



AVAILABILITY AND USE OF PLAY MATERIALS, AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN KYANGWITHYA ZONE, KITUI COUNTY



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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings on availability and use of play materials in play and their influence on social and emotional development of pre-school children in Kyangwithya zone, Kitui County, Kenya. Within this broad aim, the paper provides a better understanding on the importance of play materials, as a catalyst for play, which further enhances social and emotional development. The development of this study was influenced by various concerns of educational stakeholders as to whether pre-schoolers were provided with enough play materials and how these play materials promoted play and social and emotional development. The data collection methods involved questionnaires and observation schedules. A total of 9 pre-schools, 75 preschoolers and 6 teachers were involved in the study. The selection was done through purposive sampling and simple random sampling. It was found out that majority of the schools had play materials. However, these materials were not adequate for the children, hence this did not support variety that promote and stimulate prolonged play, which enhances social and emotional development. Also, there was a strong positive correlation ($r=+0.75$) between availability of play materials and social development of children and a significant difference ($p<0.05$). These means that if there is more variety of play materials and are well used, the children are likely to have good social and emotional development. The paper recommends that the schools should provide more varied assortment of play material to pre-school children as this is likely to improve their social and emotional development. On the whole, the study's findings are seen to be of particular relevance to curriculum developers, administrators and teachers in Kenya.

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Contribution/Originality

This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the significance of play among children. It revives an understanding that play is not optional in the process of teaching and learning for children. The essence of play among children is core factor necessary to enhance physical, emotional, and social development.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

Play and use of play materials is so important to optimal child development such that it has been recognized by the [United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights \(2006\)](#) as a right of every child. Play is any behavior that is freely chosen, intrinsically motivated, and personally directed by the child. All types of play from fantasy to rough-and-tumble, have a crucial role in children's development. The implication is that any form of play is the lens through which children experience their world and the world of others. He further asserts that if deprived of play, children will suffer both in the present and in the long-term. With supportive adults, adequate play space, and an assortment of play materials, children stand the best chance of becoming healthy, happy and productive members of society.

[Bell and Wolfe \(2004\)](#) argues that play contributes directly to children's social and emotional development. But it is toys and play materials that stimulate and prolong play. [Bell and Wolfe \(2004\)](#) further observes that if children are to discover what they are good at, what they like and what they are like, they will need variety in their play, and a broad assortment of toys to make it possible. Children will play longer when allowed to choose their play things ([Eccles and Templeton, 2002](#)). Toys should be chosen so that children can play alone and with others, in active as well as passive play. Some toys and games, board games, ball games, and large-weight blocks will encourage or require co-operation among child.

According to [American Academy of Pediatrics \(2014\)](#) through rough and tumble play, children form social bonds, acquire different dominance ranks and learn what behaviors are acceptable, how to resolve conflicts and they learn right from wrong. Play is significantly related to creative problem-solving, co-operative behavior, logical thinking, IQ scores and peer group popularity. Whilst playing together, children learn to co-operate, follow rules, develop self-esteem, control and learn generally how to get along with other people ([Elis and Arnold, 2006](#)). Young children are naturally curious, so providing them with high quality (which may not mean expensive) materials is important to the learning process. Toys that encourage children's imagination help them know that the world is a diverse and wonderful place. [Elis and Arnold \(2006\)](#) further argues that while children may clamber for the "toy of the moment" the hype should not sway decisions made. Jumping ropes, jacks, bean bags, balls, blocks and swings continue to be favorites of children everywhere.

Through play experiences, children learn about themselves, their environment and people in their lives, experiment with different ways to solve problem, develop body control, practice social skills and express creativity. An environment that encourages children to make their own choices helps them feel safe, valued, adventurous, competent and confident to take initiative. Teachers and parents are required to provide playing materials for their children so as to help them get engaged in a meaningful and quality play which influences their social and emotional development ([Jane, 2001](#)). The study was triggered by various concerns from educational stakeholders that most of the school did not have enough play materials and that pre-school children were not being given enough time to interact with play materials and develop socially and emotionally, which is portrayed in their inability to handle simple tasks, relate well with peers, poor concentration in class, aggressive behavior, lack of agility and inability to engage in socially appropriate behavior. I would argue that this has been attributed to prolonged stay indoors, rigid curriculum and lack of play materials and facilities and in this regards, it makes sense to state that majority of pre-schools in Kenya do not have adequate play materials and those who have, are not letting children to adequately use them.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Although the curriculum developers in Kenya have put a lot of emphasis on play and even allocated time for play in the timetable, little is being done in our pre-schools regarding provision of play materials and time for play. Majority of schools in Kenya host a large number of children such that the playing fields are overstretched. Most of these fields are overstretched. Most of these fields are open grounds with no facilities that the children can use in

play. While there are play materials in these schools, they appear to be inadequate for the children or even, age inappropriate, forcing children to engage in short, uncoordinated and less interesting play activities.

Recent report from stakeholders indicated that lately, pre-school children have been exhibiting increased learning difficulties, inability to solve simple tasks and numerous cases of truancy, disinterest for school, aggressive behavior and unpopularity among peers, compounded with poor class concentration, unwillingness to participate in challenging tasks, constant fatigue and lack of agility.

Many studies on play have been carried in some parts of the world. E.g. a study carried by [American Academy of Pediatrics \(2014\)](#) in the US indicates that, the use of toys and play materials stimulate and prolong play which then promotes children's social and emotional development. Their study further indicates that lack of play for children is closely associated with anxiety, depression, social tendencies, feeling of helplessness and obesity.

Most of these studies have been carried abroad. However, no single study on play materials and their relationship to social and emotional development has been carried in Kenya, hence this gap still exists.

1.3. Significance of the Study

This study is of significance in a number of ways. First, the findings will be important to the curriculum developers in evaluating and emphasizing the use of play materials during play together with allocating more time for play in the timetable so that children can engage in quality and productive play. The school administrators will be able to get a better understanding on the value of play materials hence provide more play materials for their pre-schools. The findings will also necessitate class-teachers to attend in-service courses to learn more about play and material development for the benefit of the pre-schoolers.

2. THEORETICAL CONTEXT

This study was inspired by the "social development theory" by Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, who lived from 1896-1934. This theory asserts that there are three major themes. First, social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development and that, every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level and later on the individual level, first, between people (interpsychological) and then, within the child (intrapsychological) ([Vygotsky, 1978](#)). Secondly, the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) which refers to anyone who has better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner, with respect to a particular task, process or concept. The MKO is normally thought of as being a teacher, coach, or adult, but the MKO could also be peers, young person, or even computers. Thirdly, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is the distance between a learner's ability to perform a task under adult guidance and /or with peer collaboration and the learner's ability to solve the problem independently. According to Vygotsky, learning occurs in this zone. Vygotsky focuses on the connections between people and the social cultural context in which they act and interact in shared experiences ([Crowford, 1996](#)). According to Vygotsky, humans use tools that develop from a culture, such as speech and writing, to mediate their social environment.

Initially, children develop these tools to serve solely as social functions and ways to communicate needs. Vygotsky believed that the internalization of these tools lead to higher thinking skills. [Crowford \(1996\)](#) argues that the major strength of this theory is that, a child is encouraged to discover and think in new ways and gain new social, emotional and cognitive tools to make serve of his/her world. Children can obtain help from peers and solve problems, while scaffolding has been used to support learning through play.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following research Questions;

- a) Which play materials are available in the pre-school classrooms?

- b) What is the relationship between availability of play materials during play time and social and emotional development?

4. METHODOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS AND PROCEDURES

This study was conducted in Kyangwithya Zone, Kitui County, Kenya. The study adopted a descriptive survey design which considers both qualitative and quantitative data. According to Jackson (2009) this design is used to obtain information concerning the current status of the phenomena to describe “what exists” with respect to variables or conditions in a situation. In this method, participants answer questions, and the researchers describe the responses given. Purposive sampling also called selective or subjective sampling technique was used in selecting the preschools used in the study.

Secondly, simple random sampling was used to select children and teachers from the selected schools. According to Creswell (2011) in this technique, the researchers selects participants (or units such as schools) so that all individuals have equal chance/probability of being selected and any bias in the population is equally distributed among those chosen. A total of 90 respondents were selected for the study.

The study used questionnaires and observation schedules to collect data. According to Kombo and Tromp (2006) a questionnaire is an instrument that gathers data over a large sample, it can reach a large number of subjects who are able to read and write independently. Kombo and Tromp (2006) further asserts that observation involves human or mechanical observation of what people actually do or what events take place during a particular situation. Questionnaires were answered by the teachers while observation was done on the pre-school children.

The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program, version 16. The data obtained were calculated in means and standard deviations for easy interpretation of information.

5. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSIONS OF RESULTS FROM RESEARCH QUESTIONS

5.1 Which Play Materials are Available in the Pre-School Classroom?

This study first sought to determine whether the availability of play materials influence children’s social and emotional development. The researchers first requested the respondents to indicate whether they had play materials in their classrooms.

Table-5.1. Presence of play materials

Presence	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	6	100.00
No	0	0.00
Total	6	100.00

Source: Authors, 2016

Table-5.2 Play materials available in the classrooms.

Materials	Available	Not available	Total%
Balls	6(100%)	0(0%)	6(100%)
Swings	3(50%)	6(100%)	6(100%)
Slides	0(0%)	6(100%)	6(100%)
Beanbags	0(0%)	6(100%)	6(100%)
Tyres	6(100%)	0(0%)	6(100%)
Dolls	2(33.3%)	4(.66.7%)	6(100%)
Toy cars	2(33.3%)	4(.66.7%)	6(100%)
Mean	3(50%)	3(50%)	6(100%)

Source: Authors, 2016

It was reported by 100% that they had play materials in their classrooms (Table 5.1). This shows that the teachers understood the importance of having play materials in their classrooms. As a result they were in a position to give information on whether the play materials influenced children's social and emotional development. The respondents were further requested to indicate play materials available in their classroom.

Table 5.2 shows that all the pre-schools 100% had balls and Tyres while all the schools lacked slides and bean bags. It was also observed that dolls and toys were not many in most pre-schools (66.7%). Although there were some play materials in all the schools, it was reported that they were not adequate.

5.2 What is the relationship between availability of play materials during play time and social and emotional development?

The researchers further sought to establish whether there was a relationship between the presence of play materials and social development using Pearson Correlation Coefficient as shown in Table 5.3.

Table-5.3. Relationship between Availability of play materials and social skills development

		Availability Play materials	Social skills development
Availability of Play materials	Pearson correlation	1	0.75
	Sig. (2-tailed)	6	0.001
	N	6	6
Social skills Development	Pearson correlation	0.75	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	
	N	6	6

Source: Authors, 2016

There seem to be a strong positive correlation ($r=+0.75$) between availability of play materials and social development of children in pre-schools. There is also a significant difference ($P < 0.05$). This means that if there are more play materials that are well utilized, the children are likely to have a good social and emotional development in pre-schools. These results are in line with [Elis \(2000\)](#) who argues that children should be provided with playing materials as a way of enhancing their play since play materials for children add value to play. Teachers and parents are therefore required to provide playing materials for their children so as to help them get engaged in meaningful play which influences their social and emotional development.

[Coolahan et al. \(2000\)](#) states that play is an integral part of the academic environment. It ensures social and emotional development of children as well as their cognitive development. Also, it has been shown to help children adjust to the school setting and enhance children's learning readiness, learning behaviors, and problem solving skills. [Coolahan et al. \(2000\)](#) further argues that social and emotional learning is best integrated with academic learning. It is concerned with if some of the forces that enhance children's ability to learn are elevated at the expense of others. Play and unscheduled time that allow for peer interactions are important components of social and emotional learning ([Elis and Arnold, 2006](#)). This can only be achieved if there are play materials in the school and they are effectively used.

6. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The availability of play materials seems to be a significantly critical tool in influencing and promoting children's social and emotional development. In my view, children need varied play materials to be motivated to participate in quality play which consequently improves their social and emotional development. Equally important is the amount of time allocated for play which should be long blocks of time to allow children to interact exhaustively with the play materials provided. In this regard, the schools should provide more varieties of play materials to pre-school children as this is most likely to improve their social and emotional development.

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