

Play-Way Approach and Implementation of Early-Childhood Education Curriculum in Selected Early Childhood Development Centers in Eastern Uganda

Moses Wambi (PhD)* Alfred Buluma (PhD)
Makerere University, College of Education and External studies
and Robinah Nankya (Sr.) Kyambogo University, Kampala, Oct.2022
*Corresponding Author: moswambi@yahoo.com

Abstract

Play is children's serious business and their avenue to learning. This study was conducted to explore the role of play-way approach in the implementation of Early-Childhood Education (ECE) Curriculum in selected Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centers in Eastern Uganda. It was informed by the work of Dewey, Froebel, Montessori and other seasoned Advocates of play in the domain of education. A mixed methods approach was adopted with a parallel exploratory design. The qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were employed. The specific objectives of this study were threefold to: 1. Establish the extent to which play is adopted in the implementation of the ECE curriculum. 2. Assess the role of play in the implantation of the ECE curriculum. 3. Identify challenges associated with play in the implementation of the ECE curriculum. The motivation for conducting this study was anchored on the advent of the increasing concerns of participatory approaches intended to enhance learners' acquisition of meaningful literacy skills. A sample size of 504 respondents was used consisting 274 children of ECD, 103 Caregivers, 14 headteachers and 113 Centre Management Committee members, whose views were investigated using questionnaires, key informant interviews and focus group discussions. The purpose of the study was to critically examine the extent to which play-based-learning impacts on the implementation of ECE curriculum. The problem identified was that whereas efforts had been made by researchers in identifying challenges associated with ECE curriculum implementation which inhibited children's readiness to realise a breakthrough to meaningful literacy in ECD centres, no effort had been made to establish the use of play-way approach in the same context. Findings revealed that play had been adopted to a small extent, also without proper integration content and yet, active participation, enjoyment and increase in attendance were reported as attributed to roles of play. Unfortunately, some Caregivers lacked skills and knowledge of adopting play as an approach to learning. It was concluded that whereas learning became interesting, fun and real at ECD centres where play-way approach was adopted, it was boring and stressful at ECD centres where play-way approach was not employed. It was, therefore, recommended that Caregivers required serious deliberate training on play-way approach and its alignment with content in view of and focus on the 21st century skills, proper guidelines be developed and provided to Caregivers on the use of play-way approach, instructional materials which stimulate the use of play be developed at every ECD centre and peer mentorship strategies be designed to build the capacity of Care-givers with a focus on play-way approach.

Keywords: Play, Early Childhood Education and Curriculum.

DOI: 10.7176/JEP/13-33-08

Publication date: November 30th 2022

1. Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a learning area studied by teacher trainees and Caregivers to focus on preparation of children (0-8) years of age for holistic development (Calman & Tarr-Whelan, 2005 as in UNICEF, 2015). ECE therefore, provides a wide range of programmes for children to facilitate their early learning with emphasis on Provision, Protection and Participation (3Ps). It is against that background that 0-8 years are referred to as children's formative period of Early Childhood Development (ECD) which is described as an investment in the wellbeing, gender equality, social cohesion, and lifelong learning. The period from birth to eight years old is one of remarkable brain development for children and represents a crucial window of opportunity for education (Unesco, 2017). The window of opportunity is, therefore, responsible for children's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development.

Ideally, the ECE curriculum was introduced to strengthen teacher/caregiver preparation through hands-on-learning in PTCs in Uganda (MoES, 2012). The introduction of ECE as a discipline of specialisation was done in response to the public outcry on teacher quality across the country (NAPE Report, 2017). In Uganda, various teacher preparation initiatives and curriculum interventions have been put in place from time to time to address teacher quality issues through improved pedagogy for example, Break-Through to Literacy (BTL, 2000), Early Grade Reading (EGR, 2017), Early Childhood Development-Community Child Care and Education (ECD-CCCE, 2000), Reading to Learn (RtL, 2019), Strengthening Education Systems for Improved Learning (SESIL, 2018)

coupled with National Review of curricular from objectives to competence-based approach (MoES, 2012). Despite of the various initiatives and interventions, teacher quality issues continue to persist in Uganda (Mirembe, et-al, 2017). Some researchers claim that Tutors who train teacher trainees/caregivers in PTCs are stuck to traditional methods of teaching (Kagoda & Ezati 2013; Muchange 2015). Furthermore, the ECE programme has been under the control of private sector for a long time in Uganda until concerned partners advised government through the MoES to fully embrace and fund it (UNESCO, 2006). The problem identified, therefore, is that teacher educators' (tutors) and trainees'/caregivers' practical pedagogical skills and content knowledge in ECE which is intended to facilitate children's readiness to achieving a breakthrough to literacy and realise their full potential remain an uphill task. If no attention is paid to teacher educators and their trainees, consequently children's learning continues to be at great risk!

2. Background

Eddy and Matthew (2016) noticed that it was out of certain responsibilities that ECE emerged as a field of study during the enlightenment in European Countries. ECE is now a serious concern in developed countries like USA, Denmark, Germany, Finland, Netherlands and Sweden. African countries like Nigeria, Kenya, DRC and Uganda are equally catching up with ECE concerns (Wambi, 2020).

In Uganda, UNESCO (2017) and Andreia & Mata (2016) show that for many years, the private sector has been managing ECE until 1980 when the government made a strategy and the preschool programme for 3-5 year olds was transferred to MoES while the responsibility for 0-3 year old children was assigned to parents (Elkind, 2015). In 1993, an ECE policy emerged in response to the education policy review commission report which identified lack of government control of quality, curriculum, pedagogy, facilities, and age of entry (EFA Assessment Report, 2000). Currently, ECE in Uganda is among the key strategies to implementation of Education for [National] Development 2030 Agenda. As a result, the Government of Uganda is working hand in hand with a large number of Education Development Partners through the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), e.g. Uganda Teacher and School Effectiveness Project (UTSEP) under Global Partnership for Education (GPE), School Health and Reading Programme (SHRP) under Research Institute Triangle (RTI), Community Child Care Programme (CCCP), Quality Education Initiative (QEI) and others to ensure improved Early Grade Reading (Absolunet, 2013).

Effective implementation of ECE follows Montessori's five principle approach highlighted by Morrison (2010) in Kipkosgei & Kabwos (2016) as; (1) Respect for the child; helping them to do things and learn for themselves to develop skills and abilities, (2) A sorbent mind; driving children's ability to learn on their teachers'[caregivers'] experiences and environment, (3) Sensitive periods especially of writing to detect times of sensitivity and provide setting for optimum fulfillment, (4) prepared environment where they can do things by themselves and (5), auto-education; where materials are organised in a way to provide for; control of error, isolated quality, active involvement, and attentiveness. This calls for practical approaches to be used by teachers. In this study, the researcher strongly believes that play is one of such approaches that can be used to promote effective implementation of ECE.

Bergen, Nakighu, & Kenneth (2017) established that the global view of play is that it is a whole-child educational approach that promotes academic, socio-emotional, and cognitive development through free play, which can also involve guided play by an adult. Burgen et al., (2017) observe that in guided play, teachers enhance children's exploration and learning with helpful guidance while being careful not to be invasive in the children's play. Play based-learning is thus described as developmentally appropriate learning approach for children, done at their own pace through the natural process of play and this has prompted many countries to start practicing play (Ibid).

According to Martlew, Stephen, & Ellis (2011), play is based on a Vygotskian model of scaffolding where the teacher pays attention on specific elements of the play activity and provides encouragement and feedback on children's learning. Play is defined as the use of objects or certain equipment during the teaching-learning process to create a logical way of understanding concepts. Play is categorized into six; *unoccupied play*: where the child is relatively stationary, and performs random movements with no apparent purpose. *Solitary play*: where the child is completely engrossed in playing and does not seem to notice other children; *Onlooker play*: where the child takes an interest in other children's play but does not join in. *Parallel play*: where the child mimics other children's play but doesn't actively engage with them; *associative play*: now more interested in each other than the toys they are using; and *Cooperative play*: some organization enters children's play, for example, the playing has some goal and children often adopt roles and act as a group (Ardington & Laura, 2015).

Ideally, ECE curriculum implementation ought to follow the Kyambogo University ECE Curriculum model developed in 2012 to encourage a hands-on-approach and enable teacher trainees[Caregivers] acquire skills practically rather than cramming concepts theoretically. This is in view that tutors who are charged with the core responsibility of implementing the ECE curriculum are fully-fledged with required pedagogical competencies. On the contrary, implementation of ECE curriculum predominantly reflects transfer of knowledge to children,

rather than the hands-on-approach. By implication, ECE curriculum implementation is not to the standard of Kyambogo University expectations and the ECD Learning framework of the National Curriculum Development Centre (2005).

3. Literature review

Debbie (2015) notices that play builds the foundation for the development of learning abilities. On this point, Aryl (2017) stresses that play enables children to realise that learning is not just done in classroom as it is with other approaches of teaching but it continues even when one is outside the class. In this case, therefore, it is important to realise that play as an aspect of functional education needs to be adopted by caregivers in ECD Centers.

Another effect of play on the implementation of ECE Curriculum is related to creating an enabling environment in which learners are prepared to be creative. Having explored into benefits of hidden games under outdoor play, Yuani and Merna (2015) found out that play encourages children's creativity as opposed to the constraints and confinement of indoor play because being outside makes children's imaginations often stimulated by objects around them and they quickly tap them into their creativity. The present study notices that much as outdoor play generates such benefits to the learners, in some ECD Centers, teachers [caregivers] may not even be aware of this kind of knowledge thus justifying why caregivers in notable ECD Centers did not employ play at a large scale. Besides, this study established how creativity was responsible for the implementation of ECE Curriculum, a gap which existed in the previous studies but was also reported in the findings of this study.

Other studies related to the effect of play on health benefits are also crucial. Kohn (2015), for instance, it was reported that play helps children to build strong bones and good fitness levels, while also enabling them to burn off extra energy and calories. In winter, it means that through play, children naturally absorb vital vitamin D, a lack of which can lead to Rickets. However, it is important to note that much as this may look common knowledge, other caregivers might not take it seriously. The present study seeks to integrate the fact that play has a bearing on children's health as a way of justifying the need to have full caregiver advocacy in ECD Centers. In addition, some previous studies also reported on how the health benefits of play in turn end up into successful implementation of ECE Curriculum.

Play is also reported to have social benefits to children as highlighted by some studies. This is evidenced in Kohn (2015)'s findings which indicated that play enables children to move out of their classrooms and occupy less crowded and less intimidating spaces than indoors which help children to naturally come out of their shells and be more social. This means that children who are always willing to join in games and other social activities are more likely to talk to different peers and make new friends through play. Play encourages children to learn social skills and how to interact with other children away from adult's supervision (Kohn, 2015). Through observation, the present study focuses on the need to observe the way play is done in spacious environment probably at play grounds and establish the level at which those children are social in ECD Centers thus, establishing whether even in the context of the present study, play promotes social life and then establish how this social life later promotes learning of children in those ECD Centers.

In terms of independence, the large space in which to play means that when outside children are often away from direct adult's supervision. This helps them to learn to be independent when socially interacting with other children, as well as learning to play by themselves (Aryl, 2017). They learn how to take turns in playing games, to pick themselves up when they fall, and how to negotiate, how to interact with unfamiliar equipment, resulting into children learning how to be manipulative and self-reliant (Erica, 2017). Having significantly explored into the relevance of play to introduce an environment of independence, previous studies lack in-depth explanation about how children's independence can eventually translate into successful implementation of ECE Curriculum. This is why the present study was deemed necessary.

Some children participate in solitary play and this encourages calmness among children as they get riled up, whereas playing with others also gives them a lot of interaction (Erica, 2017). Play also brings a sense of calmness and initiates a mood to a different level as children peacefully play with their toys (Debbie, 2015). Whereas, in the previous sub section, this study sought to explore how socialising translates into success in the implementation of ECE Curriculum, in this context, it was also important to explore how lonely play which generates calmness could also translate into the same.

There is also another form of play called associative in which a group of children participate in similar or identical activities without formal organisation, group direction, group interaction, or a definite goal (McLeod, 2011). Associative play is known for allowing a child to learn skills of negotiation, problem-solving and working within groups. Children practice decision-making skills, move at their own pace and discover their own interests during that type of play. Unstructured play also may lead to more physical movement and healthier children (Ardington & Laura, 2015). The present study cites some gaps in explaining how the decision making skills as well as skills of negotiation as reported by previous researchers could finally lead to implementation of ECE

Curriculum particularly in ECD Centers, thence, causing a need for this study.

Children can observe one another and learn how to apply new skills from playing alongside others. Eventually, it leads to social development where the child forms relationships with others during play. According to Erica (2017), parallel play can also be useful in encouraging expression of a child's feelings through their own individualized play. This author adds that during play, a child increasingly learns to share and become aware of others' emotions as well as learning causes and effects through trial and error of adjusting and solving problems in play. This study acknowledges that much as play is believed to encourage expression, it is not clearly known how this finally transforms into a stimulant to implementation of ECE Curriculum thus, causing a gap for this study to fill.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study adopted a parallel exploratory mixed methods research design comprising both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The parallel exploratory research design was adopted because this study consists participants of various categories who ought to be studied at one moment in time. In addition, according to available information accessed, very few studies had been conducted on play-based learning in the implantation of the ECE curriculum in the context under investigation.

4.2 Study Population

The study was conducted in selected ECD centers in Eastern Uganda and the study population included headteachers, caregivers, Centre Management Committee (CMC) members and children,

4.3 Sample Size and Techniques

The Sample size of the study population was determined using Krejce and Morgan (1970) guide. Table 1.1 shows how the samples were determined according to Krejce and Morgan's guide.

Table 1: determination of sample size

Population Category	Number in each (N)	Sample Size according to Krejce & Morghan
Children (P.1-P.3)	960	274
Caregivers	140	103
Headteachers	15	14
Centre Mgt Committee	168	113
Total	1268	504

(Source: Primary data, 2020 obtained from Coordinating Centre Tutors from Eastern Uganda)

4.4 Sampling techniques

A simple random sampling was also adopted to treat every element in a stratum with equal chances of being selected because members of a given stratum always have similar qualities. This technique was used to select individual respondents from every category of; caregivers, Headteachers, children and Centre Management Committee members.

4.5 Tools of data collection

A set of self-administered questionnaire is a research instrument consisting a series of questions and other prompts for the purpose of gathering information from respondents (Wallace, 2012). Self-administered structured questionnaires were used to obtain quantitative data from Caregivers and members of the Centre management committee.

A focus group discussion is a form of session in which a small group of 10 to 12 people are led by a moderator or interviewer in a loosely structured discussion of various topics of interest. The researcher organised children into ten members for every focus discussion group.

An informant interview guide is a list of questions intended to direct and generate a discussion between two people, commonly referred to as interviewer and the interviewee (Wallace, 2012). 14 Selected Headteachers were engaged in informant interviews to generate relevant opinions, ideas, views and experiences about the topic under investigation. This was deemed the most suitable method to obtain data from participants who were heavily pre-occupied and had no time for questionnaires. In order to test validity of the research instruments, the researcher set questions in form of a questionnaire and interview guide, and the drafts were presented to colleagues to read and provide constructive comments on individual items, whether every question was clear, simple or unambiguous before the real interview sessions were conducted.

4.6 Data Presentation and Analysis

Raw data from respondents was selected in order of its relevance to the study. Quantitative data was statistically presented in summary tables. The effect significance was determined using regression coefficients at $p < .05$. Beta values under Standardized coefficients were used to interpret findings. To make results more interpretable, the mode of every item was indicated such that readers could be able to see the most frequently stated response.

Presented data was interpreted/ analyzed in percentages. This was especially for the demographic characteristics, while other data were presented in terms of Mean scores, and mode. Qualitative research findings were presented and analyzed qualitatively in themes and sub-themes and reported in verbatim form, backed up with quotations of participants for authenticity of information.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

The main ethical issues considered included deception, informed consent and privacy. Confidentiality was therefore; taken into account so as to protect individual respondent and participant's image since some of the issues pertained to the security of their work. Respect and dignity were accorded while setting the questionnaire and interview protocol. Thus all respondents were given equal treatment to enable each of them to participate willingly.

5. Results

The study findings were used to establish that majority of the respondents had been working as caregivers for a period of 5-10 years in the ECD Centers where they were found. This informs the study in a way that for someone who has been in ECD Center activities for such a period of time, they would be capable of giving relevant data based on the experience and competence in handling children. In addition, since play is a technical aspect in academia, it requires experienced people to respond to issues attached to it. Therefore, by investing in respondents with such work experience, it increased on the reliability of the obtained data.

5.1 Extent to which play is adopted in ECE curriculum implementation

This first objective was intended to establish the extent to which play was adopted to implement play-way approach in the selected ECD centres under study. The idea behind was to generate an evidence-based justification and make caregivers of ECD Centers realise the value of play in the teaching process. This comes at a time when caregivers of ECD Centers have to a great extent ignored the use of play and thus this study is a move to reinforce their motivation to issues of play. To establish this, a linear regression model was run using a ten items of play against the mean score of implementation of ECE Curriculum. Factors with B-coefficients whose significance was less than 5% were considered to be the significant factors. Table 2 is the presentation of results obtained to this effect.

Table 2: Extent to which play is adopted in the implementation of ECE Curriculum

Teachers' use of play as a teaching strategy		B-coefficient	P-value (p<.05)
1.	Play as a teaching strategy	-.835	.000
2.	Play as a reinforcement tool for already taught concepts	.049	.682
3.	Useful for indoor play corners to help children master the newly taught concepts	.196	.008
4.	Encouraging use of songs, music and drama to enhance learning and to facilitate teaching	.730	.000
5.	Enabling teachers to extend children's free outdoor play to help them learn different themes	-.240	.000
6.	Encouraging the use of materials available in teaching and learning activities	.174	.208
7.	Limiting teachers' involvement	.785	.000
8.	Encouraging children' regular participation	-.246	.007
9.	Increasing children's concentration	.047	.711
10.	Boosting memory of answers	-.154	.024

a. Dependent Variable: AP

(Source: Primary Data)

Results in Table 2 indicate that out of the ten (10) factors explaining play, three of them (2, 6 and 9) were not found to have a significant effect. In other words, when teachers use play as a reinforcement tool for already taught concepts, it does not create any changes in the implementation of ECE Curriculum. In addition, encouraging the use of materials available in the teaching and learning activities also did not have significant changes on the implementation of ECE Curriculum, and so, was the belief that play increased learners' concentration. Each of these factors has p-value greater than .05.

Another finding was reported about the use of play in regard to children's participation. According to the results which were obtained, some caregivers who adopted play in the teaching-learning process often motivated

children's active participation in lessons. However, results from regression model revealed that this attempt had a negative effect ($B = -.246$; $p = .007$) on implementation of ECE Curriculum. This implies that whenever caregivers used play in teaching as a strategy to enhance active participation, a 24.6% negative effect is realised in implementation of ECE Curriculum. The effect on implementation of ECE Curriculum is that assessment might not be based on use of materials or the skills to use materials; rather it is based on how well a learner is able to use the manipulation of materials and provide good written responses. A learner who is used to playing with materials becomes a little confused when exposed to assessment in writing. These results are in controversy with findings of other researchers especially Kohn (2015) indicating that when children are exposed to the play way-approach, their performance improves greatly across all skills.

The third finding, as per the study, and as indicated in Table 2, is that using play to enable caregivers to extend children's free outdoor play and help them learn different themes, was established to have a negative effect ($B = -.240$; $p = .000$) on implementation of ECE Curriculum. By implication, play for out-door activities contributes to 24% reductions in implementation of ECE Curriculum. This can be two-fold. Firstly, when learners are for out-door, the concentration on a caregiver is considerably very limited. Secondly, out-door play has very limited information that characterizes assessment of results for ECD Centers. Therefore, all that time would be merged into classroom activities to boost implementation of ECE Curriculum if well planned.

It is further reflected in the results in Table 2 showing that the use of play to boost learners' memory during examinations poses a negative effect ($B = -.154$; $p = .024$) on implementation of ECE Curriculum in ECD Centers. By implication, much as play is emphasised as a good approach to learning, too much of it in minds of children creates monopoly and they may not be in position to digest other forms of information while in classroom. Common responses from headteachers indicate that the use of play in classrooms makes children fail to separate play from learning. In this case, play ought to only be used as an instrument to incorporate classroom instruction and transition from theory to practice. Quoting from one of the headteachers the idea was emphasised as follows;

...Play incorporates classroom instruction and eases transition from theory to practice. This is because children are helped to construct knowledge and understanding in order for them to arrive at right concepts...(*Interview session with a Headteacher, Sept, 2020*)

In relation to implementation of ECE Curriculum, the use of play during classroom instruction has enabled children to remember certain terms/concepts, for instance in singing, children are encouraged or instructed to make utterances, some of which are reflected in their assessment exercises.

5.2 Role of play in ECE Curriculum implementation

In addition, the use of play in teaching especially for indoor play corners helps children to master newly taught concepts ($B = .196$; $p = .008$). This implies that caregivers' use of play way-approach contributes to 19.6% changes in implementation of ECE Curriculum. Therefore, by attracting learners into play corners, their minds are refreshed and open to digesting concepts. This is not the case with learners who concentrate more on theory, feeding the brain on a lot of hypothetical knowledge, which they can even easily forget. Results from interviews show that play is believed to lead to the development of effective pedagogical competencies among caregivers who conduct lessons based on the idea of known to unknown, simple to complex, concrete to abstract. In so doing, caregivers offer experiences in areas which children are familiar and have prior knowledge/experience. The implication is that through play, teachers are in position to gradually study and understand a child's preferences thus intimate them to certain play activities for effective transition from theory to practice resulting into meaningful mastery of concepts.

Furthermore, play encourages the use of songs, music and drama, which were found to have a positive bearing on children's learning ($B = .730$; $p = .000$). This is a clear implication that through use of songs, there is a positive improvement impacting on the implementation of ECE Curriculum, which is as high as 73%. This is because children's memory works well through singing. Any song which carries meaning, clicks in a child's mind, it makes them remember required information during the time of examinations. Besides, creating effective caregivers, play was reported to encourage communication and enabling children to develop communication skills. These are in form of language and speech as well as listening skills which have a positive bearing on the implementation of ECE Curriculum. During play, children are organised with toy phones to demonstrate how a telephone call is made, the language used by the caller and the receiver. By so doing, this helps children to develop effective communication skills which are applicable in real life situations even after their studies. In the real words of a headteacher, the following statement was made as quoted;

...Play encourages free communication and allows children to have the opportunity to develop speech and language skills as well as manipulative skills which lead to effective implementation of ECE Curriculum ...(*Informant interview session with one of the Headteachers in Eastern Uganda, Sept. 2020*).

The communication and manipulative skills can help to develop a language that can be used by children in

responding to questions which require some writing. In addition, children are in position to interact with one another in class by applying the communication skills children imitate phone call users. Further still, play-based learning-teaching helps to build creative skills in form of relaxation thus, helping children to emotionally express enjoyment in releasing excessive energy during learning.

Other roles of play included enhancing the child's cognitive, affective, social and physical development, leading to problem-solving skills through interactions, self-esteem, and confidence especially when asked questions. In addition, when a child works with puzzles, and also plays with educative toys, they learn to reorganise and master order of numbers and how to tell time. It also leads to cooperation with peers, which encourages involvement in groups for academic and outside classroom activities. In other words, this kind of interaction is the foundation of teamwork as reported by one of the headteachers in an informant interview session in the quotation;

...Play helps children to organise and make sense of their social world as they actively engage with peers, objects and representations. At the same time, play improves children's memory and stimulates the growth of their cerebral cortex. During play, children pay much attention to academic tasks when they are given frequent and brief opportunities for play...(informant interview with one of the Headteachers in Eastern Uganda, Sept. 2020)

Following the quotation, it is important to notice that the implications of play are either positive or negative based on how the caregiver has organised a particular play session. If caregivers organise play in form of an entertainment or anything beyond academics, it may not lead to effective implementation of the ECE Curriculum because the play act must be channeled towards learners' mastery of relevant skills to memorise concepts in learning. In addition, play-based learning was reported to have a bearing on the development of self-regulation and reasoning about the world around children, thus learning is made practical. In another development, informant interview results indicated that by the fact that play is fun, children often become absorbed in it, which helps them develop ability to concentrate. Further still, through play, children mature emotionally through creative activities like modeling and develop the thirst to find out more, in fact, they become inquisitive. More precisely, a headteacher of one of the ECD Centers stated as indicated in the quotation:

...Play makes more complicated concepts to be easily understood by children as they play in a natural surrounding using familiar materials such as logs, plants and the like, rather than fixed equipment Interviews also revealed that play increases children's attendance, makes them happy, healthy, independent and confident; sickness records become low, regulate emotions, and prepare young brains for life, love, and activities leading to meaningful learning ...(*Informant interview session with one of the Headteachers in Eastern Uganda, Sept. 2020*)

As already stated earlier, the role play has on the academic line depends on the way a caregiver adopts it as an approach to learning. Caregivers must, therefore, always plan for the most suitable way play should be employed to inform the means by which it drives towards effective learning.

5.3 Challenges associated with play in ECE Curriculum implementation

On the other hand, however, teaching by use of play was identified to contribute to limitation of caregivers' involvement ($B = .785$; $p = .000$). In other words, the more emphasis put on use of play in the teaching-learning process, the less the participation of caregiver in covering the planned content, since play consumes a lot of time.

In addition, it was reported that use of play also requires a lot of knowledge and skills to align the content with a specific play and the available teaching-learning materials so as to facilitate meaningful concept development. In the real words of a participant, the following statement was made as quoted:

...Play is a very good approach to learning most especially when teaching infants in the ECD centres, however, it depends on the experience of the caregiver most especially in terms of preparation. Otherwise, if not well handled, the lesson may merely turn out to be an enjoyment without the development of any concepts...(Interview session with a headteacher in Eastern Uganda, Sept. 2020).

Following the statement in the quotation, it implies that there is need for caregivers to be well trained on how to apply play-way approach so as to effectively implement the ECE curriculum to the expectations.

6. Discussion of findings

The study established five most significant ways to explain the role of play in the implementation of ECE Curriculum. Some of the roles were positive whereas, others were quite challenging. On the negative side, play as a teaching strategy was reported that if not well planned, it becomes time consuming, thence, leading to inadequate syllabus coverage of a given learning area. These results indicate that when caregivers adopt play without carefully integrating it with the intended content, children are most likely to perform poorly. The results are in line with the findings of Ardington & Laura (2015) which also show that in spite of the advocacy and some caregivers' interest in the use of play-based learning, it happened that most of the caregivers in the selected ECD Centers under study did not use it as a meaningful pedagogical approach instead, they employed it as a learning

interlude between, at the end and at the beginning of lessons as an ice-breaker or energizer.

At the same time, although it was discovered that play was reported to significantly enable caregivers extend children's free outdoor activities to help them learn different themes, the results on academic performance were reported to be negative. By this, it is clear that children normally did not attach the learning aspect to play. When they played, they did not at anyone time believe that the play was intended to enable them understand and ease understanding of concepts in lessons. In establishing related information, Elkind (2015) asserted that play-based learning operates like a logical example for mature learners in that using an example, a learner is in position to remember key concepts taught in the classroom and thus not deviate from facts in responding to tasks. Therefore, it is unfortunate that even with this kind of positive implication, results indicated that, caregivers at the ECD centers under study were reluctant to adopt play as a pedagogical approach to learning. To most of the respondents, play-based learning was interpreted simply as fun or mere play to energise learners and nothing other than that.

The danger in failure to regulate the use of play is that certain subjects and learning situations may not necessarily require play-based approach. In agreement, these results are in line with the findings of Erica (2017) indicating that certain subjects might not necessarily require a caregiver to adopt play to make children understand. At times, children might not have that simple logic that in a certain play activity, a caregiver is intending to make them understand a specific concept, thence, making play as merely fun or a learning interlude.

Another role of play-based learning on academic performance was positive and it indicated that play-based learning encourages the use of songs which directly cater for the affective domain. In relation to the implementation of ECE Curriculum, it is very easy for a child's memory to be stimulated. In agreement, available research findings, for example, Erica (2017) reported that a child's mind can memorise concepts through singing than through a lecture. This is because singing is part and partial of children's real life experience. Therefore, caregivers are expected to be practicing singing as an approach to teaching of children in ECD Centers.

In addition to the above, the study also revealed that play brings about useful indoor play corners to help children master the newly taught concepts. It is against that background that Bodrova & Leong (2017) advocate for the established of indoor and outdoor play corners to refresh children's minds, both in and outside the classrooms. Based on this, some of the ECD Centers have decided to establish pit-sand areas, plant corners, animal corners and the like to enable children interact with various materials which can enable them play with materials to facilitate them remember concepts in examinations. All in all, children need areas of refreshment through play whether they are in or outside classrooms so that they do not get tired of caregiver monopoly.

7. Conclusions

Conclusively, it is hereby observed that play has both positive and negative effects on the implementation of ECE Curriculum in the ECD centres. On the negative side, it can end up as a teaching strategy which consumes time and compromises syllabus coverage, turns out to be merely fun or entertainment if not carefully integrated with the intended content. On the positive side, play intimates children to outdoor activities. Play makes children develop much love for learning, encourages regular attendance, improves learner-caregiver relationship, makes learning fun it also acts as an interlude at the start, between and the end of lessons. It is therefore, very important to apply the approach of play as a pedagogical strategy in the teaching-learning process in order to motivate learners into meaningful learning attainment. Unfortunately, Caregivers in the area of study lacked skills in applying the Play-way approach in teaching. In addition, it is also hereby concluded that what made caregivers apply play alongside lessons instead of integrating it with a given content was that they lacked background training on how to employ play-way approach.

8. Way-forward (implications for practice)

It is hereby recommended that caregivers' capacity be built in the application of play as a pedagogical approach to learning. Such capacity building strategies may be in form of seminars, workshops, peer mentorship and conferences, ranging from ECD centre-based to national levels. In a related development, Ejuu (2012) also recommends technical assistance required to promote effective implementation of the recommended ECD framework so as to produce better ECD teachers [caregivers] in Uganda.

In addition, deliberate arrangements should be put in place to develop appropriate instructional materials which attract the application of play in the learning of children at the ECD centres across the different learning areas.

Furthermore, all ECD centres should be well organised with a conducive learning environment which is play-responsive. It is better to develop the play materials of low or no cost resources from the local environment. Additionally, the involvement of learners in the development of play materials is also very important because it helps in promoting the spirit of ownership, creativity, responsibility and it is a strategy for sustainability.

All in all, Curriculum developers should review the existing reference materials and integrate the content

for ECD with play, since it is an avenue to learning, a source of creative thinking, critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Learners use play to resolve conflicts, it is a source of discovery because it helps learners to explore the world around them and it is at the same time, a source of learners' free expression of ideas.

References

- Absolunet. (2013). *Importance of Early Childhood Education*. London: Encyclopedia of Early Childhood Education, 1-2.
- Andreia, I., & Mata, L. (2016). *Pedagogical Competences-The Key to Efficient education*. New York: International Online Journal of Education.
- Ardington, C., & Laura, P. (2015). *Evaluating the Impact of Play-Based Learning on Early Childhood Development in South Africa*. Johannesburg: povertyactionlab.com.
- Aryl, D. (2017). *Why Playing Alone is Important for Children*. London: London Times.
- Bergen, D., Nakighu, F., & Kenneth, G. (2017). *Play as the Learning Medium for Future Scientists, Mathematicians, and Engineers*. London: American Journal of Play.
- Bodrova, E., & Leong, D. (2017). *Chopsticks and counting chips: Do play and foundational skills need to compete for the teacher's attention in an early childhood classroom? Spotlight on young children and play*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Calman, L. J., & Tarr-Whelan, L. (2005). *Early Childhood Education for All: a wise investment. Recommendations arising from 'The Economic Impacts of Child Care and Early Education: financing solutions for the future', a conference sponsored by Legal Momentum*. London.
- Debbie, C. (2015). *Play-based learning, the role of the adult in the play based program*. Paris: ascortikindergarten.
- Eddy, & Matthew, D. (2016). *The Child Writer: Graphic Literacy and the Scottish Educational System*. New York.
- Ejuu, G. (2012). *Implementation of the Early Childhood Development Teacher Training Framework in Uganda: Gains and Challenges*. Journal of Early Childhood Research 0(0) 1- 12© Sagepub.co.uk/journals. nav. DOI 10.1177/1476718X12437114ecr.sagepu.com
- Elkind, D. (2015). *The History of Early Childhood Education curriculum in State*. New York: www.communityplaythings.com.
- Erica, D. (2017). *A Continuum of Play-Based Learning: The Role of the Teacher in Play-Based Pedagogy and the Fear of Hijacking Play*. Washington DC: tandfonline.
- Investopedia. (2012). *Article on Stratified Sampling*. New York: Investopedia.
- Kagoda, A.M. and Ezati, B.A. (2013). *Contribution of Primary Teacher Education to Quality Education: Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, Vol. 52, 2013. Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences, Lithuanian.
- Kohn, D. (2015). *Let the Kids Learn Through Play*. Vienna: HGT.
- Martlew, J., Stephen, C., & Ellis, J. (2011). *Play in the primary school classroom? The experience of teachers supporting children's learning through a new pedagogy*. London: Sage.
- MoES (2012). *Primary Teacher Education Curriculum: Part D: Kyambogo University, Kampala, MoES*.
- McLeod, S. A. (2011). *Contribution to psychology Theory, origin of operant behavior, and control of operant behavior*. London: wikipedia.org.
- Mirembe, R., Margaret, B., Sentongo, J., Nambi, R., & Katende, G. (2017). *Teacher Preparation and Continuing Professional Development in Africa (TPA)*. Kampala: Centre for International Education (CIE).
- Muchanje, P. N. (2015). *Determinants of Career Progression of Tutors in Public Primary Teachers' Training Colleges in Kenya*. Nairobi: University of Nairobi.
- Nahid, G. (2003). *Understanding validity and reliability in Qualitative Research*. Ontario: University of Toronto.
- NAPE (2017). *National Assessment of Primary Education*. Kampala, UNEB
- Nankya, R. (2018). *Exploration of Play-Based Learning on Pupils' Academic Performance in Lower Primary: A Case Study of Iganga, Municipal Council, unpublished (Dissertation), Kampala, Kyambogo University*.
- UNESCO. (2017). *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007: Strong Foundations - Early Childhood Care and Education*. London: London Times.
- UNESCO (2006). *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007: Strong Foundations - Early Childhood Care and Education*. London: London Times.
- Wambi, M. (2020). *Tutors' Competences and Implementation of Early Childhood Education Curriculum in Primary Teachers' Colleges in Eastern Uganda*, Kampala, Makerere University.
- Wooden, J. (2012). *Seven benefits of outdoor play to children*. Washington: GTF.
- Yuani, R., & Merna, F. J. (2015). *The Benefits of Hidden Object Games, While these games are a lot of fun they can also help you in many different ways, and in this article we will introduce you to some of them*. London: GTR.