perceived influence of unstructured play on learning activities of pupils in Anambra State.
3. There is no significant difference in the mean scores of male and female teachers on the perceived influence of risky play on learning activities of pupils in Anambra State.

Method

Descriptive survey research design was used for the study. The area of the study was Anambra State. Three research questions and three hypotheses guided the study. The population of the study comprised all the 128 teachers (77 males and 51 females) from the 33 public primary schools in Njikoka LGA in Anambra State. The reliability of the instrument was obtained using Cronbach Alpha method which yielded 0.82. An item structured questionnaire was developed and used for data collection. The instrument had two sections namely; A and B. Section A is on the background information of the respondents such as gender. Section B had three clusters of B1 to B3 with 6, 8 and 7 items respectively. Section B of the instrument therefore contains a total of 21 items, all structured on a four-point rating scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree weighted at 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively. The reliability of the instrument was ascertained using Cronbach Alpha and it yielded reliability co-efficient of 0.84, 0.83 and 0.80 for clusters I, II and III respectively and the overall coefficient of the instrument was 0.82. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions while t-test was used to test the null hypotheses. The null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Research Question 1: What are the mean scores of male and female teachers on the perceived influence of structured play on learning activities of pupils in Anambra State?

Table 1: Mean ratings and standard deviation scores of male and female teachers on the perceived influence of structured play on learning activities among pupils in Anambra State.

S/N	ITEMS	Male Teachers (N =51)			Female Teachers (N =77)		
	Structured play help pupils	Mean	SD	Decision	Mean	SD	Decision
1	improve their intellectual reasoning.	2.67	1.08	Agree	2.61	0.89	Agree
2	enhance their communication skills.	2.57	1.05	Agree	2.59	1.12	Agree
3	develop their cognitive skills by introducing them to new ideas.	2.43	0.94	Disagree	2.40	1.04	Disagree
4	promote their personality development.	2.44	1.03	Disagree	2.46	1.09	Disagree
5	install cooperation within a team for cognitive growth.	2.65	1.10	Agree	2.72	1.11	Agree
6	helps pupils absorb experience into existing schema.	2.47	1.13	Agree	2.49	1.15	Agree
	Cluster Mean	**2.54**	**1.06**	**Agree**	**2.55**	**1.07**	**Agree**

Data presented on Table 1 showed that the mean scores of male and female teachers are above the cut off mean of 2.50 for all items with exception of items 3 and 4 and this indicated agreement with the items as perceived impact of structured play on learning activities among pupils. The perceived influence of structured play on learning activities among pupils in Anambra State include that; structured play helps pupils improve their intellectual reasoning, enhance their communication skills, develop their cognitive skills by introducing them to new ideas and absorb experience into existing schema. The standard deviation scores for male and female teachers which stood at 1.06 and 1.07 respectively indicated convergence of their responses and thus their responses were homogenous.

Research Question 2: What are the mean scores of male and female teachers on the perceived influence of unstructured play on learning activities of pupils in Anambra State?

Table 2: Mean Ratings and Standard Deviation Scores of Male and Female Teachers on the Perceived influence of Unstructured Play on Pupils Learning activities

S/N	ITEMS	Male Teachers (N =51)			Female Teachers (N =77)		
	Unstructured play helps pupils	Mean	SD	Decision	Mean	SD	Decision
7	develop their creativity.	2.76	1.09	Agree	2.81	1.02	Agree
8	build strong emotional tolerance.	2.54	1.05	Agree	2.52	1.11	Agree
9	cope effectively with stress and relating well with others.	2.46	1.04	Disagree	2.48	1.13	Disagree
10	take control of their own learning.	2.50	1.14	Agree	2.44	1.14	Disagree
11	build empathy and creativity.	2.72	1.06	Agree	2.77	1.06	Agree
12	make toys to develop self-reliance skills.	2.43	1.16	Disagree	2.45	1.04	Disagree
13	have sense of freedom and control.	2.45	1.03	Disagree	2.52	1.15	Agree
14	to experiment and adapt to different situations.	2.62	1.04	Agree	2.56	1.07	Agree
	Cluster Mean	**2.56**	**1.08**	**Agree**	**2.57**	**1.09**	**Agree**

From Table 2, items 7, 8, 11 and 14 have mean scores above the cut off mean of 2.50 for both male and female teachers and this indicated their agreement with the items as the perceived influence of unstructured play on learning activities among pupils. Thus, the perceived influence of unstructured play on learning activities among pupils include that; unstructured play helps pupils develop pupils' creativity, build strong emotional tolerance, empower them to take control of their own learning and to experiment and adapt to different situations. The mean scores of male and female teachers are below the cut off mean of 2.50 for items 9 and 12 which indicated agreement with the items The standard deviation scores which stood at 1.08 and 1.09 for male and female teachers respectively indicates that their mean ratings were little clustered and this implies that there is just little variation from their responses.

Research Question 3: What are the mean scores of male and female teachers on the perceived influence of risky play on learning activities of pupils in Anambra State?

Table 3: Mean Ratings and Standard Deviation Scores of Male and Female Teachers on the Perceived influence of Risky Play on Pupils Learning Activities

S/N	ITEMS Risky play helps pupils	Male Teachers (N =51)			Female Teachers (N =77)		
		Mean	SD	Decision	Mean	SD	Decision
15	engage in play-fighting to discover their strengths	2.54	1.07	Agree	2.56	1.05	Agree
16	climb trees to develop their self-confidence	2.61	1.04	Agree	2.65	1.00	Agree
17	learn problem-solving skills	2.57	1.04	Agree	2.60	1.14	Agree
18	run down the school building and steep hills	2.60	1.17	Agree	2.58	1.02	Agree
19	develop exercise motor skills	2.47	1.05	Disagree	2.41	1.15	Disagree
20	increase their muscle flexibility	2.43	1.05	Disagree	2.49	1.04	Disagree
21	to develop mental capacity to improve cognitive performance	2.53	1.03	Agree	2.58	1.04	Agree
	Cluster Mean	**2.54**	**1.06**	**Agree**	**2.55**	**1.06**	**Agree**

Table 3 showed that male and female teachers mean scores are above 2.50 for items 15, 16, 17, 18 and 21 revealing agreement with the items as the the perceived influence of risky play on learning activities among pupils. Thus, the perceived influence of risky play on learning activities among pupils include that risky play helps pupils engage in play-fighting to discover their strengths, climb trees to develop their self-confidence, learn problem-solving skills, run down the school building steep hills, develop exercise motors skills, increase their muscle flexibility and to develop mental capacity to improve learning performance. However, items 19 and 20 have mean scores below the cut off mean of 2.50 for both male and female teachers and this indicated their disagreement with the items. The standard deviation scores of male and female teachers which are 1.06 and 1.06 indicated homogeneity in their ratings.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the perceived influence of structured play on learning activities among pupils in Anambra State.

Table 4: The t-test of Significant Difference between the Mean Ratings of Male and Female Teachers on the Perceived influence of Structured Play on learning activities among Pupils in Anambra State

Respondents	N	X	SD	t.cal	t.crit.	Df	∞	Remark
Male Teachers	51	2.54	1.06	0.05	1.96	126	0.05	Not Significant
Female Teachers	77	2.55	1.07					
Total	128							

Data presented on Table 4 revealed that the t-calculated value of 0.05 is less than t-critical value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance and 126 degree of freedom. Thus, the null hypothesis is not significant. Therefore, there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the perceived impact of structured play on learning activities among pupils in Anambra State.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the perceived influence of unstructured play on learning activities among pupils in Anambra State.

Table 5: The t-test of Significant Difference between the Mean Ratings of Male and Female Teachers on the Perceived influence of Unstructured Play on Learning Activities among Pupils in Anambra State

Respondents	N	X	SD	t.cal	t.crit.	Df	∞	Remark
Male Teachers	51	2.54	1.08	0.06	1.96	126	0.05	Not Significant
Female Teachers	77	2.55	1.09					
Total	128							

Data presented on Table 5 revealed that the t-calculated value of 0.06 is less than t-critical value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance and 126 degree of freedom. Thus, the null hypothesis is not significant. Therefore, there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the perceived influence of unstructured play on learning activities among pupils in Anambra State.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the perceived influence of risky play on learning activities among pupils in Anambra State.

Table 6: The t-test of Significant Difference between the Mean Ratings of Male and Female Teachers on the Perceived influence of Risky Play on Learning Activities among Pupils in Anambra State.

Respondents	N	X	SD	t.cal	t.crit.	Df	∞	Remark
Male Teachers	51	2.54	1.06	0.05	1.96	126	0.05	Not Significant
Female Teachers	77	2.55	1.06					
Total	128							

Data presented on Table 6 revealed that the t-calculated value of 0.05 is less than t-critical value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance and 126 degree of freedom. Thus, the null hypothesis is not significant. Therefore, there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the perceived influence of structured play on learning activities among pupils in Anambra State.

Discussion

The finding of the study revealed that the perceived influence of structured play on learning activities among pupils in Anambra State include that: structured play helps pupils improve their intellectual reasoning, improve their communication skills, install cooperation within a team for cognitive growth and absorb experience into existing schema. This is in line with the findings of Zeng et al (2017) who reported that structured play has influence on learning activities of pupils due to the fact that structured play is ideal for boosting pupils' confidence, encourage resilience and also develop problem-solving skills. It also helps pupils to use their creativity, while developing their imagination, physical, cognitive and emotional strengths. Pupils who engage in structured play gain satisfaction, happiness, refreshment, sense of belonging, esteem actualization and competitive spirit. The result of the findings is in agreement with Brittain (2016) who believed that sports can have a positive influence on how children learn and develop lifelong skills such as self-esteem and the ability to socially interact with other pupils.

The result of this study also revealed that the perceived influence of unstructured play on learning activities among pupils include that unstructured play helps pupils develop their creativity, build strong emotional tolerance, to take control of their own learning and to experiment and adapt to

different situations. This is in agreement with the finding of Thiessen, Gluth and Corso (2013) which indicated that unstructured play has influence on learning activities of learners in the classroom. The possible explanation for the agreement in the findings could be due to the fact that unstructured play is inevitable in the school system. It also allows pupils to create and explore their environment without set rules. This boosts learning activities of pupils. Since, no rules in unstructured play, pupils can use their imagination and initiatives to develop their games.

The findings of this study further showed that the perceived influence of risky play on learning activities among pupils include that risky play helps pupils engage in play-fighting to discover their strengths, climb trees to develop their self-confidence, to learn problem-solving skills, run down the school building steep hills and to develop mental capacity to improve learning performance. This supported that finding of Sandseter (2011) who observed that the effect of children being able to engage in risky play such as climbing trees, running and jumping are the enhancement of their competence and confidence. This also corroborated the finding of Brussoni, Gibbons, Gray, Isahikawa, Sandseter, Bienenstock, Chabot, Fuseli, Janssen, Pickett, Power, Stranger, Sampson and Tremblay (2015) who observed that risky play has been associated with promoting children's health and learning activities. Risky play comes with many benefits for learning and development.

Conclusion

Teachers are in agreement with their perceived influence of structured play, unstructured play and risky play on learning activities among pupils in Njikoka Local Government of Anambra State. Learning through play is therefore implicated as one of the essential ways pupils learn and develop. Through it pupils come to acquire some essential skills for their all-round development as the above study revealed.

Recommendations

1. Anambra State Government, through the academic planners should integrate appropriate play such as structured, unstructured and risky play in their curriculum development to enhance learning.
2. The government, together with the school management should create enabling environment for learning through play. The schools should be provided with necessary play and instructional materials for teachers.

3. The school head-teachers and teachers should regularly inspect the risky play engaged by pupils to avoid exposing themselves to danger and ensure that the playground is free of dangerous tools.
4. Teachers should be exposed to training on learning activities in order to up-date their skills and knowledge on organizing play suitable for pupils.

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