

Research Article

SUITABILITY OF PRE SCHOOLS PLAY ENVIRONMENT ON THE CHILD'S' ORAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN BOMET COUNTY

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ABSTRACT

Play is one of the activities adopted to promote effective learning in preschool classrooms. The purpose of this study was to examine the suitability of pre schools play environment on the child's' oral skills development in Bomet county, kenya. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The target population was 185 ECD centres, with a total population of 370 teachers and managers in Bomet central division. A sample of 30% of the centers was selected to give a sample of 56 centres . All the 112 teachers and centre managers in the selected centres were considered for the study. The data collection instrument included a semi structured questionnaire designed for the teachers and an interview guide for the centre managers. Reliability of the study instrument was computed and a Cronbach's Alpha reliability index of 0.733 obtained. Validity was established using lecturers who are experts in the area of ECD to provide their judgemental opinion. Data collected was organized and summarized with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences SPSS). Data was organised descriptively using frequencies and percentages. The results were analysed using pearsons correlation analysis and presented using frequency and percentage tables and charts. The study established that play has an effect on the oral skills development of the preschool pupils. The results also indicated that the nature of play was key in oral skills development, based on the factor analysis. The study concluded that use of play has an effect on the oral skills development of the pre school pupils. It was recommended that teachers need to be trained on effective use of play in enhancing literacy development and also there was need to have an effective play environment to ensure that pupils are effectively engaged in most constructive play to enhance their oral skills.

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood educators are faced with expanded academic expectations that have forced them to limit the use of play in the classroom. This play period is often too short and is generally under-utilized by teachers in the implemetation of curriculum (Barrat-pugh and Rohl, 2000). Play has been overlooked as a valuable learning resource in classrooms in the majority of classrooms. Play serves as an energy burning activity for children although it is often dismissed as a leisure pursuit with little educational value (Barratt-pugh & Rohl, 2000). Play contextualizes linguistic features to understand how the social and cultural contexts of play as well as the tensions between new and traditional literacies in shaping, influencing and even curtailing children's learning process, (Roskos & Christie, 2000; Vukelich, Christie, & Enz, 2008). In contemporary Western society, play is viewed as offering a

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time and space for the separation of children from the adult world of work and a medium through which young children can make sense of, and feel at home in the world. An evolutionary and biological perspective proposed by play theorist Sutton-Smith suggests that play is at first a kind of biological prelinguistic enactment with its own claims on human existence (Mayall, 2002). Capturing both the resilience of children in their environment, and the notion of play as a resource that continues to be of value throughout life, play can be understood as a lifelong simulation of the key neonatal characteristics of unrealistic optimism, egocentricity and reactivity, all of which are guarantors of persistence in the face of adversity. A developmental perspective pays attention to signs of maturing, whether of children maturing or, of the maturing of play (Scarlett W .G. Naudiau, S. Saloniust-pasternak and Ponte, 2005). In this regard, Fromberg and Bergen (2006) highlight what they describe as the permeable nature of play as it interacts with, parallels, represents and integrates physical, social, emotional, aesthetic and cognitive experiences. Ethnographic studies have illustrated that young human beings play in all societies although, it is recognised

that the types and forms of children's play and the amount of play varies depending upon age, gender, cultural contexts and ecological characteristics of the play settings (Armitage, 2005). An anthropological view of play views it as an activity in its own right, where the main motive for children to come together is 'to be where the action is', while researchers have explored questions such as *What is play in itself?* and *What does it mean for the player?* (Strandell, 2000). Infants and toddlers engage in activities that stimulate their senses and develop motor skills. They actively explore objects and their own capabilities through simple non goal-oriented and repetitious play. While infants play alone or with playthings, toddlers play beside other children, although not with them. They are sometimes within speaking distance of others but make little or no effort to communicate. Two children playing with similar toys may pursue unrelated activities. They concentrate on their own needs, reflecting egocentric behavior and have no concept of rules (Parten, 1932; Piaget, 1962). Such play contributes to infants' and toddlers' growing ability to pay attention and to the development of physical skills, social competence, and intellectual growth (McCune & Zanes, 2001).

In Ghana, ECE focuses on learning through play, which Jean Piaget posits that meets the physical, intellectual, language, emotional and social needs of children. Children learn more efficiently and gain knowledge through activities such as dramatic play and social games. It is important that teachers promote children development through play by various types of play on daily basis. In Ghana pre-schools, the key guidelines for creating a play-based learning environment include providing a safe space, correct supervision and culturally award trained teachers who are knowledgeable about early years' foundation. Learning through play has been seen regularly as the most versatile way a child can learn. According to Rudolf Steiner (1925), believed that play allows children to talk, socially interact, use their imagination and intellectual skills.

In Kenya, the Ministry of Education syllabus intended for use in pre-schools places emphasis on the use of play and play materials by teachers during teaching and learning process (KICD, 2008). The schools should ensure that there is equal opportunity for girls, boys, and children with special needs in all aspects of play. However; there is a lot of rote learning with more emphasis on academic achievement denying the learner time to play. Evidence is seen in schools that have perfected teaching over the weekends even to pre-schools yet what is done is within the confines of classrooms. The school policy requires the adoption of pre-school curricula that emphasize play and child initiated activities yet both parents and teachers who believe in academic achievement hinder this. Makin et al, (2006) noted that oral language can be effectively taught if it is done early, it will make a significant difference. Research has shown that strong oral language development at an early age means that there is likelihood of the child becoming strong in literacy. Based on this argument, it is noted that oral skills development should be strengthened at an early age in order to avoid further challenges among the learners. A child's oral language development provides the foundation for all other language and literacy skills. Even the ability to think about things is tied to oral language. Our vocabulary and language ability control the way we are able to think about things.

Understanding words orally is essential to being able to understand words written down. Oral language is neglected far too often when teaching emergent and early literacy to young children (Jensen, 1999)

Statement of the Problem

Although play has long been part of the early childhood curriculum, recent emphasis on accountability in education seems to have led to a decline in the general understanding of the contribution that high-quality play can make to children's cognitive development in the early years. The school environment might play a critical role in enhancing learning among the pre school pupils but little documented evidence is available on the same in line with oral skills development. Teachers understanding of the use of play in oral development is limited in literature and most of the pre schools teachers concentrate on class work more than taking the children in the field and playing with them, this has a negative effect on the child's literacy development. Major concern according to Christie & Enz, (1992) is that children today are having fewer of the kinds of experiences they need in order to build a strong foundation for early literacy development. Children aged between three to six spend almost the whole day in class or doing class related activities yet they need time to go out and play. It is also noted that literature on play and pre schools does not fully address the ways through which play can be enhanced in preschools. A lot of literature has looked at play in relation to mental and physical development of the children with little concern on whether it has a role on oral development among the children.

Bergen and Mauer (2000) noted that the hours lost in play and interactions with materials and peers puts children at increased risk for difficulty in learning the oral skills. The problem therefore, is that despite the Republic of Kenya providing preschool education through play, play has been dismally below expectation. Not only is play rarely used in public pre-school but the quality of play activities has often been hindered by many factors such as inadequate playground, limited play materials, pressure by parents on teachers to meet academic standards. Play as a medium of learning language is not being used well in preschools hence the view upon which this study is based. It is against this backdrop that this study sought to establish the use of play on oral skills development of preschool children.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this paper was to assess the suitability of the play environment in pre schools on the child's' oral skills development in Bomet county.

Objective of the study

To assess the suitability of the play environment in pre schools on the child's' oral skills development in Bomet county.

Research question

How suitable is the play environment affect pre-school children's' oral skills development in Bomet county ?

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study may be important in a number of ways. First, the findings might be important to the teachers at the early childhood education in applying play in oral skills acquisition among the preschoolers. The findings of the study might also be important to the preschool administration in assessing the importance of Child's play and hence provide adequate facilities for play to enhance oral skills development. To the curriculum developers in evaluating the curriculum and putting emphasis on children's play and development of play materials. To the ECDE teacher training institutes in training teachers on the importance of child's play. Teachers may also benefit from this study as the findings may call for in service course to train them on different types of play that promote oral skill development. The community and other stakeholders could provide for children's play by donating play materials in support of play to promote skills development in the pre-school children. Other researchers in the field of early childhood education stand to benefit from this study as it may form a basis for further research in the area of play and oral development.

Literature review

Play Environment and preschool childrens oral development

Research has been conducted to explore the play environment as an influence to emergent oral development. McGinnis (2002) demonstrate that play environments is an excellent context for teachers to observe young children's emergent oral behaviors. Another study by Frost et al., (2001) showed that play provides teachers with an opportunity to establish whether the children are able to link theory with the play activities. One area that still needs further exploration is whether play has an influence on the oral development of the preschoolers. This research sought to fill this gap by establishing how pre-school teachers can use play in enhancing oral skills development among the preschooler.

Developmental change evolves more slowly in early childhood, the period from 2 to 6 years of age. At this age children talk in endless sentences and are keen listeners when an interesting story is being told. Their present desires can be curtailed with promises of later rewards, but they may not necessarily accept the offered terms, negotiating for an instant as well as a delayed reward. They develop theories about everything, and these are constantly measured against the world around them. Preschool children's thought processes are characterized by great awareness, yet these islands of sophistication exist in a sea of uncertainty. During these period children still understand relatively little about the world in which they live and have little or no control over it. They are prone to fears and they combat their growing self-awareness of being small by wishful, magical thinking, (Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development 2013) Frost et al., (2001) indicted that Scientists have sorted these changes into separate categories cognitive, language, physical and social development. Development in each of these areas, however, affects and interacts with every other type. For example, cognitive development creates the need for more sophisticated speech in order to express new knowledge.

Language development leads children to master new words that capture new ideas. Physical development allows them to perform more complicated tasks than they could earlier, bringing them into greater social contact with others. The information presented in the following sections discusses some of the major achievements in each of these areas of development. The researcher seeks to specifically address the role of play in enhancing oral skills development among the preschools with a focus on the use of play. Most children naturally develop verbal language skills by hearing others speak and by observing the communication process. However, the ability to read and speak and write the printed text that represents spoken language, that is, to be literate does not develop as a matter of course (Barrat-pugh & Rohl 2001). Whether 'litaracy' extends beyond the common definition of the ability to read and write to encompass all aspects of language in use in a range of social and cultural setting is widely debated. Such debate has resulted in important contributions to the study of oral skills (Makin et al, 2006), however, the primary focus of this study is the development of oral skills related to oral and to a lesser extent to reading and writing.

Christie (1990) found out that, in order to facilitate oral - directed play, attention must be given to the time allocated for play, teacher involvement during free play period, the design of the oral -enhanced play centers, Christie and Enz (1992) stressed that teachers must continually observe, manipulate and change the environment to encourage oral -enhanced play environment. The time available for play is an important element in the development of an oral -enhanced play environment. Christie, Johnson and Peckover (1988) found that children are more likely to engage in rich, sustained play schemes if play periods are twenty minutes or longer. Children need time to recruit players, designate props, and agree on the scheme. Children will not waste their energy into developing a play theme if they do not have enough time to complete the play (Christie, 1990). In relation to this argument the study sough to establish whether time is a factor challenging the effectiveness of play in oral skills development among preschool children.

The suitability of oral -enhanced play environment Flynn & Kieff, (2002) concluded that careful attention to the play environment causes oral behaviors to change several ways. First, they observed that oral skills development in play became more purposeful. The oral behavior became part of an ongoing play flow rather than a simple oral task prior to introducing the oral-enhanced environment where children would only engage in oral behaviors as a part of a brief oral exploration, such as picking up a book and quickly leafing through pages. After more oral props were introduced into the play environment, oral skills development served a direct purpose within a more elaborate play scheme. For example, after the environment was enhanced the children engaged in games like post office in which oral was incorporated into every aspect of the play. Isenberg & Jalongo, (2000) observed that oral behavior became more suitable. The oral -enhanced play centres provide a context for the use of oral skills development in play. The props offers children resources and cues they could use to scaffold their oral interactions. The oral behaviors became a substantial part of the play rather than a quick oral demonstration.

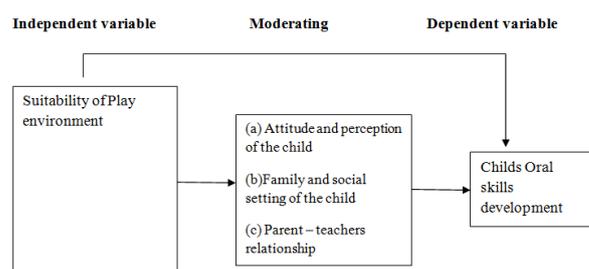
For example, after enhancing the centers two children played office for twenty two minutes, continually engaging in oral -directed play (Jensen, 2000). The office materials gave the children the resources they needed to develop an oral -rich play scheme. The oral -enhanced centre provided a meaningful context for the children to engage in reading and writing behaviours. This study sought to establish whether the use of play centres enrich oral skills development of the pre school children in the study area. Murata & Maeda, (2002) observed that oral behaviors became more connected and interactive in an oral -enhanced play environment. Before the centers were enhanced, oral behaviours seemed to be a diversion from the existing play themes. The oral behaviours were generally quick in duration, with no connection to the current play theme. After the centers were enhanced, the oral flow in play generally focused around an ongoing play theme. Within this play context, the oral behaviors tended to involve two or more children interacting with one another rather than a solitary play incident where a child briefly chose to pick up a book or draw.

Most importantly, Murata & Maeda, (2002) observed that children's oral skills behaviors became more role-defined. The enhanced play environment encouraged children to act out roles using materials in an interactive manner. This increased interaction allowed children to extend their own knowledge of oral skills development and expand the knowledge of their peers. From a Piagetian perspective, this type of interaction moves children's development forward. By enacting roles, the children also used a great deal of symbolism in play and this helps children develop representational thought, which is a huge developmental leap. This study agrees with this concept on that play enhance environment on the child's development of representational thought and it build on this concept to clearly assess the effect of play on the oral development of the child. Flynn & Kieff, (2002) found that oral -enhanced play centers had a profound effect on oral directed play in the classroom. The researchers drew the following conclusions: all types of oral enrichment encourages oral-directed play; theme play areas will encourage longer, more focused, interactive, dramatic play that is infused with oral demonstrations; oral props encourage play infused with oral behaviors; teachers involvement in a play context encouraged oral behaviors; and increases in oral behaviors remain steady over time.

Further studies, demonstrate the importance of including play as part of the early childhood curriculum. Isenberg & Jalongo, (2000) indicated that high exposure to environmental print in the context of play increased children's ability to read environmental print. Flynn & Kieff, (2002) found that oral-enhanced play environment influenced the amount and type of oral behaviors during play. This study sought to establish whether the play environment for pre school children in the study area has an effect on the oral skills development among the childre. Pellegrini, Galda, Dresden, and Cox (1991) found that children use of symbolic play predicted emerging reading ability. Bryan (1995) found that play observation provides a means of understanding the relationship among oral language, social interaction and oral skills as children develop an understanding of the communicative nature of oral . Children not only learn about their surrounding or the world but also about themselves and how they connect to the world (Sacks & Ruzzi, 2005).

Conceptual Framework of the Study

Play is an important element whose proper utilization can lead to the successful oral skills development among children but whose failure to use properly can lead to poor child oral development. This study conceptualizes that the child's oral skills development will be affected by various factors associated with the use of play. These includes; appropriate type of play, the play environment, teachers understanding of the influence of play and ways through which play can be enhanced in the pre schools so as to influence the oral skills development among preschool children. The dependent variable is conceptualized as the child's oral skills development. This conceptual framework is diagrammatically shown in Figure 1.



Source: Researcher (2016)

Figure 1. Conceptualization of the use of play in oral development of pre -school childrens'

This conceptual framework is operationalized as follows;

From the conceptualization, type of play was considered as an independent variable that affects children's oral skills development in the study area among the preschoolers. According to the figure, there are many different types of play but not all of them influence oral skills development. This study sought to establish those plays that enhances oral skills development. The study however noted that there are factors that can influence this relationship such as a child's attitude and perception, parents and teachers relations and also family and a child's social setting. This study also considered the play environment as a factor in oral skills development for the preschoolers. The study notes that if children have the right play environment which enables them to interact effectively during play then this will influence their oral skills development. However, this relationship may also be interfered with by other factors such the child's attitude and perception, family and social setting and the parent teachers relationship.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study adapted a descriptive survey design. The descriptive survey design is appropriate for the present study, because it sought to gain insight into related phenomenon as a means of providing basic information in the area of study (Gay and Airasian, 2009). This study was conducted in Bomet Central Division, Bomet County, Bomet. Central is one of the divisions of Bomet, with six zones; Township, Silibwet, Merigi, Kiromwok, Ndarawetta and Chesoen. (Bomet County Development Plan 2008- 2012). According to the ministry of education statistics, the division has a total of 140 public ECD centers with a population 5,494 of which 2,738 are boys and 2,756 girls, aged between 3-6 years.

The study targeted all the 185 ECD centres in the division with a teachers population of 370 who are trained and managers who are 185. The teachers are in constant contact with the pupils and they are in a better position to provide an appropriate records of pupils'. All the managers from the 56 selected ECD centres and all the 112 teachers were selected to constitute the sample for the study. The study used simple random sampling to select the centres and all the centre managers and teachers considered for the study. A total sample of 168 respondents of which 56 were centre managers and 112 were teachers. This sample agreed with the suggestion of Mugenda and Mugenda (1999), that for descriptive study a sample of 30% or more is appropriate for use in analysis and making inference from a sample. The researcher used a questionnaire for the teachers and an interview guide for the managers of the ECD centres in central division of Bomet county. The completed questionnaires were collected and sorted out and cleaned for completeness, accuracy and consistency of the data with other facts gathered. Those that were not completed fully were considered spoilt and hence was not used for the study. The questionnaires were coded and entered in the computer software; Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used as a tool to assist in the analysis. SPSS helps to summarize the data into frequencies and percentages during the data analysis.

Play Environment affects oral skills development among preschool children

This was the second objective of the study. It sought to find out the influence of the play environment in enhancing oral skills development among preschool children in ECD centres. The respondents were required to respond to various statements which addressed this objective. The results were summarized as shown in this section. It was important to establish whether the curriculum supports the use of play in early childhood education. Curriculum was considered as part of the environment because it affects the ability of the teachers to allocate time for childrens' play and the effort to complete the syllabus. The results of the study were summarized on cross tabulation table as shown on Table 1. The study results shown on Table 1 indicate that, 27(28.1%) of the teachers strongly disagreed with the statement while only 59(62.5%) disagreed while only 5(5%) of the teachers strongly agreed with the statement. This shows that curriculum does not support the use of play in enhancing oral skills development among the pre school children .This is because the curriculum is rigid and tailored to academic matters and not play.

The study sought to establish whether schools have enough space to provide free play for the children . It was noted that 53(55.2%) of the teachers disagreed, 33(34.4%) agreed while only 10(10.4%) strongly agreed. This means that the schools do not have enough space to provide for free play among the pre school children. On whether the play ground has enough facilities to enable the children to play. All the 96 respondents disagreed with the statement that the playground has enough facilities to enable the children to play. This indicated that play facilities in the schools are not enough for the children. This was important in bringing out the effect that play has in enhancing learning and particular oral skills development among the children in preschools. It was also important to establish the perception of the respondents on the play environment in the schools.

The study established that 81(52.3%) of the respondents, of which 29(50.9%) were managers and 52(54.2%) were teachers had a negative perception about the play environment in the school. Only 11(19.3%) of the managers and 22(22.9%) of the teachers had positive perception of the play ground. The results show a mixed response on perception of the respondents. This means that the pre schools should improve the play environment in order to enhance the use of play in oral skill development among the pre schoolers. On whether teachers have appropriate skills and knowledge for enhancing play in preschool children, 51(53.1%) of the teachers disagreed with the statement while 35(36.5%) agreed. This means that the ECD teachers do not have appropriate skills required to support the children to develop during their play. The results indicates that lack of skills among the teachers on the appropriate use of play in literacy development limits their understanding of the use of play. This is a point of concern that needs to be investigated further. From interviews with the managers, data indicated that various types of play children engaged in enhanced self-confidence in them thus prepared them for speaking and reading skills. One of the managers confirmed that where learners did not use real objects their concentration span and motivation was low. She indicated that;

"Children who used variety of play things had developed better social skills and tend to be more creative and innovative in their daily thinking and activities". Than those who were not exposed to a variety of play materials". However since the centers are unable to equip the play grounds then it becomes very difficult to achieve the objectives.'

This confirms that, for children to develop language skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing there is need to expose them to different play activities that enhances acquisition of these skills. Use of variety of play materials equips children with creativity that enhances them with cognitive skills which fosters thinking aspects at the same time communicative skills.

One of the managers had this remark:

"Because of play with other children, my son learnt to talk and produced words that he acquired from his friends in the neighborhood hence he had to be taken to preschool at the age of three years simply because of his eloquence in speech"

The manager saw his child's eloquence as a gate way to join preschool which in the actual sense appreciated play in young children and he is towards the support of the policy of the use of play in skills development among the preschool children school as a school administrator

RESULTS

The study distributed a total of 112 questionnaires to the teachers and 56 interviews done to the managers.. All the 56 interviews were successfully done and used for analysis and a total of 96(83.5%) of the questionnaires distributed to the ECD teachers were filled and returned for the analysis. The non response was attributed to the fact that some of the teachers were not present at the centre for the period of the study and also some did not just return the questionnaire even after follow up efforts.

Table 1. Play Environment affects oral skills development among preschool children

Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
The curriculum supports the use of play in early childhood education	27 (28.1%)	59 (62.5%)	2 (2.1%)	3 (3.1%)	5 (5%).	96
Schools have enough space to provide free play for the children	0	53 (55.2%)	33 (34.4%)	10 (10.4%)	0	96
The play ground has enough facilities to enable the children to play .		11 (11.5%)	62 (64.3%)	23 (24%)	96	
The facilities available offer different learning skills for the children and hence they play a key role in oral literacy development .	0	22 (22.9%)	0	22 (22.9%)	52 (54.2%)	96
The teachers have the required play skills to support the children to development during their play time .	0	51 (53.1%)	0	35 (36.5%)	10 (10.4%)	96
As teachers we understand that enough play will influence their literacy development	0	0	0	33 (34.4%)	63 (65.6%)	96

Source: Field Data 2016

This study establish that the respondents were in the age bracket of 20 – 40 with. Although the deviation was very big as a result of there being a difference in the age of the managers and the teachers. Majority 78.1% of the respondents were female while 21.9% men only indicated that most of the teachers and managers of ECD centers were female. On education level , most of the managers and the teachers were diploma holders . The respondents had worked at the current ECD centres for between 6-10 years therefore they had good knowledge of the pre school education.

Play Environment affects oral skills development among preschool children

The second objective of the study sought to find out the influence of the play environment in enhancing oral skills development among preschool children in ECD centres. The respondents indicated that the curriculum does not support the use of play in early childhood education. Similarly they indicated that the ECD policy does not support the use of play activities in teaching at preschool. This shows that ECD policy does not support the use of play in ECD centres hence it affects the oral skills development. The respondents also indicated that play is an effective tool in developing literacy skills in young children and particularly the oral proficiency. This indicated that both teachers and managers believe that play is an effective tool in developing literacy skills in young children and particularly the oral proficiency. They also indicated that play facilities were not enough to enable the children to play. Therefore there is need to improve on the play environment in order to achieve the objectives of enhancing oral skills development among the preschool children .

Recommendation

From the results of this study it can be recommended that;

- Teachers of ECD centres need to understand the different types of play that can be effective not only for physical development of the pupils but also for oral and mental skills development. Understanding the nature of play will help to improve learning in ECD centres.

- It is also recommended that teachers for ECD should be assisted by availing the necessary facilities for use to enhance oral skills development of the pupils. From the findings of the study it was noted that teachers have appropriate understanding of play and how it is used to enhance skills development among the pre school pupils. Therefore teachers should be encouraged to use play and to make them effective for preschoolers.
- It is also recommended that ECD centers improve on the play environment in-order to ensure that there are facilitates on play ground to enhance the use of play in foster the development of the preschooler.
- There is need to have an improved ECD policy which will enhance play among the preschooler. ECD Policy was very important because it will help to ensure that all the other functions supporting ECD are done appropriately. With the right policy, the curriculum will be well implemented to ensure that play was enhanced in the learning process.

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