

TEACHING LITERACY THROUGH PLAY: PERSPECTIVE FROM FILIPINO EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT: *The role of play is critical to the learning process in early childhood education settings. International researches indicate the advancement of children's learning when engaged in active play. However, little research has been conducted in Philippine settings on the use of play in teaching literacy in early childhood education classrooms. This small qualitative study explored teachers' conceptualizations of play in the literacy teaching and learning process. The study addressed two research questions: what are the perceptions of early childhood educators in regard to the use of play as a medium of delivering instruction to advance literacy? And what kinds of plays do teachers think are suited to advancing literacy? Data was obtained through five (5) one-on-one, one-hour in-depth interviews from teachers in two early childhood education institutions. Analysis of the data revealed that teachers agree on using play as a tool in teaching literacy concepts. Furthermore, different kinds of play were enumerated addressing the different aspects of children's development. These teachers showed the use of play in their current approach in teaching, showed knowledge in play with literacy and development and different kinds of play used in their classroom.*

Keywords: Play, Literacy, Filipino Childhood Teachers, Childhood, Teachers

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In early childhood education settings, the role of play is considered critical to children's learning. Research indicates that active engagement in play results in the advancement of children's learning, making play an integral part of early childhood programs [1; 2, 3], also affirms play as a primary means for the expression of ideas, feelings and beliefs in early childhood settings. Combined with this centrality of play in early childhood education is the importance of acquiring language and literacy skills. As [2] suggests, 'individuals with higher levels of literacy have better opportunities for social and economic success'.

In the Philippines, as part of that country's attention to UNESCO's *Education for All* goals, there has been a focus on early childhood education. However, there has been little research undertaken on early childhood education in the Philippines. In light of this context, we suggest that understanding how Filipino early childhood teachers view play, literacy and the place of these in children's learning is important.

This study investigates Filipino teachers' ideas about the use of different kinds of play in their classrooms and how they perceive play as important, or unimportant, in teaching literacy. This paper will first present an introduction to the place of early childhood education in the Philippines; it will then briefly discuss some literature in the field of play and literacy. Finally the paper presents the research project and discusses the data generated.

1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

1.2.1. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN THE PHILIPPINES

The importance of early childhood education in the Philippines was recognized with the passage of *Early Childhood Care and Development Law* enacted in 2000 [4]. The National Coordinating Council for the Welfare of Children was then established as a requirement of this Law.

This council oversees a range of issues related to the delivery of services for young children and their families, including regulation, resourcing and monitoring. Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) is delivered through center-based, home-based, school-based and clinic-based services. Provision of these services falls within the remit of the Department of Social Work and Development as the agency responsible for early childhood education (Early Childhood and Family Policy Series N^o4, 2002). On January 20, 2012, *Republic Act No. 10157*, otherwise known as the *Kindergarten Education Act*, was approved by the Philippine Government under the Department of Education. The *Kindergarten Education Act* integrated kindergarten as part of the existing elementary education system, which forms part of the larger K-12 basic education system. Section 2 of the *Kindergarten Education Act* further states that the provision of mandatory kindergarten education should promote the development of children across all aspects, in preparation for formal elementary education. This is in accordance with the Philippines' progress towards accomplishing their *Education for All* (EFA) goals by 2015. Teachers in Philippine kindergartens are mandated to use the *National Kindergarten Curriculum Guide for Teachers* [5]. This document includes specific and clearly defined instructional goals and objectives regarding content coverage, classroom activities and their corresponding learning materials. According to the *National Kindergarten Curriculum Guide for Teachers*, the aim of kindergarten education is to develop children in all domains of learning development, cognitive, physical, emotional and social, preparing them for the high demands of formal education at school. Section 2 of the Kindergarten Act of 2010 described Philippine's kindergarten curriculum as focused on 'school readiness'. In this context, where school readiness is considered key to early childhood education, space for children to play can be overlooked in the everyday work of

the classroom. In the following section we note some of the research about the importance of play for literacy learning in the early years.

1.2.2 PLAY AND LITERACY IN THE EARLY YEARS CLASSROOM

There is a large body of literature, much of it Western, considering the relationship between play and literacy learning, e.g. [6; 2; 7; 8; 9]. [7] for example, talks of a 'reading/playing nexus' (p. 332, original emphasis). More broadly, language learning is considered one of the most critical areas of development during the early years of childhood education. Play in language and language in the play, the Nexus, can result in growth in language construction and acquisition [7; 10].

An example of this is sociodramatic or pretense play. During this kind of play, children have the opportunity to plan out scenes or episodes, make bargains, negotiate and carry out the roles assigned to them. In this way, the use of language is practiced and honed as the children interact with each other during the play episode. A considerable level of language understanding, including intonation, facial expression and another non-verbal language such as gestures and postures is needed to enter such a play episode [10]. This kind of play includes discussions and conversations that often require complex and elaborate language interaction and metacognition processes [10].

Taking on and acting a specific role in pretense play elicits considerable linguistic abilities and literacy skills in young children. These skills, linguistic abilities and expounded vocabulary serve as the foundation of literacy in the primary years of education. While in play, the children may practice narrative conversations as they talk about specific details of their play episode, for example, the story settings, characters, plot, action, and problems. These elements significantly contribute to language acquisition, reading and writing comprehension that is essential in the educative process and school success [10].

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study examined teachers' conceptualizations of the importance of play in the literacy teaching-learning process in early childhood education settings in the Philippines. Specifically, this study investigated on the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of early childhood educators in regard to the use of play as a medium of delivering instruction to advance literacy?
2. What kinds of play do teachers think are suited to advancing literacy?

2. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research study analyzing teacher's conceptualization of play in the literacy teaching and learning process. It investigates some components of play as a learning tool that teachers consider in their everyday teaching. A qualitative research methodology was adopted because of its mission to achieve "trustworthiness" of conclusion and interpretation yielded from the collected data

[11] and this can be achieved through a qualitative research method. Validity in qualitative research purports to the "accounts, not to data or method" [11]

2.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

An interpretative and descriptive qualitative research is the design of this study. A qualitative study was undertaken because this technique allows researchers with ways and means to consider different views of the research subject [12] therefore producing rich, in-depth and elaborate data. This study of the teacher's conceptualization of the use of play in literacy teaching and learning in their classroom would give the avenue for the teachers to speak out their ideas and opinion on their respective teaching styles.

2.2. PARTICIPANTS OF THE STUDY

All of the participants hold a university qualification, four hold a bachelor degree in elementary education (Teachers 1, 2, 4 and 5) and one holds a secondary education degree (Teacher 3). All participants were experienced teachers, having each taught for between 7-18 years. All teachers were teaching in Nursery or Kindergarten settings in the Philippines at the time of the interviews. Children in these classes are aged four to six years.

2.3 SOURCE OF DATA

In response to the teacher's conceptualization on the role of play in teaching and learning, the researcher was the primary agent for data gathering and data analysis.

An in-depth interview method was used because it allowed the researcher the chance to gather original and firsthand information from the respondents, observe the different body language and expression of the respondents and do follow up questions and inquiry of their given statement. A semi-structured interview strategy opted as it gave the researcher the opportunity to make follow up question and ask for further explanation on the respondent's statement. Though an interview protocol was set and, the follow-up questions mentioned are for purposes of clarification or further explanation. As such it will also be advantageous in gaining additional data needed.

2.4 PROCEDURE

Each teacher took part in a single one-to-one interview lasting between 40 to 60 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and then reviewed and approved by the teachers. The researcher also took written notes during the interviews. Teachers were asked about the children's play in their classroom, the views of the teachers regarding the effect of this play on children's literacy, and the teacher's perception on the use of playing in literacy teaching.

2.5 METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The interviews were analyzed through extensive reading for emerging themes; the themes were then coded and further analyzed to make sense of the data. A key theme emerging from the interview data addressed the kinds of play the teachers used and valued in their teaching of early literacy.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Filipino teachers using play to promote literacy learning

The teachers drew on dominant developmental discourses to describe the social, emotional, physical and intellectual

benefits of play, especially in terms of the children's literacy learning. They used different kinds of play as a mode or tool for literacy teaching and learning. These different kinds of play were described and categorized by the teachers as: active play, exploratory, manipulative or construction play, music play and dramatic play, or cooperative play.

Literacy in active play

The idea of active play was described by all of the teachers. Based on the responses and examples provided in the interviews, it is noted that for teachers in this study active play was understood as a form of structured, teacher-directed play or games rather than any sort of free-flowing or child-directed play. The active play was used by the teachers to integrate the introduction of literacy and numeracy concepts through incorporating these concepts in active physical play such as hopping, running or crawling games. Teacher 5 gave an example of her use of teacher directed active play in teaching literacy,

...another one that I once – I made them a kangaroo... I let the children wear something with a pouch, and then I said...ok, kangaroo begins with K, so this time you are all going to pick up all the letter K that you can find on the floor and put it inside the pouch.

The teachers' viewed manipulating letter blocks of different sizes as supporting a child in learning to spell their name, while also building fine motor development skills. For example, Teacher 1 explained

"...we have manipulatives, so they work on blocks to construct things when we like, wanted to have lessons on letters, so we make use of that."

Activities such as these are specifically linked to the learning competency set for the day as per the *Pre-School Handbook* and the *National Kindergarten Curriculum Guide for Teachers*, targeting children's achievement of the subject matter according to their own pace in their development.

Literacy in exploratory, manipulative or construction play

Blocks and other manipulatives were described by all the teachers as common materials used within their classrooms. It is evident that their classrooms hold some, if not all, these learning materials and the teachers make them available to the children through different learning centers. A range of manipulatives was described by the teachers such as various blocks, beads, toys, puzzles, and clay or dough, all of which come in different colours, sizes and shapes. As Teacher 2 explains,

"we have sorting of beads with different colors and shapes, we have to identify numbers and number object using 'Lego' toys."

Another form of exploratory play described by teachers was water play. Teachers 2, 3 and 4 suggest that water play activities allow the children to practice their fine motor skills leading to the correct 'finger grips' in holding pencils, considered as essential in early writing by the teachers. Teacher 3 explains, "pouring water from one container to the

other, it's more on how to use their three finger grips, it's preparing them on how to hold the pencil."

Four of the five teachers linked the term 'free play' with explorative and manipulative play. Most of the time spent by children in their classroom doing explorative and manipulative activities are specifically scheduled at the time of the day when children are free to choose their preferred learning centers and are able to choose any manipulatives they wish such as blocks, toys or puzzles. For Teacher 2, the children's choice of their own manipulatives encourages each child to freely express their thoughts,

...children will have, have to choose toys that they want... so that they can express what they want, for example, they get certain, a certain toy and then they are free to say something about that one so you encourage the child to talk.

Teacher 4 also suggests that this level of choice allows the child to be comfortable within the classroom environment,

... most of the time, we spend our time by playing like sitting down on the floor, using a mat and there's one corner in our classroom with toys, we, we let our children to be more at ease and choose the toy that they want to play. If they like to play with those blocks, with those legos, with those puzzles so children are free to choose whatever toys that they want to play during that day. For them to be at ease, ok...

Teachers 3 and 5, however, both described the manipulative play as a 'time-filler', used while waiting for other children to arrive in the mornings. They further expressed that using these manipulatives, as a form of play, gives children the opportunity to explore either on their own or with peers,

...so the children can just get the toys that they like and they can bring it to the mat area where they can play either by themselves or with another kid around the room while they wait for other classmates or other children to arrive.

Literacy in Music Play and Dramatic Play

Music play was a popular response from all the teachers as singing is common in many classroom settings. However, the teachers did not talk at length about how music play might serve to advance literacy, especially the emergent narrative and communication skills of the children. Teacher 1 showed her knowledge of the development of early phonics as a result of singing songs,

"we play with tunes, and that's when they are able to hear sounds which is actually phonics and actually beginning reading skills and therefore kids to learn in reading".

Teachers reported that children move to the beat of any music, they play and sing along to songs and come up with their own words and tunes according to songs they frequently hear.

Interestingly, the dramatic play was not raised in any depth by any of the teachers. Only two of the five teachers mentioned their use of dramatic play in their teaching-learning activities. Teacher 1, for example, briefly added dramatic play onto her discussion of playful learning activities for teaching,

"...and then we also have a dramatic play".

Teacher 3 elaborated a little further describing why she incorporates dramatic play in her classroom,

...then dramatic play so they love to model, model people like especially teachers, they really, if they go home they will act like you.

Teacher 3 discussed the importance of providing an environment close to real-life in some detail, for example, a living room, dining room or bedroom. Teacher 3 also discussed how these lessons "retain to them"[sic] when children are given this style of the learning environment. In other words, Teacher 3 believed the children retained their learning more effectively in these dramatic play contexts. She went on to suggest that children take on different roles according to the presented play setting. A 'home' setting, for example, consists of many family members. As the children have previous knowledge of characters such as members of the family (e.g. mother, father, brother, sister), they are able to act out and modify these roles in association with their peers.

The five Filipino early childhood teachers in this study have described their understanding of the links between play and the literacy teaching-learning process as they talked about their everyday, play-based teaching activities with nursery and kindergarten children. Associating play with learning is a consistent practice in the field of early childhood education and teachers in this field should understand the linking of play with the learning process [13]. The types of play teachers discussed varied, ranging across active play, dramatic play, exploratory and manipulative play, constructive play, cooperative play, and music play. These different kinds of play provide young children experiences that allow them to think symbolically, building the foundation for later learning [14]. The teachers emphasized the importance of cognitive development and they recognized signs of emergent literacy in children, enabling them to design play programs aimed at building a range of literacy skills that may be gained through play [6].

The active play was raised by all the teachers. Based on the responses and experiences provided in the interviews, it is noted that active play was considered to be a form of structured play and games directed by the teachers. These activities were taught by the teachers to introduce number and letter concepts through incorporating these concepts into active physical play or games such as running, crawling or pretending to be Kangaroos. This active play was also considered to contribute to the development of both fine and gross motor skills. For example, teachers suggested that manipulating letter blocks of different sizes while assisting the child to spell their name was important not only for building fine motor skills but also pre-literacy skills. Active play, physical games or activities were considered to create a positive learning experience resulting in positive affect, thus learning in this context is thought to be fun for the children. As [13] suggests positive emotions, such as joyfulness and happiness, may emerge during this kind of active play.

Block play and other manipulative play was discussed by all the teachers as being common in their classrooms. Different

manipulatives were noted by the teachers such as blocks, beads, toys, puzzles, and clay, all of which come in different kinds, sizes and shapes. It is evident that their classrooms hold some, if not all, these learning materials and generally the teachers introduced them to the children through various learning centers in their classrooms. [15], found that the inclusion of literacy objects such as these manipulatives enabled the children to practice literacy behaviors such as reading, writing, handling and labelling objects and using their emergent literacy skills in their play activities.

It is evident in most kindergarten classroom settings that songs are being used in circle time and other class activities, often used as a transition from one activity to another or used as motivation and opening activities [16]. Music play was a popular response from all the Filipino teachers. However, while the teachers recognized the importance of songs and music play, they were not able to discuss in any depth the role this type of play has in advancing literacy, especially for the emergent narrative and communication skills of the children. Interestingly, only two of the five teachers mentioned dramatic play, and only one discussed it in any depth. Given the widespread emphasis on dramatic or socio-dramatic play in the overall play literature, this is rather surprising. Again, it could be that while the teachers recognized the importance of dramatic play, they did not have a professional language to express this knowledge.

4. CONCLUSION

Early childhood educational philosophy places children's play in the center of learning, as the point at which children develop their ideas and construct their own knowledge [2]. The five Filipino teachers interviewed in this study were able to discuss their knowledge and understanding of the importance and value of play in literacy teaching and learning process. This is apparent in their use of play as one of their key tools for teaching literacy concepts. The five teachers discussed their classroom practices in linking play with literacy teaching and learning activities. This research indicates that while teachers value play they also need support to develop their ability to articulate the links between play and learning literacy concepts.

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