The Place of Play in Ghana's Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to determine how early childhood educators in the Tamale metropolis of northern Ghana feel about using play as an instrument of instruction at the early childhood level. In this direction, early childhood educators were asked to provide a conceptual definition of what constitutes play, indicate when play is used as an instrument of teaching, and to identify challenges that in their perspectives may be associated with the use of play in teaching. Definitions provided by participants were coded and grouped into five thematic areas. Responses on when early childhood educators use play in teaching were mixed, whiles a number of challenges were also identified. The study was a qualitative research of the survey type. Using a questionnaire, participants were asked to respond to a number of open-ended questions grouped into six categories. Overall, 108 early childhood educators drawn from public and private early childhood centers in the Tamale metropolis participated in the study.

Keywords: Indigenizing Play, Materials for Play, Play and Development, Play and Learning.

Introduction

Play historically has had an important and unquestioned place in children's development and continues to be relevant in contemporary early childhood educational practices. Play over the years has been identified as developmentally appropriate for teaching in early childhood settings (see, NAEYC, 2009). Philosophers such as Froebel, Montessori, Piaget, Vygotsky, Dewey, and Gardner have all advocated and used play in their early childhood educational practices. In fact, existing literature supports the relevance of play in early learning of pre-academic skills for primary aged children (see for example; Bodrova & Leong, 2005), and also noted as been a tool of motivation for children especially at the pre-school level (Vukelich, 1994).

These notwithstanding, there are growing concerns on how play is used by teachers in the classroom (Genishi, Ryan, Ochsner & Yarnall, 2001), the complexities associated with the use of play (Goffin, 1989), and how to set the environment to reflect a "play friendly" environment (Crain, 2000). Interestingly with Ghana, little is known about how play is used in Ghanaian early childhood educational settings. Studies have revealed that learning occurs naturally even though most teachers do not use real objects (Ministry of Education, Ghana, 2012). Generally, when it comes to Ghana, there are some perceptions that play hovers around chaos and harmony.

Extensive studies have documented the value of play as a developmentally appropriate method of teaching especially at the early childhood level. Play undoubtedly is known to be effective in children's development. These not withstanding when it comes to the use of play in teaching at the early childhood level in Ghana, teachers are confronted with challenges (Ministry of Education, Ghana, 2012). Hence, this study sought to investigate early childhood educators' perspectives on the use of play in teaching at the early childhood level. Specifically the study addressed three fundamental issues which are as follows:

1. Early childhood educators' conceptual definition of what constitutes play.
2. Early childhood educators' perspective on the place of play in children's learning activities and
3. Early childhood educators' perspective on challenges if any that may be associated with the use of play in teaching.

Literature Review

The debate as to what constitutes play has persisted for some time now. What and how to describe as play has been a subject of debate especially within the early childhood educational environment. Regarding child development, play is not an end-state, terminus nor an outcome. It is viewed as a process recognizable as a pattern of activity with certain salient features such as; positive effect, non-literality, means-over-ends orientation, flexibility, and autonomy (Sutton-Smith, 1985). According to Roskos, Christie, & Richgels (2003), play can be a guided activity even though it should not be scripted. The authors argue that it can be assembled but not tightly structured.

Theories and research on early childhood education and play have a longer history dating back to the beginnings of the 20th century when Karl Groos (1898) and G. Stanley Hall (1907) began making connections between play and development. Between the periods 1880-1979 it is on record that, not fewer than 739 scholarly articles and books were written on children's play (Sutton – Smith, 1985). Woltberg (2003) for example argues that when it comes to play they are mostly characterized with the following:

- Play being intrinsically motivated.

- Play activities being chosen freely.
- Play being pleasurable.
- Play involving an element of believes, and
- Play being an instrument of engaging participants (Woltberg, 2003).

The literature affirms the existence of different types of play. For example, Anderson-McNamee & Bailey (2010) presents the following as types of play; unoccupied play, solitary play, onlooker play, parallel play, associative play, social play, motor – physical plays, constructive play, expressive play, fantasy play, and cooperative play (p.2). Unoccupied play according to the authors constitutes play at the early months of the child where the child is busy engaged in unoccupied activities with no clear purpose. Solitary play on the other hand starts from three to 18 months where the child spends much of his/her time playing on her own. Descriptions for the other types of play are provided by the authors. For Woltberg (2003) however, play could be categorized based on what goes on during the activities that the child engages in the process of playing. For example, Dramatic play according to Woltberg (2003) is characteristic of children between the ages of 3-5 years old. The author indicates that, with this type of play, the child acts out specific roles, interact with one another in their roles, and plan how the play will go.

The importance of play in pre-school education is definitely not in doubt as presented in most studies. Theoretical formulations by Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1966) among others affirms the significance of play in the development of symbolic thinking as a cornerstone of cognition. For Vygotsky, the key role in the development of language and thought for children is what the author describes as "make-believe play"; a particular feature of pre-school age (p.17). Vygotsky (1966) argues that "play contains all the developmental tendencies in a condensed form" (p.16) and thus creates the zone of proximal development that pulls the child forward. For this reason play is extremely essential in pre-school years because it leads to development.

Most contemporary studies on child development also affirm the importance of play in child development (see for example; Saracho & Spodek, 1998; Johnson & Wardle, 2005.)). Ailwood (2003) for example talks of the relevance of play in promoting understanding and discourse between the family and the child. For Kamps et al (1995) play has become an almost hollowed concept for teachers of young children. The point of argument here is that there is a strong link between play and learning for young children especially in the areas of problem solving, literacy, and social skills. There are others who believe that play is an important vehicle in connecting children to nature. For instance, in relation to play and the natural environment; Scheuermann & Webber (2002) note that children's access to natural areas on a frequent basis during childhood has been identified as one of the major predictors of environmental sensitivity and responsible land stewardship. According to Bodrova & Leong (2005), play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as promoting language, cognition, and social competence in children. Bingham (2008) opines that play is important as a natural part of the make-up of every healthy child. The child's love of learning according to the author is linked with a quest for play. Singer & Singer (2004) argue that there is a link between play and foundational capacities of children when it comes to memory, self-regulation, oral language abilities and social skills.

Undoubtedly, existing literature affirms the importance of play in child development. In fact the Ghanaian curriculum objectives for early childhood education are strongly premised on theories of play which are seen to be beneficial to the child's development (see; Ghana's Early Childhood Education Policy, 2004). However, as to how teachers feel about using play especially at the early childhood level is something worthy of investigation. Hence, this study attempts to engage early childhood educators in the Tamale metropolis on this important subject.

Research Questions

In order to achieve the objective of the study, three research questions were formulated. These were:
- What from the perspectives of Early Childhood educators' in the Tamale Metropolis constitutes play?
- How do early Childhood Educators in the Tamale Metropolis feel about using play in teaching?
- What barriers if any exist in the use of play in teaching at the early childhood level in the study area?

Methodology

The main thrust of the study was to ascertain how early childhood educators in the Tamale Metropolis of the northern region of Ghana feel about using play in their teaching activities at the early childhood level. Since the study involved a survey of early childhood educators' perspectives on the place of play in teaching, the research instrument used was a questionnaire which consisted of closed and open-ended items.

The questionnaire consisted of six sections: Section A looked at participants' demographic data whiles section B asked participants to provide personal description or definitions of what constitute play. Sections C centered on responses by early childhood educators relating to teaching and play, whiles section D looked at management's attitude towards the use of play in teaching. Section E looked at challenges or barriers faced by

early childhood educators' in the use of play as an instrument of teaching whiles section F asked for general comments on play and teaching. The entire questionnaire consisted of 20 questions.

A purposive random sampling method was used in the selection of the population sample. In all 150 questionnaires were distributed to early childhood centers who agreed to participate in the study. Of the 150 questionnaires, 108 (72%) were completed and returned. Participants were drawn from public schools (government) with early childhood centers, and private early childhood institutions. Questionnaires were to be filled by staff and personnel involved in early childhood activities at each school except the head of the institution if he/she was not a class teacher. Frequencies and percentages were generated to describe the number of responses to a question. These were then presented in tables or graphs. The responses for the open-ended questions were coded and categorized based on the pattern of responses. A narrative summary including direct quotes was made to further explain the data.

Findings

Bio-data of participants as revealed in table 1 of this study indicates that of the 108 early childhood educators who participated in the study, 33.33% (n=36) were male whiles 66.67% (72) were female. Also, of the total number of participants; 108, 68.52% (n=74) taught at government schools (public schools) whiles 31.48% (n=34) taught at private schools. The study in gathering the bio-data of participants inquired about the qualification of early childhood educators with specific reference to teacher certification. By certification emphasis was not placed on background in early childhood education instead whether educators were certified by the Ghana Education Service (official body for teacher certification). In response, 62.04% (n = 67) responded in the negative (untrained) whiles 37.96% (n = 41) said they were trained. 32 participants taught at crèche, one teacher taught at the nursery, 29 taught at kindergarten one, while's 46 taught at kindergarten two.

Table 1: Participants Bio-Data

Gender		
Male	36	33.33
Female	72	66.67
Place of teaching		
Private	34	31.48
Public	74	68.52
Qualification		
Trained	41	37.96
Untrained	67	62.04
Level of teaching		
Crèche	32	29.63
Nursery	1	0.93
Kindergarten one	29	26.85
Kindergarten two	46	42.59

Early Childhood Educators Conceptual Definition of Play

Responses by participants with respect to research question one; what is early childhood educators conceptual definition of play can be categorized under five broad headings.

For some early childhood educators, play is understood as an activity that arouses the interest of children. For example this is how an early childhood educator defined play; it is a process whereby children participate in a game in a form of music, rhyme etc, to arouse and sustain their interest. Another educator also defined play as; an activity that is interesting, intriguing and motivating to children. For those who saw play as an activity of arousing interest also saw it as an instrument of arousing enthusiasm. This is how an educator puts it; play encompasses a continuum of activities which in any form trigger children's enthusiasm in carrying out designated instructions during lessons. Again an educator adds; play is what children want to do and what they choose to do when given the freedom, independence, time and space. Overall, what interests the child with regards to what activities to engage in for some early childhood educators constitutes play.

Another theme that emerged out of the study was; play being an instrument of development of the whole being of the individual child. In this direction, a participant described play as; play is an activity in which children explore the environment and unknowingly enhance their total development: physical, social, emotional, cognitive. For another educator; play is an activity that develop the whole being of children, e.g. Social, emotional, physical, and spiritual being of the child. On this theme, an educator adds; play is an activity that

children are engaged in which in turn develop either their fine muscles, cognitive, and physical features. Play as a source of development for children was a perspective that was held by a number of participants.

In addition to the above, some participants saw play as an activity characterized with fun, amusement, pleasure, and satisfaction. This view was held by a number of participants in the study. For example an early childhood educator defined play as; play is anything that pupils do for enjoyment and interest. Another educator describes play as; any activity or activities that children are engaged in, to enable them derive maximum pleasure and satisfaction after the activity. On the same theme, a participant puts it simply; any activity that is interesting, motivating, and intriguing to children. Again an educator adds; play is any activity undertaken to have fun. Play as an instrument of fun and amusement for children was a position held by majority of participants in this study.

Apart from play being described as activities that provide children the opportunity to have fun, others saw play as an activity that provides children the opportunity to use materials. The following examples of definitions by participants illustrate this theme: a) Play is where you provide the materials for pupils to use it on their own. b) Play is an activity that engages pupils to manipulate and interact with materials. c) Play is an art of interacting with objects, people and things. It is also a source of recreation. Play as a means of children engaging in activities using materials is how some participants' defined play.

Some early childhood educators also saw play as a method of teaching. For example an early childhood educator described play as; play is a way of teaching children using things around them. Children should be given materials to play with if we want them to understand a concept. Also describing play an early childhood educator states; play is the use of activities and games in teaching and learning in order for children to understand what is being taught. Still on play being a method of teaching, an early childhood educator describes it as; play is a strategic approach or method used in teaching and learning process. It enables pupils to come out with their innate potentials, boost their morals and above all help gain pupils attention.

All in all, the above themes as presented by participants of this study describing play were arrived at based on certain identified similarities and differences that existed in the various descriptions provided by participants. Actually the section on participants' perspective on what constitutes play did require participants to provide descriptions of play based on their viewpoint and not textbook definitions.

How Early Childhood Educators Feel about Using Play to Teach

Research question two of this study sought to determine how early childhood educators felt in using play to teach at the early childhood level. In this direction three issues were addressed. First participants had to respond to how often they adopted play in their teaching activities. Responses as revealed in figure 1 of this study indicates that one percent of participants said they never use play in teaching, 25% of participants indicated that they use play to teach always, whiles 24% said they use play to teach sometimes. For 50% of participants of this study, they only use play to teach depending on the subject.

Figure 1: Play and Teaching
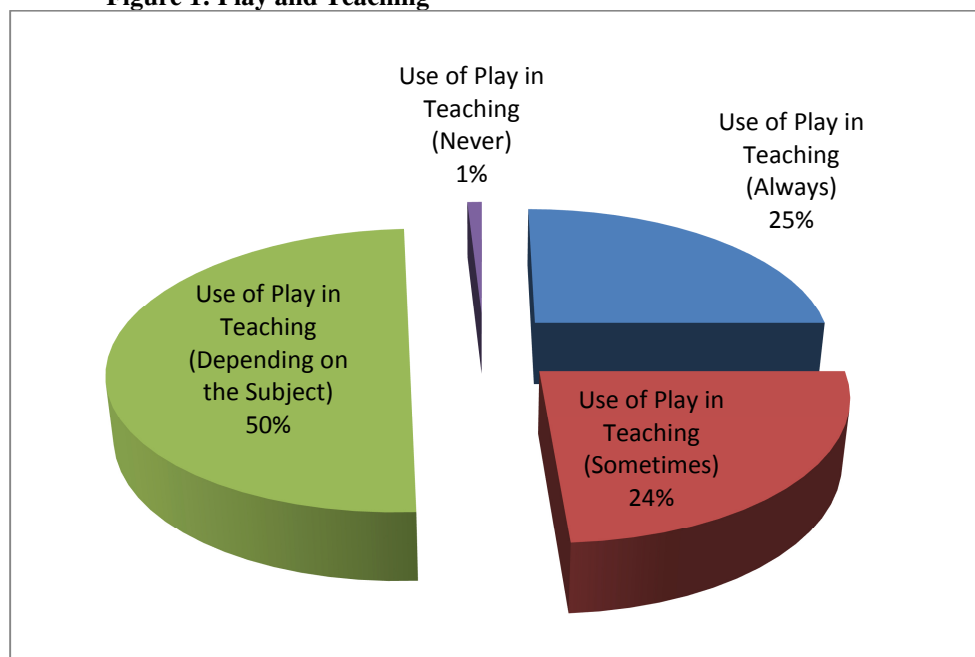
Still on the question of how participants feel about using play to teach at the early childhood level, responses were sought on available play materials at their respective schools and centers. 11% of participants

described play materials at their institutions to be excellent, whiles 28% saw it to be good. 45% of participants on the other hand described it as fair, whiles 16% saw availability of play materials in their schools as bad. Unfortunately, the study did not provide participants with interpretations of the various descriptions. These results are presented in figure 2 below:

Figure 2: Availability of Play Materials at Schools
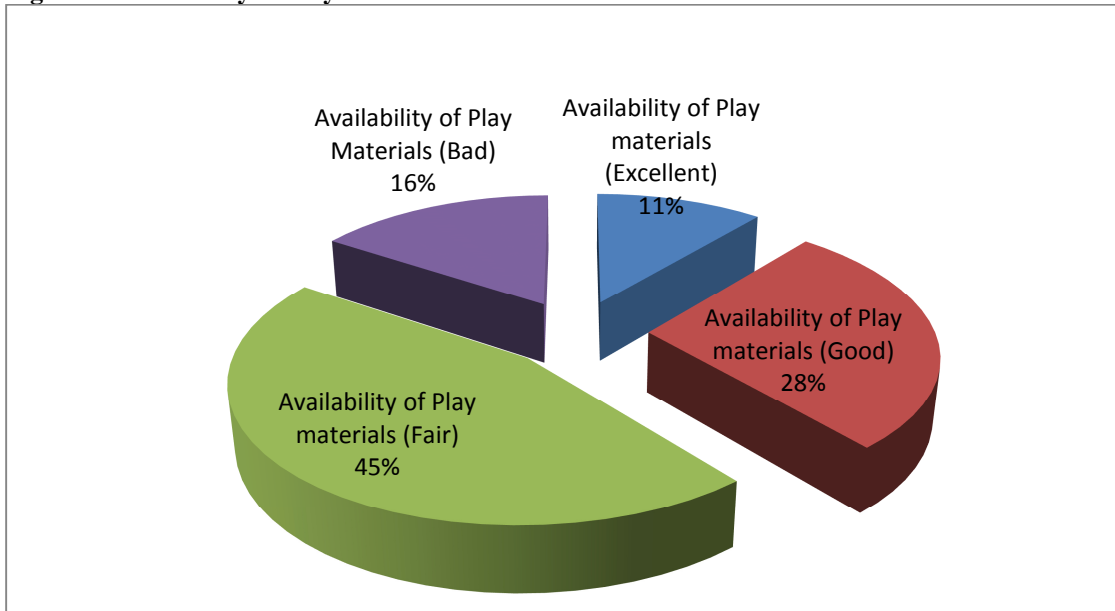
Finally, as parts of attempts to address research question two, participants were also asked to provide their perspectives on whether they deemed play as an instrument of teaching to be difficult. In response, 73% of participants saw it to be easy, whiles three percent of participants saw the use of play in teaching as very difficult, and 24% of participants saw it to be somehow difficult. Figure 3 provides a graphical representation of these responses.

Figure 3: Difficulty in Using Play to Teach
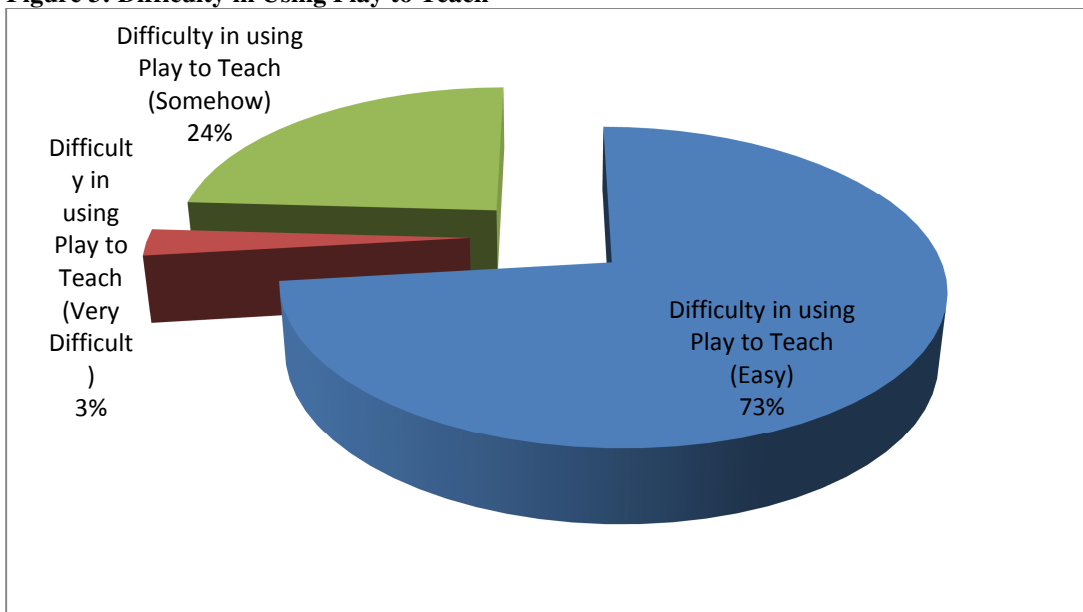
Perspectives of early childhood educators on barriers that may militate against successful use of play in teaching at the early childhood level were sought for. In fact research question three of this study addresses this issue. In this direction participants were asked to identify challenges that from their perspectives hinder play in their respective schools. Responses by participants as presented in figure 4 shows that 10% of participants saw parental preference for other activities aside play as being a challenge, whiles two percent saw play being

difficult to use as a challenge. Also 28% of participants saw lack of space as a major challenge, whiles 60% saw lack of play materials as the biggest challenge confronting the use of play.

Figure 4: Challenges of Play
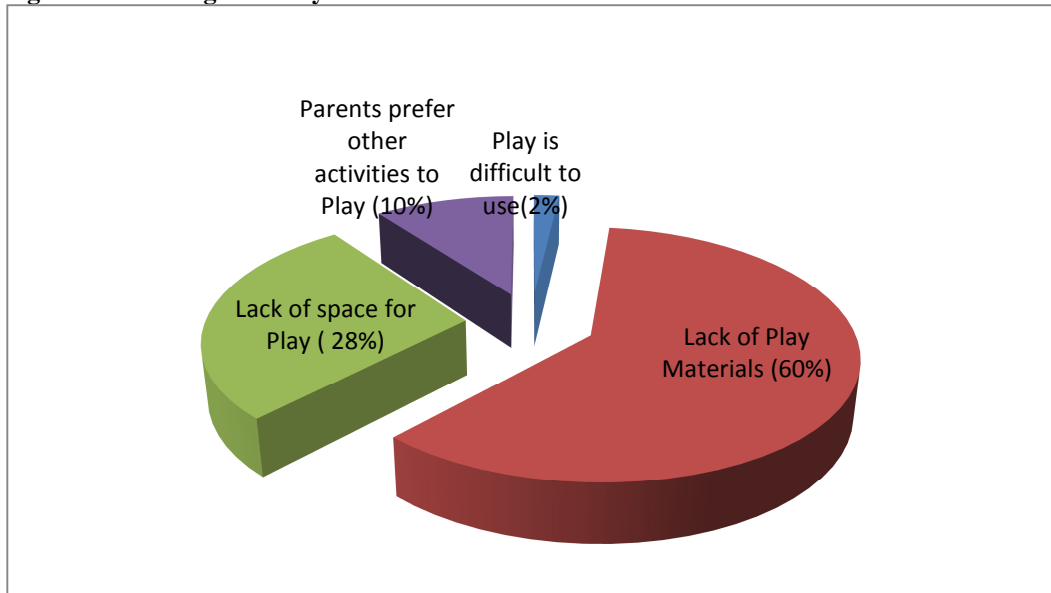
Still on the question of barriers affecting play use at early childhood centers, attempt was made to determine management's attitude to the use of play in teaching within the context of how that could influence teachers use of play in the classroom. Simple Yes or No responses were expected of participants to certain questions. Results are presented in figure 5 below.

Figure 5: Management' Attitude towards Play and Teaching
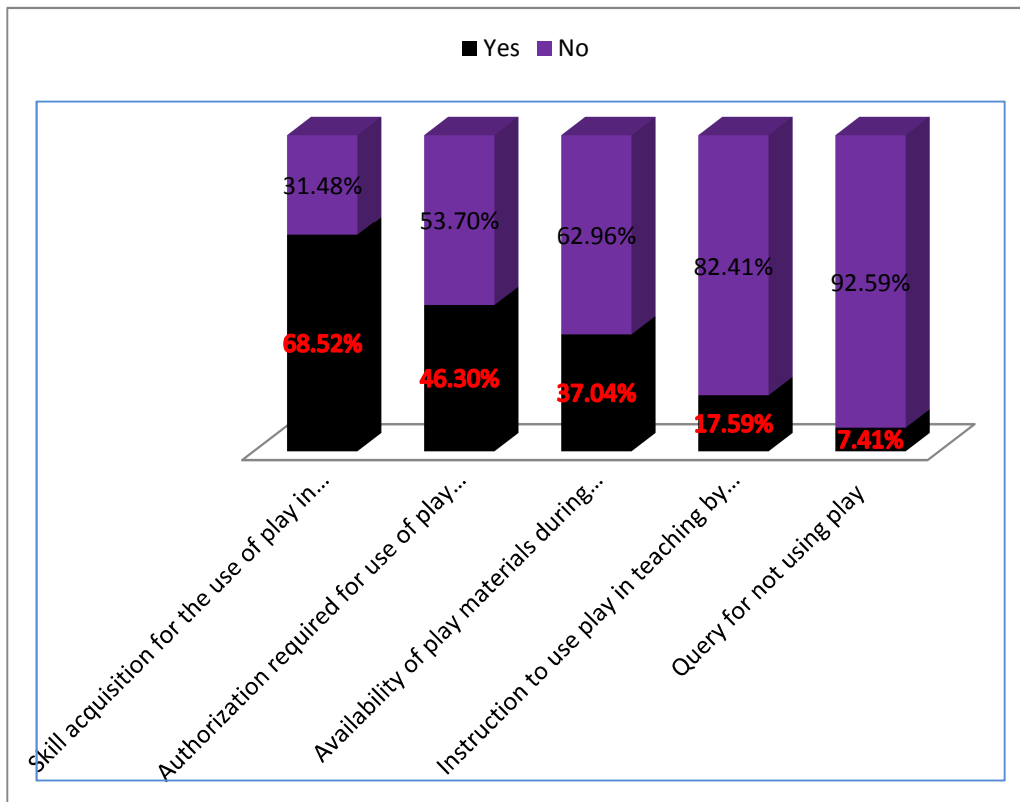
On the question of whether management provided educators periodic skills in using play to teach, 68.52% responded in the affirmative whiles 31.48% in the negative. Besides, participants were also asked if they needed any form of clearance by management before involving the class in some form of outdoor play and 46.30% responded yes whiles 53.70% said no. In addition, participants were also asked if management periodically provides play materials for instruction and the responses were; 37.04% said yes, whiles 62.96% said no. Again on the issue of management and play the study sought to find out if early childhood educators were under direct instruction by management to use play in teaching? Responses were 82.41% responded to the negative whiles 17.59% responded in the affirmative. Finally, as to whether participants were queried for non use of play in their teaching lessons, 92.59% responses were negative whiles seven-point-forty one percent responded in the affirmative.

Conclusion

Guided by the objectives and research questions of this study, as well as the findings presented above, the conclusions of this study are as follows:

1. Based on the conceptual definitions provided by participants with reference to what constitute play, it can be concluded that, what constitutes play is viewed differently by early childhood educators. As revealed in the findings of this study, play was defined and viewed differently. Five groupings were identified. Even with these five themes differences existed within the themes as evidenced in some of the direct responses provided. However, the objective of this study with specific reference to research question one; determining early childhood educators conceptual definition of play was not to arrive at a uniformed definition of play instead to gauge how early childhood educators viewed play to be. In fact, notwithstanding the differences in the definitions, it could be realized that, the five thematic definitions arrived at possessed an element of activity and the involvement of the learner when play is in place and that should be the basis of play and teaching.

2. Secondly, on the question of how early childhood educators felt in using play to teach, findings as revealed in figures 1 and 2 indicates that; play use in teaching has not been regular, and play materials are not readily available. For example, in figure 1; 50% of participants' response on using play was; depending on the subject whiles 24% responses were sometimes. In effect, it means that 75% of participants (50% + 24% + 1%) in this study do not use play to teach in every subject which should not be the case. Besides, when it comes to available play materials, it could be described as non-available. For example, in figure 2, it is revealed that 45% of participants of this study describe play materials at their school as fair, whiles 16% saw it as bad.

3. With regards to challenges, the conclusion arrived at in this study is the lack of play materials in schools which is also revealed in the findings of research question two. In addition, it is also revealed that lack of space for play is also a challenge that early childhood educators are confronted with when it comes to using play to teach. Of course parental preference for other activities aside play was an identified challenge.

Recommendations

Stemming from the above, the following recommendations are provided:

1. There is the need for efforts on the part of early childhood educators to indigenize play. Definitely providing play materials for institutions involves finance which can be a challenge. Hence, it is the recommendation of this study for early childhood educators to adopt existing traditional indigenous play activities into main stream formal educational practices. These activities can be modified to suit the school environment. However, for this to be successful the early childhood educator will have to be knowledgeable and conversant with various indigenous play activities.

2. In addition to the above it is also the recommendation of this study that early childhood educators will have to produce play materials locally and by themselves. Just as teaching and learning materials are mostly produced by early childhood educators themselves, they could also provide most play materials themselves. After all "Art and Craft" is a major component of early childhood teacher training program.

3. The question of space being a challenge can also be addressed if the current requirement of the Ghana Education Service; for early childhood service providers to show evidence of enough space for play before issued with licenses of operation is enforced. Outdoor play undisputedly is critical and relevant in every successful child development program; hence anything that hinders it will have to be addressed.

4. School authorities especially managers and administrators of early childhood centers will have to make provisions for play materials to be made readily available for teaching and learning. Also, heads of institution should make play a priority in teaching and learning by insisting on early childhood educators to regularly use play in all teaching activities.

In addition to the recommendations provided, it is also the suggestion of this study that future research on play and early childhood education should focus on how and in what ways play can be indigenized for early childhood educational purposes. Also a determination of any relationship between early childhood educators' conceptual definitions of play and play use is very necessary. Finally, an empirical study on using play to teach in early childhood centers is worth pursuing.

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