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Beyond the classroom: The impact of play-based pedagogy on social competence in urban early childhood centres in Uganda

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Abstract

Despite global recognition of play as a fundamental component of early childhood development, its implementation in sub-Saharan urban contexts often faces competition from academic pressures. This study investigated the relationship between play as a teaching method and the social development of pupils in early childhood centers in Makindye Division, Kampala, Uganda. Anchored on Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory, the study employed a descriptive correlational design utilizing mixed methods. Data were collected from 118 respondents, including head teachers, teachers, and parents, alongside observations of 13 pupils. Findings indicate a significant positive correlation ($r = .564$, $p = .001$) between play-based teaching and social development. However, a dichotomy emerged: while "cooperative" and "symbolic" play were reported as frequent, qualitative data revealed inconsistencies in implementation due to limited resources and teacher training. Furthermore, while general social skills were rated "good," specific competencies such as conflict resolution and assertiveness lagged behind. This article argues that for play to effectively foster holistic social competence, educational stakeholders must move beyond "free play" toward intentional, resource-supported play pedagogies.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Play-Based Learning, Social Development, Uganda, Erikson's Psychosocial Theory

Introduction

The early years of a child's life are foundational for cognitive, social, and emotional architecture. Neuroscientific research indicates that the brain develops over one million neural connections per second during this period, making the quality of early experiences a critical determinant of lifelong success. Within this developmental window, play is not merely a leisure activity but a primary engine of learning. International bodies, including the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), emphasize that play fosters self-regulation, cooperation, and resilience.

However, the pedagogical landscape in Uganda, specifically in urban centers like Kampala, is witnessing a shift. In Makindye Division, increased academic pressure has led to a reduction in child-directed activities. There is a marked increase in teacher-directed instruction emphasizing memorization, often at the expense of unstructured play. Additionally, the rise of digital media consumption has further diminished opportunities for face-to-face social interaction.

This shift poses a significant risk. When children are deprived of play, they lose critical opportunities to learn social navigation i.e. how to negotiate, share, and resolve conflicts. While the benefits of play are well-documented globally, there is limited empirical research examining the specific relationship between play-based teaching methods and

social development within the specific socio-economic context of Makindye Division. This study sought to bridge this gap by assessing the prevalence of play-based methods and their direct correlation with pupils' social competence.

Literature Review

This section provides a comprehensive review of the theoretical perspectives, conceptual frameworks, and empirical studies relevant to the relationship between play as a teaching method and the social development of pupils in early childhood centers. It critically analyzes existing scholarly works to establish the theoretical grounding of the study and identifies the gaps that this research seeks to address.

Theoretical Review

The study of social development is supported by a diverse array of psychological theories. Bandura's Social Learning Theory posits that children acquire social behaviors primarily through observation and modeling of adults and peers [1]. Concurrently, Attachment Theory, developed by Bowlby and Ainsworth, focuses on the emotional bonds formed between infants and caregivers, arguing that secure attachment is the precursor to healthy social and personality development [2][3].

However, this study is anchored principally on Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory (1963) [4]. Unlike theories that focus solely on observation or attachment, Erikson's framework

offers a lifespan perspective, viewing social development as a series of stages, each characterized by a specific psychosocial crisis. For the preschool-aged child (the focus of this study), the critical stage is often defined by the conflict of Initiative vs. Guilt. During this period, children begin to assert control and power over their environment. Success in this stage leads to a sense of purpose, while failure results in a sense of guilt. The theory suggests that social behavior is shaped by how society and culture present challenges to the child [5]. A successful resolution of these crises results in a psychologically healthy individual, whereas unsuccessful resolution leaves the child prone to maladjustment and behavioral problems [5].

Complementing Erikson is the work of Lev Vygotsky, who emphasized the cognitive and social duality of play. Vygotsky argued that play creates a "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD), where a child behaves beyond their average age and daily behavior [6]. In this view, play is the leading source of development in preschool years, pulling the child forward by integrating cognitive, physical, and emotional tendencies. While psychoanalytical theorists like Freud viewed play primarily as an emotional catharsis for working out social conflicts, Vygotsky and Erikson positioned it as a constructive tool for social maturation and self-regulation [7]. Through the active exploration of their environment, children acquire not just physical knowledge, but logic mathematical and social knowledge essential for navigating the real world [8].

Conceptual Framework

The relationship between the variables in this study is conceptualized through a framework that links pedagogical methods to developmental outcomes.

The Independent Variable is "Play as a Teaching Method." This is operationalized not as a monolith but as a spectrum of activities including:

- 1) Functional Play: The repetition of acts for pleasure and physical manipulation of materials.
- 2) Symbolic Play: Also known as pretend play, where children transform objects and assume non-literal identities such as a stick becoming a horse.
- 3) Games with Rules: Structured play where children must agree to and follow established regulations.
- 4) Cooperative Play: High-level interaction where children work interdependently towards a shared goal.

The Dependent Variable is "Social Development," categorized by indicators such as empathy, communication, generosity, teamwork, helpfulness, and problem-solving. The framework acknowledges that this relationship is not linear but is mediated by Intervening Variables such as the Early Childhood Curriculum and School Management, which dictate the resources and time allocated for play.

Play as a Teaching Method

Play is universally recognized as a spontaneous, intrinsically motivated behavior that is "non-rule governed" and enjoyable for its own sake [9]. Daubert et al. describe it as "just pretend," noting that it occurs because the child is moved to pursue the activity rather than being forced by external reinforcement [10]. It is distinguished from work by its lack of immediate goal orientation; it is an end in itself [10].

Despite the clear consensus on its value, implementation in educational settings is fraught with challenges. Almon notes that while preschool children naturally spend hours building, pretending, and exploring, modern educational pressures are curtailing these opportunities [11]. There is a growing trend where parents and teachers, driven by a desire for academic achievement, orchestrate children's lives to the exclusion of self-initiated play [12]. This "high-stakes" approach often leads to the elimination of play in favor of teacher-directed instruction, as educators feel pressured to meet academic goals [16].

However, the literature strongly supports the pedagogical integration of play. Zosh et al. argue for a spectrum of play ranging from free play to guided play which harnesses active, "minds-on" thinking [13]. Empirical studies confirm that when teachers adopt playful and movement-based pedagogies, pupils demonstrate enhanced motivation and engagement with academic content [14]. Furthermore, outdoor play, such as "outdoor kitchen" activities, has been found to provide a unique medium for children to practice social skills that may be insufficient in a classroom setting [17].

The Dynamics of Social Development

Social development is the process of socialization i.e. how children learn to connect with others and perceive their individuality within a community [21]. It begins in infancy through attachment to family but expands significantly during early childhood as children enter school and form relationships with peers and non-familial adults [22].

Social competence involves a complex set of skills including emotion regulation, perspective taking, and inhibitory control [24]. Thompson and Lagattuta emphasize that these skills are critical for success not just in school, but in adulthood [25]. A child with high social competence can build relationships, solve problems, and cope with emotions, while deficits in these areas are linked to poor health and wealth outcomes later in life [26].

A significant concern identified in the literature is the vulnerability of children with deficits in attention, listening, and language [23]. These children often miss social cues, leading to inappropriate reactions and difficulties in peer acceptance. The community environment serves as a vital forum for these children to interact; however, the increasing

use of digital devices and reduced play time are eroding these natural opportunities for social growth [28][34].

The Nexus Between Play and Social Competence

The intersection of play and social development is well-documented. Play is described as an "integral" component of healthy social development [10]. Through play, children learn to inhibit impulsive behavior, plan adaptive responses, and navigate the complex social rules of their peer groups [10].

Symbolic or "make-believe" play is particularly beneficial. Pyle highlights that role-playing offers children a safe space to resolve conflicts, express emotions, and practice empathy by stepping into the shoes of another [35]. For example, enacting a scenario where a "doctor" cares for a "patient" requires the child to understand and support the emotional needs of another, thereby fostering generosity and helpfulness.

Moreover, the role of the teacher in this dynamic is crucial. Tarman and Tarman argue that teacher involvement in play can enrich the experience, provided it balances support with the child's autonomy [37]. Teachers who utilize play as a teaching method effectively shift the educational process from being teacher-centered to pupil-centered, allowing children to construct their own social and cognitive knowledge [8]. Studies indicate that children exposed to structured play programs exhibit significantly higher social development scores than those who are not, suggesting that the method of teaching is as important as the content [38].

Literature Gaps Identified

While the existing literature is robust, several gaps necessitate this study. Firstly, a theoretical gap exists: most related studies underpin their work with Piaget or Vygotsky exclusively, whereas this study utilizes Erikson's Psychosocial Theory to specifically address the crisis of initiative versus guilt. Secondly, a geographical gap is evident; the majority of cited studies were conducted outside Uganda, leaving a scarcity of contextual data regarding Makindye Division, Kampala. Finally, methodological gaps are present, as previous researchers have largely relied on quantitative designs. This study addresses this by employing a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative observations to provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of how play influences social development in this specific context.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a descriptive correlational survey design mixed with qualitative observation. This approach allowed for the quantification of the relationship between play and social development while capturing the nuanced, contextual

realities of the classroom environment through interviews and observation.

Participants and Setting

The study was conducted in Makindye Division, one of the five divisions of Kampala, Uganda. This location was selected for its diversity, containing both urban and semi-urban settings and a mix of socioeconomic contexts. The target population comprised 135 respondents. A sample of 118 participants was selected using purposive sampling (for 15 Head Teachers) and simple random sampling (for 60 Teachers, 30 Parents, and 13 Pupils).

Instruments

Data were collected using three primary tools:

Questionnaire: A self-administered instrument with a 4-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 4=Strongly Agree). It assessed the frequency of play methods (10 items) and indicators of social development (18 items). The instrument demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach Alpha = 0.801) and content validity (CVI = 0.80).

Interview Guide: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents and teachers to validate questionnaire responses and explore attitudes toward play.

Observation Checklist: Direct observations of 13 pupils focused on peer interactions, emotional expression, and adherence to social rules during recess and class activities.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 26.0). Descriptive statistics (means and percentages) characterized the levels of play and social development. Pearson's Linear Correlation Coefficient (PLCC) was used to test the relationship between variables at a 0.05 level of significance. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

The majority of respondents were female (59.3%), reflecting the gender distribution typical of the early childhood education workforce in Uganda. In terms of education, 39.8% held a Bachelor's degree and 29.7% held a Master's degree, indicating a relatively well-educated respondent pool. Teachers were generally experienced, with 43.2% having served between 5 and 10 years.

Level of Play as a Teaching Method

Respondents rated the use of play as a teaching method as "Often," with an aggregate mean of 2.94.

Most frequent methods: The most commonly practiced forms of play were Cooperative Play ($M = 3.28$, "Always") and Symbolic Play ($M = 3.27$, "Always"). This suggests that teachers prioritize activities requiring group interaction and imagination.

Less frequent methods: Functional play ($M = 2.61$) and Games with Rules ($M = 2.72$) were used less frequently, though still within the "Often" range.

Despite these positive quantitative ratings, qualitative interviews revealed a gap in implementation. One teacher noted, "Not all of us use play as a method of teaching; it depends on the topic that I will teach for the day". Another admitted, "I am not very familiar with play as a method of teaching, so I just use the traditional way". Furthermore, resources were inconsistent; some teachers reported, "Our school doesn't have an indoor play corner, only a playground".

Level of Social Development

The social development of pupils was rated as "Good" overall, with an aggregate mean of 2.61.

Strengths: Pupils excelled in understanding non-verbal communication, with "Understands gestures and facial expression" scoring highest ($M = 2.89$). Pro-social behaviors such as helping others move objects ($M = 2.86$) and using social amenities like greetings ($M = 2.83$) were also rated highly.

Weaknesses (The social gap): The lowest scores were observed in assertive and restorative social skills. "Requesting clarification" ($M = 2.43$), "Makes apologies or gives explanation for behavior" ($M = 2.45$), and "Greet or talks first when meeting a friend" ($M = 2.46$) were all rated only as "Fair".

Observations confirmed this dichotomy. While most children shared toys and took turns, a subset of children appeared shy or hesitant to initiate interaction. Some children struggled to apologize or resolve conflicts without adult intervention.

Correlation Analysis

A Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between play as a teaching method and pupils' social development ($r = .564$, $p = .001$). This finding leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis, confirming that increased frequency and quality of play are statistically associated with better social outcomes.

Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to establish the relationship between play-based pedagogy and social development in Makindye Division. The findings confirmed a significant positive correlation, aligning with global literature suggesting that play is a primary vehicle for social learning. However, the data reveals a nuanced "implementation gap" that warrants closer examination.

The Paradox of "Always" vs. "Unfamiliar"

Quantitatively, teachers reported using Cooperative and Symbolic play "Always" or "Often." However, the qualitative admission of being "unfamiliar" with play methods or lacking indoor play corners suggests that what is being reported as

"play" may be unstructured recess rather than pedagogical, guided play. Vygotsky emphasizes that play contributes to development most effectively when it creates a Zone of Proximal Development often requiring scaffolding by a more knowledgeable other (the teacher). If teachers are untrained or lack resources, the "play" occurring may not be maximizing social learning potential, which explains the "Fair" scores in complex social skills.

The Conflict Resolution Deficit

While children rated "Good" on passive social skills (understanding gestures, waiting for turns), they scored "Fair" on active, difficult social skills like apologizing ($M = 2.45$) and requesting clarification ($M = 2.43$). Apologizing requires a high level of empathy and the ability to overcome egocentrism i.e. skills that are typically honed during guided sociodramatic play where teachers can intervene to model conflict resolution. The lack of active teacher guidance in play (due to the reported lack of training) may leave children ill-equipped to handle the friction of peer relationships, resulting in lower scores for these specific traits.

Infrastructure and Academic Pressure

The study context highlights the tension between academic pressure and holistic development. The qualitative finding that "pupils prefer to play outside" because indoor corners are missing or unused points to a structural deficiency. When play is relegated solely to the outdoors (recess), it often becomes "rough and tumble" play. While beneficial, this does not always provide the structured environment needed to learn subtle social nuances like "requesting clarification." The academic pressure in Makindye likely crowds out the time needed for the distinct, high-quality instructional play that builds these finer soft skills.

Conclusion

This study confirms that play is not an optional extra but a fundamental driver of social competence for early learners in Uganda. The significant correlation found between play methods and social development underscores that children learn to cooperate, empathize, and read social cues primarily through interaction.

However, the study identifies a critical area for improvement. While children are generally socially competent, they struggle with assertiveness and conflict resolution which are the skills that require not just free play, but guided play. The inconsistency in teacher training and the lack of indoor play materials in Makindye Division limits the potential of play-based learning.

Recommendations

To bridge the gap between "play time" and true "play-based learning," the following recommendations are proposed:

Professional development: The Ministry of Education and school management must provide in-service training

focused on pedagogical play strategies, ensuring teachers move beyond "traditional ways".

Resource allocation: Schools must invest in indoor play corners and diverse materials (blocks, role-play sets) to facilitate symbolic and cooperative play, which are linked to higher social understanding.

Curriculum integration: Policy makers should institutionalize play not just as a break from learning, but as a method of instruction, specifically targeting complex social skills like apology and negotiation.

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