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"Play is Play" and "Learning is Learning": Beliefs and Practices Linked to Pre-Primary Children's Play and Learning in Tanzania

Miraji Ramadhani Mgonja*

Master of Arts in Education, Department Business Administration, College of Business Education (CBE), Tanzania, <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6951-3929>

Yusuph Maulid Kambug

PhD in Education, Department Business Administration, College of Business Education (CBE), Tanzania, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5648-6968>

***Correspondence email:** mirrajirmgonja2017@gmail.com.

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Abstract: The beliefs and practices of selected preschools in the Dodoma Region regarding the role of play in pre-class learning were examined in this study. The main goal was to understand how teachers and parents view play as a significant role in child development and how they incorporate it into their teaching and learning activities. The study's guiding questions concerned the status of play in the curriculum guidelines in Tanzania, how teachers and parents perceive the play for pre-primary school children and the challenges pre-primary teachers face in using play as a curricular tool. A qualitative research design approach was used with face-to-face interviews and documentary analysis to gather information from 17 participants, including heads of teachers, pre-class teachers, and parents. The study participants were expertly purposive and cluster sampled. Data were collected from four selected preschools located in the urban and rural Dodoma region. The study found that the play was almost unreal in all visited preschools and that pre-classrooms were dominated by academic instructions, despite teachers' awareness of the significant contribution of play in the cognitive and

academic development of a child. The study also revealed that factors such as limited play materials, academic pressures on teachers, playground safety, and unqualified teachers to teach in pre-classes could negatively impact children's cognitive and socio-emotional growth. Based on the study's findings, recommendations included curriculum adjustments and enhanced pre-primary teacher education programs.

Keywords: Play, learning, preschool, early childhood, pre-class, Teachers

Introduction

Early Childhood Education is a fundamental right for every child worldwide, regardless of ethnic background. The United Nations conventions declare that children have the right to be protected and provided with education, playtime, and other fundamental human rights (United Nations, 1989). Further, the United Nations international treaty requires all state parties to acknowledge and uphold children's rights, regardless of age or ethnicity. As a signatory of UN treaties, Tanzania has demonstrated its commitment to prioritising children's rights by enacting laws such as the Child Act of 2009 and the Disabilities Act of 2010.

The Law of the Child Act (2009) categorically states that: *"A person shall not deprive a child of access to education, immunisation, food, clothing, shelter, health and medical care or any other thing required for his development"*. Furthermore, the Act states that *"A person shall not deprive a child the right to participate in sports, or in positive cultural and artistic activities or other leisure activities unless, in the opinion of the parent, guardian or relative such participation or activity is not in the best interest of the child"*. Additionally, the Persons with Disabilities Act (2010) states that *"Persons with disabilities in all ages and genders shall have same rights to education, training in inclusive settings and the benefits of research as other citizens as well as encourage and promote the participation of persons with disabilities in sports activities at all levels"*. Besides, the country has put in place a national strategy for inclusive education and updated education policies to ensure the protection of children's rights to education (Mgonja, 2014; Mabagala & Mabagala, 2012; Kambuga & Hussein, 2022; Kejo, 2017). These rights include the right to rest, play, and participate in recreational activities. Article 37 of the United Nations treaty explicitly emphasises the importance of promoting children's right to play, and state parties are also required to educate families, communities, and parents about cultural beliefs that may impact children's rights (United Nations, 1989).

The play at an early age of child signifies a vital part of human development and is recognised as a fundamental right for every child (Karaoglu, 2020; Brockman et al., 2011; Mgonja, 2014; Kejo, 2017; Fisher, et al., 2008; UNICEF, 2018). Despite this, many caregivers and educators underestimate its power and is often overlooked as a learning tool. Some African countries, Tanzania particularly, have tried to include play in early childhood curricular education, but there has been a decline in understanding of its role in cognitive development due to increased emphasis on accountability (Ezati & Odele, 2022; Karaoglu, 2020; Bodrova, 2008; Mgonja, 2014; Kejo, 2017). In pre-primary schools in Tanzania, the play is a crucial aspect of early childhood education (Mgonja, 2014; Kejo, 2017; Shukia & Marobo, 2022; James, 2023). However, it is important maintaining a balance between conventional learning, e.g., the alphabet, memorisation of facts and poems, and recreational activities to ensure that children receive holistic support for their development (Mabagala & Shukia, 2019; Ndijuye et al., 2020; Shukia & Marobo, 2022; James, 2023). Studies reveal that, in the classroom, educators' beliefs about play can impact children's experiences and create challenges in managing the classroom. Meanwhile, caregivers often see play as a fun activity enhancing learning (Ranz-Smith, 2007; Omoera, 2011; Kejo, 2017).

Research has shown that the play was a powerful tool in education that could positively impact the development and pathways of the brain (Lester & Russell, 2008; Jing & Li, 2015; Karaoğlu, 2020). By integrating the play into the curriculum, pupils can improve their ability to focus on teacher-directed tasks and become better prepared for academic learning, including instruction in the alphabet, numbers, colour, and other important skills. This paper examined how teachers and parents view the play, its significant role in child development, and how they incorporate it into their teaching and learning activities. It seeks to answer related questions.

Research Problem

Child Playing in schools is very important for educational and cognitive development and for fostering social-emotional skills and language abilities. Play's nature and perceived role may vary across different cultures and contexts. In some societies, the child play is closely related to the free learning rather than teacher-directed learning and is consequently viewed as a valuable tool for child education development. Despite the fact that research and theory support the idea that the play is an important part of child learning in developed countries, there is scanty information available about how parents and teachers in Tanzania view the play in pre-classes and its role in preparing children for academic tasks in the future.

Research Focus

The dynamic relationship between beliefs and practices in pre-primary education provides new light on the influence of play and learning on children's development. This investigation portrays the alignment between these beliefs, actual classroom practices, and their influence on child development. The dynamic interplay between beliefs and practices offers new perspectives on the results of pre-primary education about the significant role of the play and learning in children's development and their potential implications for pre-education in Tanzania.

Research Aim and Research Questions

The study explored parents' and teachers' beliefs and practices with regard to the play as a learning tool in pre-classes in Tanzania. The aim was to gain insights into how selected participants understood the play and its significant role in teaching and learning activities as well as how beliefs about the play and learning influenced their practices in the classrooms and home settings. The main multifaceted question guiding the study was as follows: What is the status of play in the curriculum guidelines in Tanzania? How do teachers and parents perceive the play for pre-primary school children? and What challenges do pre-primary teachers face in using the play as a curricular tool?

Research Methodology

General Background

In this study, the use of a qualitative design, as described by Creswell (2014) and Johnson and Christensen (2014), as an inquiry process of describing life experiences and giving them meaning to social or human problems opted. This design allowed a comprehensive understanding of the ideas, perceptions, opinions, and beliefs of the study participants regarding their attitudes and practices towards the play. So far, this design has helped reduce misunderstandings with key informants by allowing participants to express their feelings and experiences.

Sample / Participants / Group

The study was conducted from 2021-2022 by involving four primary schools in the Dodoma region's urban and rural areas. The selected sample consisted of 17 participants, including four Heads of schools, eight pre-primary class teachers, and five parents. These study participants were homogeneously selected using a sampling technique helping to explore their beliefs and practices about the contribution of the play as a teaching approach in pre-primary child brain development in Tanzania. The selected 17 participants were obtained using expert purposive and cluster sampling techniques. The head of school and pre-class teachers were selected from the chosen school sites using expert purposive sampling. In contrast, parents with children in pre-primary classes and who lived near schools were selected using cluster sampling for easy access.

Instrument and Procedures

The researcher used a face-to-face semi-structured interview and documentary analysis to obtain information from the study participants. The interview questions were designed to capture verbal interactions between the participants and the researcher. Creswell (2014) explains that a semi-structured interview is a flexible tool that enables new questions to be introduced during the interview based on the interviewee's responses. The researchers used this technique to capture the beliefs and classroom practices of teachers and parents at home regarding the role of play in developing children's mental cognition. The documents were reviewed to see what directives and guidelines are regarding the implementation of play as the pedagogy in pre-schools. Since Kiswahili is the medium of instruction in pre-class in Tanzania, the interview guide questions were transcribed into Kiswahili for all key informants. Later, the Kiswahili version was translated into English for analytical interpretation. The questions were the following:

Interview Guide Questions for Teachers: 1. When reading the early childhood curriculum guidelines, what do you reflect on the position on play within these guidelines? 2. To what extent do you implement these guidelines in your classroom when it comes to children's play? 3. Why do you think children's play is important for their learning? 4. Can you explain the link between play and children's learning? 5. What do you believe are the obstacles preschool teachers face when using play to help children learn?

Interview Guide Questions for Parents: 1. In your opinion, what is the role of play in a child's development? 2. Can you explain the link between play and children's education? 3. How frequently do you encourage your children to engage in playtime at home? 4. Do you believe that preschool teachers should prioritise play over academic instruction? 5. What do you think are the challenges teachers face when implementing play-based learning strategies in schools?

Data Analysis

Data analysis is an ongoing process of sorting, sifting, reading, and rereading data (Creswell, 2014). To accomplish a common interpretation pattern across the data set, the researcher transcribed, summarised, reduced the volume of raw information, and constructed a framework for communicating the essence of what the data revealed. Thereafter, thematic inductive content analysis was done to produce themes and align them to the study's guiding questions. Finally, the data collected from all sources were presented as thematic paraphrases and verbatim quotes.

Research Results

This study was conducted in the natural settings of schools where teachers have autonomy in their classroom environments. The research explores the beliefs and practices of teachers and parents regarding the play as a curricular learning tool in pre-primary schools. The study findings were presented based on the research questions.

Status of Play in the Curriculum Guidelines in Tanzania

The first question of this study sought to identify the status of the play in the curriculum guidelines in Tanzania. The results reveal that the play was one of the more excellent central approaches to educating young children as it aids children's early development of arithmetic, language literacy skills, and social as well as self-regulatory skills. The government of Tanzania acknowledged play in pre-primary as the methodical approach under the educational and training policy of 2014 and the Pre-primary syllabus of 2016. These two government documents consider the play to be the main activity for young children, and pre-primary and class teachers are encouraged to use the play to facilitate teaching and learning by motivating and increasing interest in the learning process. The Educational and Training Policy of 2014 and the Pre-primary Syllabus 2016 put more emphasis on the play as a multi-sensory experiential learning for children aged one to three by directing class teachers to offer a hands-on and play-based program. These documents require children to engage in various activities such as messy play, sand and water play, swimming, and physical education sessions on the school playground.

"Teaching methods constitute one of the key factors that promote the child's interest in learning. To promote the child's interest, the teacher is required to use methods that will encourage children's participation in performing different activities. Since the play is the main activity for young children, teachers are encouraged to use the play to facilitate teaching and learning" (pre-primary school syllabus, pg. 21).

Despite the high-level status of the play in the documents, the interviewed teachers at pre-primary schools noted that the play is theoretically given a high value in the documents but in practice is less valued. Some interviewed teachers view the use of the play approach as taxing because school environments do not support its implementation. As one teacher said:

"Look we are stressed by the authority to ensure children at this level know the 3Rs (read, write and arithmetic) so no teacher will go for the play method while you will be questioned whether children can the 3Rs. In practice children at the age of 1 to 3 years are not supposed to have such subjects as this, they were supposed to be outside playing".

Although pre-primary curriculum documents insist on play-based teaching and learning as the main approach, most teachers prioritise didactic methods that place too much emphasis on 3Rs skills and with less emphasis on learning through the play. These practices probably might be caused by either the majority of teachers being unfamiliar with pre-primary guidelines or prospective pre-primary teachers being taught in the same ways as primary school teachers in colleges.

Teachers' and Parents' Perceptions of Play for Pre-Primary School Children

The second question of this study explored teachers' and parents' perceptions of play as a teaching strategy for pre-primary school children in schools. The results showed that all participants recognised the play as the children's basic right that needs to be managed in educating young children. The participant's views are categorically presented below;

Views of teachers. Most teachers view the play for children in school as a fundamental right as it aids in their growth and is something that cannot be separated from child development and learning. One of teacher said the following:

“Most of the teachers think that their task to these pre-primary children was to make sure that they know how to 3Rs skills, but we forget this important aspect in child development without knowing that we deny one of the basic rights of the child”.

Another teacher said the following;

“Children learn by seeing, doing, and even by touching. I think play is important for all children, especially those ages 2 to 3. It is good for their memory because as they engage in play, especially group play, they also learn various skills, friendships and many things that make them confident”.

Also, another teacher said the following:

“Sports are not just activities of roving around the playing field, and that is all. Playing any sports helps to enrich a child mentally, not only because they get time to relax their mind after school hours but also because the development of winning strategies and the cultivation of a spirit of daring in sports can be transferred to classroom work.”

The researchers were under the impression that the play as the teaching method was not prioritised in many pre-primary schools. Our impression was not far from one of the teachers who provided the following statement:

“In my school, the play is practised as one of the teaching methods, although not to the extent because the school timetable is limited. Much of our efforts are on teaching 3Rs skills only. Also, the reason why play takes a small part in our school activities is because performance indicates big results now influences. So many schools are struggling to achieve that goal”

Contrary to the majority, one teacher made the following statement:

“Children need to be encouraged to learn more academic subjects than being engaged in the play. I think the play should be part of an extra-curricular activity after break time. Remember these children have a short time of learning as they are alive at 8.00 am and leave at 12. 00 pm. So, if we devote much time to playing outside as required by the guidelines, when and how they will develop 3R skills, which to me is more important than play”.

Views of parents. On the other hand, parents had divergent views on the play as the teaching and learning method for children in pre-primary classes. Although most of the parents viewed the play as a time waste that could be devoted to learning. One of them said the following:

“There is no way for these young children can learn academic subjects while playing. Teachers in school should prioritise one of them play or studies.”

Another parent provided a condemning statement to some teachers in school by saying the following:

“You know these days teachers are not doing their work properly. I am the neighbour of this school, but most of the time I see these children playing the time they are supposed to be in class. I always ask myself, when do these children learn?’ It seems the only thing teachers and schools do is let our children play and not learn that is why our children are not able to read or write. Children should be able to read and write at an early age and master of language”.

Another parent said the following:

“Our children should play at their own time because classroom time is occupied with academic instructions. children play every day at their homes where there is plenty of time. I think should be a place of learning not playing”.

Contrary to this view other parents see the play as a curriculum tool that creates an opportunity for children to learn from new experiences by being close to the community and objects with which they are familiar, and that the school setting is the best avenue for creating such opportunity. One of the parents made the following statement:

“The play and learning are the two related things because when children play, they also learn about numbers and word pronunciation which help them in learning different academic subjects”.

Another parent said the following:

“The play is a recreation for children after classroom hours they need to refresh. To me, I don’t see the problem of play but it should not be too much because playing is part of stimulating their bodies and keeping them physically and mentally fit”.

Additionally, another parent nailed it:

“My children play almost every day. I don’t have to tell them how and where to play. As a parent, I think have more important issues to work on than playing with children. The important thing is that I don’t stop them from playing”.

Considering the views of parents, it is clear that the majority of parents were not aware of the benefits of the play as a curriculum tool in enriching a child's learning ability and mental development.

Challenges pre-primary teachers face in using play as a curricular tool

The third question of this study explored the challenges pre-primary teachers face in using the play as a curricular tool. The results showed that the Big Results Now Education (BRED) requirement, inadequate playing materials, and the lack of sufficient and comprehensive skills for pre-primary teachers in the use of play-based learning techniques were reported to be challenges facing the use of play as the teaching tool in Pre-primary schools. During the interview session, teachers have various opinions on the challenge facing them in the use of play as a strategy to enhance the competencies of pre-primary pupils.

Pressure from Big Results Now Education (BRNED) directives. The government of Tanzania launched the BRNED initiative in 2013 as a response to the dramatic deterioration in academic and non-academic skills due to poor average pass rate in national examinations which dropped from 90% in 2007 to 43% in 2012 in both the primary and secondary schooling systems (United Republic of Tanzania, 2014). In response to this drastic decline, the Big Results Now Education (BRNED) Initiative from the Malaysian government in 2013 was adopted to improve the pass rate in schools. In so doing, teachers were capacitated in different approaches to ensure they help to trigger students’ academic performance and consequently improve the quality of education in government schools. One teacher said the following:

“To me, the play is the best approach to teach these kids but since the government launched the Big Result Now Education (BRNED) our effort is in teaching 3Rs to both preschools and standard one pupil. It is not our fault, it is the BRN requirement to ensure that all children should be able to read, write and account at an early age to reduce or do away with children who complete primary education while unable to read and write”.

Another teacher stated that:

“The BRN is pressuring us too much and we have no time to think of play because, at the end of the year, you will be asked about how many pupils know or don’t know to read, write and account but not how many pupils know how to play”.

Contrary to pre-class teachers, heads of schools pointed out that BRNED directives encouraged teachers to use all possible means to ensure that the BRNED goals are achieved and none of the government officials nor school heads prohibited teachers from using play as a teaching method in pre-primary schools. One head said the following:

“Look my school have two classes of pre-primary with more than 150 pupils. I have been encouraging my teachers to use friendly teaching methods for these pupils because we want them to love the school and come every day. I think the problem is not the BRNED directives the problem in teachers' ability to improvise different play activities in their classrooms”.

Inadequate playing materials. The study found that having appropriate play materials is of noteworthy standing for the learning and brain development of children in school. However, during visits to all the schools, school heads and pre-class teachers mentioned that insufficient play materials pose a challenge, making the use of the play as a teaching method in preschools more difficult. Further, it was noted that the play materials used by other pupils of higher-level standard were the same as those used by pre-class and standard one pupil. Moreover, it was noted that the playgrounds used were also shared among these different groups. One of the head schools made the following statement:

“The preschool syllabus encourages us to use the play-based learning, but the current school environment presents challenges that hinder its effective implementation. As a school, we don’t have the essential play materials necessary for effective play-based learning. This shortage has resulted in limited scope for teachers to integrate play-based teaching methods into only a handful of topics”.

Besides, pre-class teachers noted that a lack of playing materials such as a swing set, slides, climbers, and spring riders are posing a threat of pupils dropping out and limiting children to improving and increasing their vocabulary words. All interviewed pre-class teachers believe that the availability of play tools is a stimulus for preschool children to attend school willingly and develop a love for it. One teacher made this statement:

“The children who attend pre-English medium schools have a variety of play tools. That is why many children love going to school, and sometimes they cry if they don't. A good example is my child who loves going to school every day, and sometimes when I ask why she loves school, she simply says, I love swings and swimming”

Shortage of and exposed pre-primary teachers. The study found that most teachers who teach pre-school classes have not specifically trained to teach at this level. They have usually been hired from other classes such as standard one, three and five based on their long-serving in teaching. It was noted that since the majority of preschool teachers are not trained for this purpose, they also have little competence in using play as a teaching approach at this level of education. Besides, only two out of ten pre-class teachers interviewed had attended capacity-building training for preschool teaching. In addition, it was noted that these two teachers possess good practical knowledge of using the play-based teaching and learning approaches. One of the two teachers made the following statement:

“I have a class of about 100 pupils, and always I like to start my lesson by playing or singing songs that are related to the topic of that day. I find this approach makes it easier for the children to learn and stay focused. If they sing, they feel more relaxed and become more engaged in the lesson. I simply tell them that there will be no more songs if they disturb my class”.

There were consensus between the interviewed pre-class teachers that, preschool teachers should be those who were trained for that purpose. It was further noted that the majority of teachers in pre-classes rely on their experience as long-time standard-one, two and three teachers in teaching the pre-class levels.

However, in responding to the question of challenges faced by teachers in using a play-based learning approach, parents have divergent views. Overall, it was revealed that the play-based learning is impossible to use in pre-primary classes because of overcrowded classes, shortage of teachers to watch the individual play of children, inadequate teacher basic skills and lack of playing tools. One parent commented:

"I live near this school and am also a member of the teacher-parent- association. I saw what is taking place in this school. Some teachers have limited competence in providing a variety of playful activities in the classroom, but the main problem is the time allocated to play for pre-children classes and the shortage of play tools in public schools compared to private ones"

Another parent made the following statement:

"I have a child in the pre-class at this school, but I am concerned about him returning home at 12:00 p.m. One day, I asked about this to the head of the school. She told me that the pre-class session ends at this hour. When I suggested allowing them to stay and return home at regular hours alongside older students, she mentioned the necessity of constant supervision for pre-class children during their play and the lack of teachers to match individual children"

Besides, one parent contrasts with fellow parents by putting the blame on their side by providing the following statement:

"At some point, we parents are the source of discouraging teachers from incorporating play into their teaching approach, as we put more pressure on teachers for our children to master reading, writing, and arithmetic skills ahead of the designated curriculum pace. We tend to prioritize written work as the sole measure of child learning, inadvertently limiting teachers from utilizing alternative activities."

The overall consensus of the interviewed parents is that teachers' beliefs on the use of the play in the classroom should be the preference of parents and the government. Also, parents should promote and enhance their understanding of age-appropriate aspects of the education of pre-class children.

Discussion

Today the play has received significant attention from researchers and academia in education disciplines in many countries. The play has emerged as an important strategy to promote pupils' engagement, inclusion, and holistic skills development. Psychologists, consider the play in early childhood to be an attribute of appropriateness and significance in children's development (Mardell et al., 2023; Parker et al., 2022; Karuppiyah, 2022; Gura et al., 2022; Burghardt, 2011; Smidt, 2011). Children display different behaviours like creativity, sense of humour, and problem-solving that are associated with play which signifies developmental benefits for children as linked to play theories (Mardell et al., 2023; Parker et al., 2022; Gura et al., 2022; Kejo, 2017; Seager, 2010). Research reveals that child play is branded into various aspects such as object play which helps the child with object manipulation, and promotes physical and motor development; Social play helps the child to develop interaction skills with

others, enhances social relationships and symbolic play helps to strengthen imagination, enhances language and literacy development (Parker et al., 2022; Gura et al., 2022; Ta, 2021; Yee et al., 2022; Kejo, 2017; Mgonja, 2014).

The study discussion highlights the benefits of incorporating play pedagogies in pre-class education. The study suggests that including the play in the school syllabus can result in beneficial outcomes, but it needs to be carefully integrated by considering the requirements of a structured curriculum in the school setting. Studies conducted in Tanzania acknowledge the influence of the play on children's early development of mathematics and science skills, language and literacy skills, and social and self-regulatory skills. Despite being included in the curriculum guidelines of pre-primary schools, the play is often overlooked (Shukia & Marobo, 2022; Kejo, 2017; Mgonja, 2014). This study has revealed that the use of play as a teaching tool is not effective due to the curriculum demands, parents' expectations, and underqualified teachers, which hinders the provision of appropriate education through play pedagogies to pre-class children in Tanzania. Also, the findings show that teachers are stressed due to the expectations placed on them by the government as they are required to ensure that no child is left behind without knowing how to read, write and account or face consequences such as punishment or demotion. As a result, teachers often have to prioritise academic instruction over play-based pedagogy. These findings align with previous literature which shows that teachers regularly receive contradictory information from top-down management such as the Ministry of Education and educational administrators. While these leaders encourage research on the contribution of play to the learning process, school administrators expect teachers to use more traditional approaches to demonstrate children's learning, such as success criteria, learning goals, and anchor charts. (Ta, 2021; Yee et al., 2022; Lynch, 2015). These studies further demonstrated that emphasising academic curriculum can hinder teachers, who may feel obligated to prioritize activities that enhance academic performance overplay and other activities that are not mandated (Ta, 2021; Lynch, 2015). For example, a study conducted by Parker and Thomsen (2019) revealed that teachers in the United States feel pressured by academic expectations to prepare their pupils for the next grade level. Another study in the U.S. conducted by Jachyra and Fusco (2016) found that teachers in Ontario state felt responsible for teaching their students strategies for attempting standardized testing. Furthermore, a study conducted in Kenya by Onditi et al. (2018) showed that many schools have reduced time committed to recess, creative arts, and even physical education in an effort to focus on reading, writing and arithmetic. These authors suggest that changes in play activity may have implications for children's ability to store new information, as their cognitive capacity is enhanced by clear-cut and significant changes.

Although many teachers hold positive beliefs about the play as a fundamental right that aids in their growth and is something that cannot be separated from child development and learning, other teachers did not support the inclusion of the play in pre-classrooms. The rejection of the play by some teachers as pedagogies was viewed by the researchers as be lack of experience with progressive teaching methods and inadequate knowledge of the role of play in child growth. These findings concur with the literature which shows that rejection of play-based pedagogy in pre-classes is the pervasive norm (Ta, 2021; Yee et al., 2022; Lynch, 2015). Resistance to incorporating play-based pedagogy in the classroom extends beyond parents as many of them view the play as a waste of time that could be spent on learning. This view concurs with the work of Ezati and Odele (2022) who revealed that the majority of parents in Adjumani and Yumbe districts in Uganda view the play as disruptive to learning but only 12 out of 32 associated plays with learning. However, this view contradicts the literature suggesting that play should be enjoyable and children should be free to choose their activities and materials. The literature also, suggested that playful pedagogies can be more effective in fostering social, emotional,

physical, cognitive and creative skills than traditional or more highly guided pedagogical approaches used in the primary school classroom (Parker & Thomsen, 2019; Ta, 2021; Parker et al., 2022).

There is no doubt that the lack of clear guidelines and directives for pre-primary teachers regarding the incorporation of play-based learning poses a significant barrier to implementing this teaching pedagogy in schools. Despite the fact the Tanzania pre-primary syllabus recognises the play-based learning as the main approach to teaching at this level, it has been given less priority than academic subjects in their timetables. The findings align with literature that notes frequent directives from the Ministry concerned with education and the expectation to implement new pedagogical practices every few years reduce teachers' confidence in implementing play in a meaningful way (Ta, 2021; Onditi et al., 2018). Besides, the study found that creating and engaging in interactive play activities in the pre-classroom requires trained and skilled teachers. However, the majority of teachers in pre-classes are not trained to teach at this level and they have little competence in using the play-based learning as a teaching approach at this level of education. This finding aligns with the work of Baker (2015) and Blucher et al. (2018) who found that teachers in preschools may experience difficulties in integrating the play-based learning in their classrooms, especially with pupils who struggle to identify appropriate play behaviours and contexts due a lack of prior experience in managing such situations.

Embedding the play-based learning in pre-classes in Tanzania faces significant challenges due to a lack of playing materials and space due to over-crowdedness. The study found that there was a shortage of playing materials such as a swing set, slides, climbers, and spring riders posing a threat of pupils dropping out and limiting children to improving and increasing their vocabulary words. This finding aligns with the Treasure (2020) which shows that the play is more an engaging activity for enjoyment or recreation rather than a serious purpose. However, this perception of viewing play as non-serious or non-work-related can be a challenge in schools, where teachers are accustomed to more rigid curriculum structures and attainment targets. The absence of playing materials in pre-classes creates a loophole for inexperienced teachers who are not able to improvise play materials to reduce the time of child-free play and prioritise instruction.

Conclusion and recommendations

In Tanzania, the pre-primary level serves as the foundation of the education system. The future academic and personal achievements of the younger generation are heavily influenced by their experiences during pre-primary education. Unfortunately, it has been noted that many teachers are not adequately equipped with the instructional methods needed to properly teach preschool children in a way that will benefit their future education and life. Considering the significant role played by pre-primary education in preparing children for the next level, teachers at this level must adopt a friendly approach that includes play-based learning to foster confidence and promote brain development in children. Unfortunately, the decline in the use of the play as a teaching method for pre-class pupils may negatively affect their cognitive and socio-emotional development as play activities promote problem-solving, emergent literacy, conceptual understanding, creativity, and improved social skills. It is vital to understand the various geographic regions, tribes, and social groups within Tanzania in order to comprehend the beliefs and practices related to pre-primary children's play and learning in schools. The study recommends the government provide schools with sufficient play tools and improve playgrounds as they are doing in classes that would allow children to become children. To improve the quality of the pre-primary education level, it is recommended that the government invests in training and employing specialised preschool teachers nationwide. At present, unqualified teachers who are teaching in pre-classes are not providing promising results in pre-primary education. Moreover, the government should

consider establishing specific colleges devoted to training high-quality pre-primary teachers instead of relying only on teacher colleges and universities.

Suggestions for Future Research

As previously noted, this qualitative study aimed to explore teachers and parents perceiving of the play as a significant aspect of child development and its integration into their teaching and learning activities. While the findings provided comprehensive coverage of the identified topics, further research would benefit school leaders and preschool teachers in understanding the potential benefits of play-based learning in the classroom for children's mental and cognitive development. The study recommends expanding the scope of research to include a comparison of the beliefs and practices of teachers in pre-primary public schools and private schools in urban and rural parts of Tanzania. A comprehensive study comparing the effectiveness of traditional games and newly invented ones is crucial to understanding the impact of play on a child's brain development and emotional intelligence by examining the cognitive and emotional benefits of play, including its ability to enhance memory, problem-solving skills, creativity, and emotional regulation. Additionally, a study should be carried out in order to explore the potential risks associated with excessive screen time and the use of technology in play by identifying strategies for optimising play-based learning and promoting healthy habits among children. Moreover, a study should be conducted on pupils of lower classes aged between 7 and 10 to assess how play can significantly impact their learning. As mentioned in the study results, most of the interviewed teachers lacked relevant training on using the play as a teaching method in preschool children. Therefore, a study could determine the efficacy of teaching methods in Teacher Education Colleges in preparing pre-primary school teachers.

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