

Stakeholder perspectives of PBL and their involvement in the implementation of play pedagogy in selected Schools offering ECE in Southern and Central Zambia

Noah, K. Sichula, Bibian Kalinde, Robinson Mambwe, Collins Kaluba, and Phiri Davies

Authors Emails: noah.sichula@unza.zm/bibian.kalinde@unza.zm/robinson.mambwe@unza.zm/collins.kaluba@unza.zm/ davies.phiri@unza.zm

Abstract

While several studies have been done on parental involvement in early childhood education, gaps still exist relating to the conceptualisation of play and play-based learning in different contexts. The various perceptions of play and play-based learning have a strong influence on their involvement in play-based learning activities involving children in Early Childhood Education. Using a qualitative approach, framed within the interpretive research paradigm, this study revealed a disjuncture between the positive perception held by the stakeholders on play and PBL to the reality of play-based learning in the ECE schools. The researchers asked three questions: 1. What are the perceptions of parents, community, and school administrators (teachers and administrators) regarding play and play-based learning? 2. How do these stakeholders get involved in PBL? 3. And what factors influence their involvement? The researchers collected data through key informant interviews (KII), focus group discussions and classroom observations. The study established that the involvement in PBL varied among stakeholders. For parents and community members their involvement was often based on solicitation by the school administrators and external development agencies - as opposed to volunteering postulated by Epstein's theory of parental involvement employed in the study. Among the factors that influenced their participation was a general lack of a clear understanding of PBL and their role and functions in PBL and ECE in general. Thus, the study recommends capacity building in PBL for parents, community members and school administrators.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Play, Play-based Learning, School Readiness.

Introduction

The Zambian Education policy on Early Childhood Education (ECE) prescribes Play-Based Learning (PBL) as the main pedagogy for learners at this level (Ministry of Education, 2015). This is informed by research that shows that not only is PBL appropriate for the developmental process of Early Childhood Learners but also carries the benefits for learners academic achievements (Hathaway, 2019; Pyle, Pyle, Prioletta, and Alaca, 2020). Beyond this, PBL is seen as a tool for creating a collaborative culture through constructing an optimal play learning experience for young children, which facilitates various aspects of development through the mediation of teachers' enactment of play pedagogy and home-school cooperation (Keung and Cheung, 2019). The home-school cooperation brings in the role and functions of parents in the implementation of PBL for early learners both in school and at home. Literature shows a general agreement among ECE researchers, scholars and practitioners (Keung and Cheung, 2019; McLean, Lake, Wild, Licandro, and Evangelou, 2023) that parents have a significant role in supporting children to learn through play, thus, crucial in the implementation of play-based learning. Despite this evidence, Monkevičienė *et al.* (2017) observe that the involvement of adults in children's play needs more research because the area remains unclearly understood and practised.

In Zambia, parents and community are part of the primary stakeholders to ECE, and hold a special place in the preparation of ECE learners for school readiness and transition (Matafwali and Chansa-Kabali, 2017). This is a deliberate effort made where parents and members of the community, are collaborating with the school in supporting the child's learning, development and wellbeing (Ministry of Education, 2020). Parents and communities are required to be involved in ECE at four levels: to live together; to do together, to think together, and decide together in facilitating child development (Ministry of Education, 2015). The rationale included the idea that parental involvement in the activities and materials, that drive learning has been seen as important to the development of a child including a successful progression in school (Hatcher, Nuner and Paulsel, 2012). Parents are also identified as role models and the most important factor in the child's immediate family for caregiving that affects school readiness (Mungai, 2015; Munnik and Smith, 2019; Sema, 2021). Initial emotional and social skills among the children are primarily acquired through parental and caregiving interaction, and parents set an example to the children (Munnik and Smith 2019). This is important because parents are the first point of contact with a child and most of the foundational training is offered by the parents and caregivers.

Despite this pedagogical prescription and the possible benefits that accrue to the entire early childhood education sector in Zambia, the implementation of PBL has been characterised by some discrepancy between policy and practice. For instance, while the national documents on ECE have addressed a considerable

amount of key aspects of play-based learning, evidence from practice on how to implement play based learning in the Zambian context is seemingly unavailable. It is generally not clear the kind of support that PBL receives in the school, home and community as the main pedagogy for ECE in Zambia. This is notwithstanding the fact that the government has provided a guide for parental involvement in ECE. However, this does not accommodate their involvement in PBL.

For this reason, this study explored stakeholder (community, parents, ECE teachers) perspectives of PBL and its possible influence on their participation in the implementation of play pedagogy. This is supported by McLean *et al.* (2023) who observe that various perspectives and conceptualisation of play-based learning have an influence on the decisions that people make about their involvement in play in early childhood education. This means that the lack of consideration of this relationship can make it difficult for PBL to receive the kind of support needed. Stakeholders' understandings of the need for play in young children's lives is crucial for providing wholesome support from creating an optimal play environment to the development of learners and academic achievements.

Theoretical framework

The study employed a six-factor framework of parental involvement postulated by Joyce Epstein which is based on long years of research in parental involvement in early childhood education (Epstein *et al.*, 2018). The six factors are; parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making and collaborating with the community. The framework posits that parental involvement in the education of students begins at home with the parents providing a safe and healthy environment, appropriate learning experiences, support, and a positive attitude about school (Đurišić and Bunijevac, 2017 p. 140). Parenting refers to activities that parents engage in to raise children. Parents do this in different ways. Communicating involves families and schools sharing information in multiple ways. Schools may send learners home to provide certain information regarding important events and activities. Volunteering applies to recruiting and organising help and support from parents for school programmes and students' activities. Three basic ways that individuals volunteer in education are: Volunteering to participate in the school or classroom by helping teachers and administrators as tutors or assistants; volunteer to raise funds for financing school activities. Learning at home pertains to providing and supporting learning at home involving parents. Decision making involves the inclusion of parents in school decisions and to developing parent leaders and representatives. One way of doing this is by making parents become part of school governance committees or organisations, such as the parent/teachers association.

Methodology

Study Context

The Zambian education system is divided into Early Childhood Care, Development and Education (ECCDE) Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Education (Ministry of Education MoE, 2022). Early Childhood Education provides learning and development for children aged from 3 to 6 years. Zambia has made significant progress in the development of this sub-sector of education. Both the government and the private sector, including NGOs, are involved in the provision of ECE services in the country.

This article was drawn from a project on the School Readiness Initiative (SRI) that is being implemented by a Zambian NGO (Zambia Open Community Schools). The SRI project aims at building capacity for teachers, community and the school to prepare ECE learners for transitioning to primary education through play pedagogy. Considering the existing gaps in the implementation of PBL in ECE in Zambia (not limited to such) data was collected on stakeholder perception of play-based learning in Early Childhood Education (ECE). The rationale for studying stakeholder perception of PBL in ECE was informed by the dearth of research on PBL in Zambia (Lungu and Matafwali, 2020; Nakawa, 2019) and the interest to understand the contextual factors associated with the implementation of play-based pedagogy as the main pedagogy for Early Childhood Education in Zambia.

Study design

The study followed a qualitative research approach and case study to gather and collect the data from the research participants. The design was important for generating in-depth knowledge and evidence on the contextual factors supporting or hindering the implementation of PBL. Further, to understand the perspectives of the research participants (parents, communities, and school staff) on their involvement in PBL, for the purpose of evidence for strengthening the implementation of Play-Based Pedagogy in ECE in Zambia. Three research questions guided the study: (1) How are the parents, communities and school (teachers and administrators) involved in PBL? (2) What factors influence their involvement in PBL in ECE centres? (3) How do the parents, community and school (teachers and administrators) perceive play-based learning in Early Childhood Education?

Research sites

The research sites for the study were Southern and Central Zambia. The study was conducted among government schools in three districts namely; Choma, Kabwe and Kapiri Mposhi. These schools included those implementing the SRI and those

that were not. A total of 31 schools were included in the study. 14 schools were in Choma, 10 schools in Kabwe and 7 schools in Kapiri Mposhi.

Population, sampling, and sample size

The population of the study comprised schools and participants involved in Early Childhood of Education. The schools were drawn from Southern and Central provinces Zambia that were offering Early Childhood Education. The research participants included the parents of the children attending ECE in the selected schools, community members within the location of the school, ECE teachers and grade 1 teachers, and school administrators. Understanding the individual teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and skills related to play-based learning was fundamental and the nature of the relationships that existed among all the research participants. It has important implications for creating an atmosphere that either supports or discourages the efforts for the effective use of PBL pedagogy. These relationships are teacher and learner, teacher and parent, community members, relationships among teachers in a school and school administrators, on the implementation of PBL as ECE pedagogy.

Informed by the qualitative nature of the research questions and design of the study, purposive sampling was ideal for selecting the research participants. Essentially, purposive sampling deals with the selection of the units based on the research questions being asked because the research questions give an indication of which units need to be sampled (Bryman, 2012). Specifically, criterion purposive sampling was used to sample all the participants because the SRI model is based on building the capacity for school readiness and transition at three levels – the Home, Community and the School. Criterion sampling is a type of purposive sampling that is used to sample units that meet a set criterion of interest (Suri, 2011). In addition to the three level model of the SRI the following inclusion and exclusion criteria was employed.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Southern and Central provinces were selected on the basis of having implemented more ECE and play based activities in the country under the SRI project. Thus, it was envisaged that the two provinces would provide the best context for generating knowledge on the involvement of parents, communities, and school (teachers and administrators) on the implementation of PBL in ECE.

The parents were selected and included in the study because of having a child attending an ECE class. The inclusion of parents was crucial for understanding the nature of the relationship that existed between a parent and the child with regard to supporting PBL, and also establish the role played by family structures in fostering play-based learning. Similarly, communities were envisaged to create an environment that would offer support and encouragement to children in ECE and their teachers in their effort to facilitate learning and the holistic development of the learners.

ECE teachers were key in this study because they were directly involved in the implementation of PBL in ECE. By policy they are supposed to teach ECE learners through play because PBL is a recommended pedagogy for learners at this level in Zambia. Grade 1 teachers were equally important in providing information on the implementation of PBL based on their experience of teaching some of the learners who transition from ECE to grade 1.

School administrators are the custodian of the education policy at the school. The role is very much defined around ensuring that ECE activities embrace the recommended PBL pedagogy by all stakeholders at the school level. Therefore, school administrators were important in providing key information on their perception of PBL and influence towards its effective implementation at school level.

Data collection methods

Three methods were used to collect the data from the participants: Key informant interviews (KII), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and lesson observations of the implementation of play. Despite the target group being 31 schools, only 19 schools were accessible for data collection. A total of 87 interview transcripts were collected. (19) KII interviews were conducted with the ECE teachers, (16) grade 1 teachers, and (18) school administrators. 18 Focus group interviews were conducted with the parents, and 16 FGDs with the community.

Three research teams were involved in data collection and each team physically collected data from each study site: Choma, Kabwe and Kapiri Mposhi. The data from all research sites was collected from November 2022 to August 2023, which was within the period for Scaling-Up School Readiness Initiative Project.

Data analysis

Inductive thematic analysis approach was used to analyse and interpret the data. 87 interview transcripts were analysed to generate evidence-based knowledge on stakeholder perception and involvement in the implementation of PBL in selected schools that were offering ECE.

Thematic analysis involved the research team getting familiar with data to generate codes, describing the codes, creating categories, identifying the themes, reviewing the themes, and finally defining and creating appropriable names of themes. Analysis began with the transcription of the audio recording by each research team member. The interview transcripts were later assigned to three team members who were conversant with thematic analysis to generate codes and themes from the data. The themes were then scrutinised using interview transcripts, later discussed, and reviewed by all the research team members. The themes that emerged from the analysis were stakeholder perception of PBL in ECE, enablers for the perceptions, and stakeholder involvement in the implementation of PBL in ECE as indicated in table 1.

Table 1: Themes from the data analysis

Major themes	Sub-Themes
Conceptualisation of Play- Based Learning	Characterisation of ECE learners Teaching and learning through play
Perception on the importance of PBL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stimulates learners interest to participate in learning - Facilitates learning without learners realising that they are learning - Improves school attendance - Play provides a good foundation for ECE - Improves learner development
Perception on the prioritisation of PBL for ECE Learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More time is allocated to learning through play - Every lesson involves play - Monitoring of teaching through play
Factors for the perception of PBL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stakeholder orientation to PBL - Lack of information and knowledge on PBL - Home, school and community cohesion
Involvement in and support for play-based learning in ECE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mobilisation and provision of local play material - Construction of ECE infrastructure - Community and parental involvement in play in ECE - Material and nutritional support for ECE learners

Ethical Considerations

The study was subjected to the ethical review board at the University of Zambia and was cleared. Ethical considerations observed were informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and the participants privacy.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study as presented in table 1. There were four major themes that emerged on the perception of play-based learning by parents, community members, and school administrators. We generally observed a positive perception of PBL by the stakeholders. However, there was also a limited understanding of PBL by parents and community members. ECE teachers and school administrators equally portrayed a limited understanding of PBL.

Conceptualisation of Play Based Pedagogy

Characterisation of ECE learners

The characterisation of ECE learners as play-based learners was a common feature among the ECE learners. They seemed to see ECE learners as a type of learners whose teaching approach is through play. For the ECE teachers, this characterisation seemed important in guiding their teaching. They presented a perspective that children naturally learn through play and as such play pedagogy was essential for this age group.

Children naturally learn through play, and this makes play-base learning a method through children learning while playing... (ECE teacher – S1).

... this is where the learning of children is much concentrated on playing using different objects, play park and other facilities because children like playing (ECE teacher – Kapiri, L2).

I feel this relates to the teaching of ECE learners by playing and we use play methodology because it enhances the interest of children in learning naturally (ECE teacher – Kabwe, H1).

Teaching and Learning Through Play

Through this characterisation, play was perceived as an everyday interaction among the children as they engaged each other physically and emotionally. The other perspective was play for teaching and learning. Some of the parents did not recognise play as a method that should be used by teachers to teach their children in school. They preferred teachers to use traditional instructive methods to teach the children. It was felt that *...children simply played at school and thus added no value to the learning.*

From the perspective of these parents, the idea of play reflected a negative representation of what they know as real teaching and learning when children go to school. Teachers and the school were seen by some of the parents as not attaching the seriousness to the teaching of the children as expected when they attend school.

For Early Children Education, what we know is that children just play at school, and it does not reflect any seriousness, on what the schools are doing. Maybe it could be that they are still too young so playing is seen to be the best for them...we don't know. We just do not see the seriousness in that (FGD, parents Choma).

Some parents held a neutral position because they were not sure and did not know anything about PBL. They trusted the teachers and school that whatever methods of teaching they used were in the best interest of their children in ECE.

The communities expressed and portrayed a limited understanding of play as a method for teaching children in ECE. They acknowledged observing ECE teachers engaging children in play activities but could not comprehend the explanation behind the approach.

*We teachers play with little children in the school ground and the play park over there, but we do not know why this is so, may be this is what they are taught to teach the children
(Community FGD, SI).*

A positive perspective by parents and community members towards PBL was largely evident in schools and communities that were exposed to the School Readiness Initiative (SRI) project being implemented by the Zambian Open Community Schools (ZOCS). They had received some orientation on their need to be involved in supporting early childhood education in general and not specifically on PBL. A negative perspective was observed among parents and communities that were not exposed to the SRI. For a neutral stance by some parents, this was common to both settings-SRI and Non-SRI exposed communities.

The key findings involved seeing PBL as an important instrument for fostering the acquisition of different skills by learners through play, improvement of the physical well-being of the learners, and from a negative view it was seen as promoting a lack of seriousness needed to learn.

Perception on the importance of PBL in Early Learning

Fosters the acquisition of different skills through play

Parents from the SRI exposed communities perceived PBL as an important tool for fostering the learner's acquisition of different skills. This perception was informed by the knowledge that children understand concepts better when they engaged in play. For example, they had seen their own children develop and become better at language skills through association and socialisation with their peers.

Children understand things better through play. They master language, spellings easily than simply instructing them. In fact they seem to learn things faster through play (FGD PTA, Kabwe).

Most parents held a view that PBL made a huge contribution in improving the physical well-being of a child. As children engaged in play, they were not just playing, their physic was being developed and strengthened, thereby improving the whole physical well-being of a child.

*Learning through play makes children to be active and clever in all the things that they do. (FGD, Parents, Kapiri Mposhi).
Learning through play makes children to be active and clever in all the things that they do. (Parent, Kapiri Mposhi).*

The learners, the moment they begin playing, you may just think they are playing but when they come to put it into practice you will see them growing big and doing well in their education. Those who like mixing with friends, they learn more than those who do not mingle (FGD, Community, Choma).

Stimulates learners' interest to participate in learning

Play for children at school generates interest to participate in learning and has resulted in improved school attendance. Through play, learners who are shy tend to open up and begin to socialise and perform different tasks with other learners.

Facilitates learning without learners realising that they are learning

When learners play, they may not even realise that they are actually learning something. Their focus is play or performing a particular task given by the teacher, but in the process learning is actually taking place. They acquire different skills and knowledge based on the task they perform through play.

Play provides a foundation for early learning in school

Play is associated with the establishment of a positive foundation to learning in early years. This was common among the ECE teachers and school administrators. Children enjoy play by nature, so when play is used to teach skills it creates a firm foundation for further learning as they progress even to grade 1.

Promotes learner development

The ECE teachers and school administrators see play pedagogy from the perspective that ECE is concerned with the physical, social, cognitive and emotional development of learners in general and play is important for scaffolding learner development and progression in school.

Perception on the Prioritisation of PBL for ECE Learners

More time is allocated to learning while playing

The teachers and school administrators regarded the more time allocated to play when teaching ECE learners as the necessary priority. Teachers and school administrators interviewed in this study made reference to the ECE syllabus which stipulates 60 per cent play and 40 per cent academic teaching. However, none of the teachers and school administrators could clearly articulate and quantify this in the real terms of teaching.

Every lesson involves play

The integration of play in every lesson and activity for learners at this age was simplistically perceived as giving priority to play in ECE. It was understood that this was the only way teaching and learning could happen for learners to enjoy.

Monitoring of teaching through play

Some school administrators had instituted regular monitoring of the teaching and learning through play in their respective schools. This was in an effort to ensuring that teachers adhered to the prescribed pedagogy in ECE. The study, however, did gather evidence on resistance on the use of play in ECE.

Factors for the perceptions of PBL in ECE

The study established that the factors responsible for stakeholder perception of PBL border on their orientation to PBL pedagogy, lack of information and knowledge on PBL, and existing relationships intra and external – home, community and school.

Stakeholder orientation to PBL

The teachers involved in teaching ECE learners indicated not having been adequately oriented in PBL. Some of them had received some Continuous Professional Development (CPD). However, a considerable number of school administrators and ECE teachers lacked the orientation to PBL. For ECE teachers, the challenge stemmed from their training, which lacked emphasis on play-based learning. Some school administrators indicated that the introduction of ECE in schools comes at a time when most of them were trained under a different curriculum and they had not been given any orientation regarding play-based learning for ECE.

Lack of information and knowledge on PBL

The lack of information and knowledge on PBL applied to parents and community members who could not link everyday play to the pedagogy for ECE in the school environment. In some communities, this perception resulted in low involvement in ECE activities by communities. During the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with the community and parents, it was indicated that parents and community members were aware that children learnt as they played. However, they could not relate this to be something that could be used by teachers in school to teaching children.

Home, school, and community cohesion

The cooperation among home, community, and school was an important factor for creating a support system for ECE in general and the implementation of PBL. It was observed that communities which were characterised by some degree of unity and organisation in working together, offered more support to ECE than those that were not. The understanding of government implementation of free education were cited as a factor impeding the home, school and community cohesion.

Involvement in and support for play based learning in ECE

The researchers observed that parental perception of PBL in ECE had implications on the support towards PBL. From the findings, it was noted that parents who

appreciated the role of PBL in preparing children in ECE centres for primary education, provided the support at their level of ability and available resources. The support towards ECE and PBL mainly included the mobilisation and provision of local materials, and construction of infrastructure. The details are presented in the following sub-themes.

Mobilisation and provision of local play materials for ECE activities

Parents and community members in some communities played an important role in rendering support for PBL activities through resource mobilisation that were necessary for facilitating teaching and learning. Most of the resources were locally generated and produced. Often, schools made requests for parents to help the ECE unit with some materials, which they provided [not all parents participate] but some got fully involved in supporting PBL and ECE in general. Materials would include building materials when needed, wood for construction of play park items and equipment, tyres for making tyre tunnels, and several other materials which the ECE teacher could use for PBL. The researchers observed that parents are only able to provide what is within their capacity and ability which is often limited in relation to the prevailing needs for PBL in most ECE centres involved this study.

“Sometimes the community has to come in, for example, with materials, if there is a construction to be done” (Head Teacher, Choma-SRI School)

“So around 2018 the community supported us by collecting old tyres and brought them to the school and said we can make play items from these tyres” (Head Teacher, Kabwe- SRI-school)

“We donated tyres for children to play but these were stolen” (Parents, community leaders and PCSCs, Kabwe).

However, in schools, parental involvement was a challenge that was caused by a myriad factors some of which were economic and others were social in nature. Economic factors related to parents being more involved in doing piece works to provide family needs. At a social level, some parents had desired to participate as well, whereas others did not simply see the need for their involvement in supporting whatever was happening in ECE centres. They felt government should meet the needs of the school and those of their children in ECE. It also emerged that with the introduction of free education by the government, parents did not see the need to contribute anything towards ECE and PBL in schools.

Most parents here, work in farms so, they are normally busy they'll be out the entire day, coming back its late, when time comes for piece works they knock off as late as 19hours, so we can't be assured that they play with their children at home (ECE teacher Kapiri-Non SRI)

The parents are not involved in supporting PBL at this school. Some of them, the best they have done is attending school meetings when called upon. But when it comes to actual participation in the ECE projects or activities, they simply stay away (Head, Kabwe)

One head teacher felt parents and community members who did not realise the role they can play in PBL in their respective ECE centres, could be given some orientation to facilitate their involvement. He explained that some parents did not actually know that they could participate in PBL activities because schools had chosen not to involve them.

I think they just need orientation because for some of them they've taken it as long as the child is in school they are under the teacher's custody, and schools have not involved them, but if they knew that even them can participate freely in teaching the children through play. I'm sure some would come through and participate (Head, Choma).

Construction of ECE Infrastructure

Parental involvement included the provision of labour used in the construction of different physical structures and facilities used in ECE. The parents and community members provided their different available skills and competences in the actual construction of the needed PBL facilities, equipment, and items in their respective schools.

"...we are involved because ECE is directly connected to us, we want our children to acquire education. So we participate in the construction of school facilities starting from moulding the bricks, to roofing the constructed structures. All such things are done by us the community (Parents, Community Leaders and PCSCs, Kapiri Mposhi).

It was also observed how the contribution of labour towards the construction of infrastructure was often divided among the men and women. While the men were typically involved in the actual construction, women were involved in the supplying and delivering of the needed materials, which included building and river sand, crushed stones, wood and several others. Their involvement was perceived as a huge motivation to their own children to value the infrastructure and the education provided to them by the school constructed by their parents.

For us women we are also involved in bringing other building materials such as river sand and crushed stones, while the men are involved in the construction of the buildings ..." (Parents, community leaders and PCSCs, Choma).

For us parents and the community, we see this to be very important, to inspire our children that although we didn't go to school ourselves, but we value education by participating in constructing a school for their benefit. At least when they enter that classroom and play on swing they realise that this was made by our parents (Parents, community leaders and PCSCs, Kabwe).

Community and parental involvement in play in ECE

Parental involvement in play activities for teaching and learning purposes is generally fundamental towards school readiness and transition. Some parents were

not aware of the need to be involved in play with their children as part of preparing them for grade 1. However, for those parents who were aware, not everyone attempted to engage in play for teaching purposes. The few parents who were involved in PBL, engaged in games such as *Nsolo* [a scooping holes game using small stones].

Informed by their perception of PBL for ECE, parental support and involvement in school readiness and transition activities was quite rendering. The involvement of parents in school readiness and transition ideally relates to the provision of learning support for their children to substantiate the teaching and learning that happens in school. However, the findings of the study shows more concentration of the provision of material support in terms of school requisites, food and other materials that some parents deem necessary for their children in school. The researchers also observed that not all parents were equally involved in all these aspects because most of them could not afford to consistently make for these provisions for their children due to limited capacity. While all these aspects were of value to school readiness and transition, parental involvement in the actual teaching and learning either in the context of a home environment as crucial as it may be to school readiness and transition, has been missing among the parents. The study showed that very few parents were able to engage in teaching and learning with children at home. For most parents, the barrier had been the lack of education and low literacy levels. They did not feel confident enough to guide their children in school-related activities because they too needed the same education.

...I know that not all parents are involved in school activities with their children at home, but I think one of the ways in which some parents are involved is through the homework policy. The teachers give homework to the children who are helped by the parents so that the parents are part of the support for children to be ready to go to grade one (Headteacher, Choma).

Material and nutritional support for ECE learners

Provision of material support involves school uniforms (were applicable), books, pencils and other learning materials that parents are expected to provide for a child in ECE. Most parents accepted this role as their own responsibility to do, unless in instances where parents had limited to no means.

The support is also in material form, parents buy uniforms for their learners, because books and uniforms are not given for free (Headteacher, Kapiri Mposhi)

Parents buy school requisites for their children which are uniforms, books and pencils (Headteacher, Choma).

...us parents we buy what is needed by the school for our children. Uniforms,

books and pencils, this is our responsibility to support the school and the children. But not all of us parents can afford, so we help in this area (FGD, Community Parents, community leaders and PCSCs, Kapiri Mposhi).

The provision of food for ECE learners as they went to school was found to relate to the need for children to be kept active as they learnt and also the long distances covered to and from school. This aspect was regarded as important by the parents, the school managers, and ECE teachers. Nevertheless, not all parents were able to provide food for their children as they went to school because of lack of resources to do so. While other parents felt the government needed to provide food for ECE learners through government of schools.

Discussion

The study identified stakeholder perception of PBL, the responsible factors, and implication on the involvement in the implementation of PBL in ECE centres in Southern and Central Zambia. The findings showed several similarities of ECE in both regions. The notable themes on the perception included the conceptualisation of ‘play’, the importance of play, prioritisation of play, and factors responsible for play and the implication of play on their involvement.

Although the general perception of play-based learning by a considerable number of teachers and school administrators was seemingly positive, different interpretations of play for teaching in ECE emerged, which informed their teaching through play. For example, they largely viewed play from their perspective and not the child’s perspective. The various conceptualisations of PBL by teachers, school administrators, parents and community members represent different interpretations of play at the implementation level. McLean *et al.* (2023, p. 5) have reported that various conceptualisations of play and play-based learning influence the decisions adults make about the provision of play in early childhood. It also makes it difficult to support adults in their understandings of the need for play in young children’s lives.

The study also established that the positive perception of play and play-based learning could not translate into the actual teaching through play in many schools. This discrepancy has continued to be a source of concern regarding teachers lacking training in PBL, inadequate PBL material and infrastructure in the ECE sector in Zambia (Lungu and Matafwali, 2020). The conceptualisations of the importance of play-based learning which are perceived by teachers, has a lot of influence on the implementation of play-based learning involving a home-school cooperation (Đurišić and Bunijevac, 2017; McLean *et al.*, 2023). Various conceptions of the importance of play-based learning included supporting the acquisition of different skills by learners and stimulation of interest to participate in learning, learning with ease in which learners might not even realise, that PBL promotes a foundation for early learning in school and the general development of a child.

Fleer (2018), acknowledges a long tradition of play pedagogy in early childhood education, and observes that teachers have mostly taken a passive role in children's play. This has created a conflict in theory of play-based learning as understood by teachers and the reality of play, because, while play-based learning is a developmentally appropriate teaching-learning practice which stimulates children's interests to learn (Taylor and Boyer, 2020). Most ECE teachers use 'play' only for raising children's interest and then proceed to direct teaching and some teachers focus either only on free play or on direct teaching (Monkevičienė *et al.*, 2017). Most teachers tend to position themselves outside of children's play, they are usually distant, and their intents are often in parallel with that of children Fleer (2018).

The involvement of parents in ECE demonstrates a collaborative effort by parents and school administrators towards support for the development of children in early childhood education. Research on parental involvement in ECE shows that the school-home interaction facilitates various aspects of children's development through the use of play pedagogy (Keung and Cheung, 2019). It also demonstrates that the home and school are pivotal contexts because they contribute to the development of a tripartite relationship between Teacher, Student, and Parent (TSPR) (Krane and Klevan, 2019). This relationship holds promise to the holistic development of a child, representing the expected payoffs of parental involvement in early childhood education (Đurišić and Bunijevac, 2017; Halgunseth (2009). However, the ability of involvement tended to differ across communities that are well-resourced and poorly resourced.

Different factors drive parents and community to get involved in ECE activities. School request parents and community to get involved, where resistance ensue, community leaders are called upon to intervene and engage the parents and community members. Sometimes, it takes external stimulation driven by government or development agencies working with ECE, and the latter is the most common. This relates to Keung and Cheung (2019), who states that a school collaborative culture is an important factor for parental involvement in ECE. However, what the researchers observed was that the involvement concentrated on the provision of material and the actual construction of play parks and items used for play in ECE. There was little evidence of parents involved in real PBL except few cases in which some parents played a traditional game (*nsolo* - a game of scooping stones from small holes constructed on the surface of the ground, concrete or slate) with their children. Other factors for parental involvement included the awareness and orientation of parents on their role and functions in ECE, while for others it was an issue of attitude. Some parents believe that teaching and learning in school is a sole responsibility of teachers (Đurišić and Bunijevac, 2017). Where parents have a basic understanding of PBL, this would be a good starting point to influence others for their involvement and support PBL.

However, in some schools, attitude was cited as a factor that suffered from non-parental involvement in ECE and play-based learning in particular. Such communities lacked community ownership of PBL infrastructure and safeguard from theft, and elements of vandalism were present. Other studies by Krane and Klevan, (2019); Menon, (2013) have found significant differences in responses of parents for an unwelcoming atmosphere in the school, bad experience in the past, language problems, schools located far, busy with work and attitude of parents regarding parent involvement. Apart from attitude, low levels of education and limited access to information on early childhood education were equally attributed to as the barriers hindering parental involvement in play-based learning. The researchers also observed that with the introduction of the free primary education policy by the Zambian government, parental and community support for ECE has generally reduced, in some communities, parents and communities had completely withdrawn.

Conclusion

Generally, the parents, community, and school (teachers and administrators) had a positive perception of play-based learning as a pedagogy for Early Childhood Education. Despite this, most parents and community members expressed a lack of clear understanding and knowledge of PBL, with an exception of communities that had a privilege of experiencing the school readiness initiative project. This created a perceptual gap of PBL between parents and communities among SRI and non-SRI schools. A more positive perception of PBL was observed among parents and community members in SRI schools to non-SRI schools, and was also strongly linked to the support rendered by parents and communities towards PBL.

However, a conflict existed – this positive perception did not seem to align with the reality of the support and attention given to PBL. Support for PBL was limited to community members providing local materials for the construction of playparks and in certain rare instances, production of play items for children. There was little involvement in the actual play-based learning by parents, community and school administrators, thereby rendering gaps in strengthening the tripartite linkages of home, community and school in PBL.

Much of play-based learning involves the interaction of the ECE teacher and the children. While this interaction is important, strengthening teaching at this stage requires a collaboration of all key stakeholders. School administrators are mainly involved and concerned with supervision by monitoring the activities and providing materials needed for PBL and this was informed by the ability and capacity of the school. Different factors influenced involvement in PBL and not limited to attitude of the parents and community members, awareness of their role and functions as parents in early childhood education, and the kind of orientation received if any regarding PBL. For many parents and community members, the researchers observed that limited knowledge of PBL hampered their appreciation of PBL in

facilitating teaching and learning among ECE learners. Some of the parents felt that they appreciated teachers to use the conventional methods as opposed to play, which they profiled as not being professional on the part of teachers. However, the parents and communities who had a positive perception of PBL, and some knowledge, rendered the expected support required for PBL in schools.

Recommendations

The study recommends capacity building in PBL for parents, community members and school administrators. Orientation of parents and community members on their role in PBL is crucial to help schools to implement PBL effectively through a collaborative culture within the various school contexts.

As part of capacity building, there is need to provide targeted community-based literacy programmes for parents with low literacy skills to enable them provide support to their children home learning for school preparedness and transition.

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