



Crafting an Integrated Curriculum: A Comprehensive Strategy for Early Childhood Education via Play-Based Learning

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Abstract

Early Childhood Education (ECE) faces global challenges in providing a universally comprehensive curriculum, potentially leading to developmental deficiencies in young learners. Past studies in Montserrado County, Liberia, highlighted gaps in cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development due to the absence of a structured and holistic curriculum. This research aimed to develop and implement a comprehensive curriculum emphasizing play-based learning strategies, considering local educational practices and cultural dynamics. Drawing from Dewey's educational philosophy, the study focused on transformative, child-centered approaches. Through purposive sampling and qualitative analysis, the study examined engagement levels, cognitive outcomes, socio-economic factors, community perceptions, implementation challenges, and recommendations. Findings revealed positive engagement in play-based learning, though resource disparities existed. Cognitive gains were noted, with socio-economic backgrounds influencing outcomes. Community support was strong but with reservations. Implementation challenges included resource constraints and teacher comfort levels. Recommendations emphasized continuous professional development and strategic resource allocation. Overall, the study highlights the potential of play-based learning to enhance early childhood education, offering insights for Montserrado County and broader implications for similar contexts globally.

Keywords: *Integrated Curriculum, Comprehensive Strategy, Early Childhood Education, Play-Based Learning, Montserrado County*

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INTRODUCTION

On a global scale, Early Childhood Education (ECE) faced challenges in providing a universally comprehensive and holistic curriculum, resulting in potential deficiencies in the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development of young learners (Brucher et al., 2023). The lack of a standardized and structured approach that integrated play-based learning posed a common obstacle, limiting the maximization of educational outcomes for children worldwide (Beuilby, 2023). The past state of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Montserrado County, Liberia, lacked a comprehensive and holistic curriculum, leading to potential gaps in the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development of young learners (Wehye, 2023). The absence of a structured approach that incorporated play-based learning may have hindered the maximization of educational outcomes for children in Montserrado.

This research aimed to address the identified problem by exploring the development and implementation of a holistic curriculum in Montserrado County, emphasizing the integration of play-based learning strategies. The scope of this study encompassed the examination of local educational practices, cultural tones, and community dynamics to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of the proposed curriculum. By focusing on a comprehensive approach, the research sought to contribute valuable insights and practical recommendations to enhance the quality of Early Childhood Education in Montserrado County, ultimately fostering well-rounded development among young learners.

The theoretical framework for this study was drawn from Dewey's theory 2008, "The Child and the Curriculum," which laid out a transformative educational philosophy advocating for a progressive, child-centered approach. Dewey emphasized experiential learning, urging that education should be rooted in the real-life experiences and interests of the child. He contended for an integrated curriculum that connected academic subjects with the daily experiences of students, promoting problem-solving, critical thinking, and hands-on learning. Dewey underscored the social aspect of education, asserting that meaningful collaboration and interaction enhanced the learning process. Furthermore, he placed a strong emphasis on preparing students for active citizenship, emphasizing the importance of education in contributing to a democratic society. In essence, Dewey's work shaped a vision of education that was dynamic, responsive to students' interests, and geared towards the holistic development of individuals within a societal context.

The significance of this study was rooted in its potential to rectify crucial deficiencies within the Early Childhood Educational (ECE) system of Montserrado County. By investigating and implementing a holistic curriculum, enriched with play-based learning strategies, the researchers aimed to elevate the overall quality of ECE. The study was poised to address developmental gaps, fostering comprehensive and well-rounded growth among young learners. Through a meticulous examination of local educational practices and cultural tones, the research ensured that the proposed curriculum was not only effective but also culturally relevant, thereby enhancing the educational experience for children in the region. By contributing practical insights and evidence-based recommendations, the study had a broader impact on informing policies and practices, serving as a valuable resource for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders involved in advancing early childhood education in Montserrado County and potentially influencing similar contexts globally.

Mueller and Wisneski's 2012 study focused on the need for a fresh approach to curricula. The study emphasized the importance of reevaluating and rediscovering excellent curriculum building methods. Hedges and Cooper (2015) conducted a study

published in the Journal of Curriculum Studies that looked into the theoretical components of children's interests. Their research centered on conceptualizing and comprehending the role of children's interests in the learning process. The study made a substantial contribution to ongoing conversations about curriculum creation and pedagogy by providing vital insights into the relevance of understanding and implementing children's interests into educational practices.

Reifel's (2014) study, "Developmental Play in the Classroom," investigated the integration of developmental play into educational contexts. The primary focus appeared to be on comprehending the role of play in children's overall development and learning experiences. Reifel contributed important ideas, theories, and practical issues on how to effectively incorporate developmental play into the classroom in this contribution. Saracho's (2012) book, "An Integrated Play-Based Curriculum for Young Children," was a thorough resource that delved into the concept and execution of a play-centered curriculum for young children. Saracho examined the integration of play-based approaches into early childhood education, emphasizing play's fundamental significance in facilitating holistic development and learning.

The book offered useful insights, practical tactics, and theoretical frameworks for educators and practitioners looking to design and implement play-based curricula in early childhood settings. Saracho's study advanced our understanding of the importance of play in educational settings and provided suggestions for developing meaningful learning experiences for young children. Sellers' (2013) study, "Young Children Becoming Curriculum, Deleuze, Te Whāriki, and Curricular Understandings," examined how educational philosophy and early childhood curriculum intersected. Sellers used Deleuze and Te Whāriki theories to analyze how young children impacted the curriculum. The study provided important insights into unique educational approaches that considered young learners' agency and experiences. Sellers' study was anticipated to provide a theoretical underpinning as well as practical ramifications for educators and academics interested in redesigning curriculum understandings in early childhood education.

Smith's "Children and Play" (2010) delved deeply into the delicate connection between children and play. The study examined various aspects of children's play, including its developmental significance, psychological characteristics, and societal consequences. Smith, the author, provided a thorough assessment of the importance of play in children's lives, drawing on perspectives from both psychology and education. This information was relevant for educators, parents, and researchers who wanted to get a thorough understanding of the role of play in children's cognitive, emotional, and social development.

METHODOLOGY

Purposive sampling was considered appropriate for the research through a qualitative design due to the study's specific objectives and the need for the targeted selection of participants who could provide in-depth insights into the integration of curriculum and play-based learning in early childhood education in Montserrado County, Liberia.

Diversity Representation: Montserrado County exhibited diversity in terms of socio-economic status, geographic locations, and types of early childhood education centers. Purposive sampling allowed for intentional selection, ensuring representation from urban and rural areas, public and private institutions, and community-based centers.

Expertise and Experience: By purposively selecting early childhood education centers, the research aimed to include educators with varying levels of expertise and experience. This deliberate selection ensured a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and potentials associated with implementing an integrated curriculum via play-based learning.

Cultural Relevance: The use of purposive sampling allowed for the inclusion of centers that aligned with the cultural context of Montserrado County. This strategy ensured that the integrated curriculum that was developed was not only effective but also culturally sensitive and relevant.

Criteria:

Geographic Diversity

Centers were selected from both urban and rural areas within Montserrado County to capture potential variations in resources, community dynamics, and educational infrastructure.

Type of Institutions

Public, private, and community-based early childhood education centers were included to understand the implications of the integrated curriculum across different types of institutions.

Socio-Economic Diversity:

The socio-economic backgrounds of the communities surrounding the selected centers were considered to ensure representation from various economic strata.

Community Involvement

The level of community involvement in each center was assessed to understand how community dynamics may have impacted the acceptance and success of the integrated curriculum.

Educator Expertise

Centers with a mix of experienced and less-experienced educators were selected to measure the adaptability and effectiveness of the integrated curriculum across different skill levels.

Infrastructure and Resources

The availability of infrastructure and resources in each center was considered to analyze potential challenges and opportunities for implementing the integrated curriculum.

Sampling Criteria:

Define the criteria for selecting participants, considering factors such as:

Participants from various socioeconomic origins, geographic areas within Montserrado County, and a variety of early childhood education centers, including public, private, and community-based settings. It also requires the active engagement of educators, parents, and community leaders, ensuring a thorough investigation of the issues influencing early childhood education in the region

RESULT DAN DISCUSSION

Result

Theme 1: Play-Based Learning Engagement Levels and resources provider.

Play-Based Learning Engagement Levels	Presentation	Analysis	Intrepretation
Understand the engagement levels of educators in play-based learning	Visual representation of teacher facilitation strategies.	Identified a strong theme of interactive play activities.	The engagement level of educators in play-based learning is a prominent theme. (Heang, Shah, Hashim, & Aliah, 2021).
Resource Provider by educator in play-based learning	Bar chart depicting variations in resource utilization.	Highlighted discrepancies in resource access across centers.	Limited resource access suggests potential challenges in providing a consistent play-based experience. (Pyle, Poliszczuk, & Danniels, 2018)

This table provides a structured presentation of the study's objective, along with the corresponding presentation, analysis, and interpretation for the theme of Play-Based Learning Engagement Levels.

Theme 2: Cognitive Development Outcomes.

Cognitive Development Outcomes	Presentation	Analysis	Intrepretation
Explore cognitive development improvements over time.	Line graph illustrating cognitive development improvement over time.	Identified substantial improvements in problem-solving skills.	Play-based learning contributes positively to cognitive development (Ali, Constantino, Hussain, & Akhtar, 2018)
Socio-Emotional Development	Age-wise comparison of cognitive gains.	Recognized age-related differences in cognitive gains.	Acknowledged the need for age-sensitive implementation strategies (Waterworth, Chignell, & Moller, 2020)

This table structure provides a clear alignment between the study's objective and the corresponding presentation, analysis, and interpretation for the theme of Cognitive Development Outcomes.

Theme 3: Socio-Economic Factors

Theme3: Socio-Economic Factors	Presentation	Analysis	Intrepretation
Examine the impact of socio-economic factors on the effectiveness of play-based learning.	Parental involvement visualized through charts.	Recognized the correlation between parental involvement and cognitive outcomes.	Socio-economic factors play a role in parental involvement and resource availability (Khakiti, 2013).
Access to Resources for play based learning.	Socio-economic background impact on resource access.	Noted economic barriers affecting resource access.	Implications for tailoring interventions based on economic contexts of play based in ECE (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015).

This table structure provides a clear alignment between the study's objective and the corresponding presentation, analysis, and interpretation for the theme of Socio-Economic Factors.

Theme 4: Community Perceptions.

Community Perceptions	Presentation	Analysis	Intrepretation
Explore community attitudes towards play-based learning	Word cloud representing community attitudes.	Positive sentiments expressed toward play-based learning.	Overall positive community support with cultural considerations (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2001).
Cultural Acceptance	Bar chart illustrating cultural relevance ratings.	Identified reservations about shifting from traditional methods.	Acknowledged the need for addressing concerns about pedagogical shifts (Vartuli & Rohs, 2009).

This table structure provides a clear alignment between the study's objective and the corresponding presentation, analysis, and interpretation for the theme of Community Perceptions.

Theme 5: Implementation Challenges.

Implementation Challenges	Presentation	Analysis	Interpretation
Identify challenges in the implementation of play-based learning.	Bar chart depicting teacher comfort levels.	Noted varying levels of comfort among educators.	Teacher training is crucial for successful implementation (Pyle, Poliszczuk, & Danniels, 2018).
Materials, Resources AND Budget Allocation	Infographic highlighting infrastructure and resource gaps.	Identified challenges related to infrastructure and resource availability.	Urgent need for addressing infrastructure and resource gaps in ECE (Imchen & Ndem, 2020).

This table structure provides a clear alignment between the study's objective and the corresponding presentation, analysis, and interpretation for the theme of Implementation Challenges.

Theme 6: Recommendations for Improvement

Recommendations for Improvement	Presentation	Analysis	Intrepretation
Identify areas for improvement in play-based learning implementation.	List of recommendations generated through participant feedback.	Noted recurring themes in recommendations.	Recommendations focus on continuous professional development and resource allocation (Peleman et al., 2018).
Design infographics that combine visual elements, icons, and text to convey prioritized areas of improvement.	Visual representation of prioritized improvement areas in ECE	Identified priority areas based on participant consensus.	Highlighted the importance of ongoing support in key areas ECE (Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2022).

This table structure provides a clear alignment between the study's objective and the corresponding presentation, analysis, and interpretation for the theme of Recommendations for Improvement.

Discussion

Presentation

During the presentation, various dimensions of Play-Based Learning were explored, leveraging visual representations to convey essential insights. The engagement level in Play-Based Learning was showcased, emphasizing teacher facilitation strategies. A visual depiction of resource utilization variations was presented through a bar chart, providing a comprehensive view of the landscape. Furthermore, a line graph illustrated cognitive development improvement over time, emphasizing the trajectory of progress. Age-wise cognitive gains and the role of parental involvement were effectively communicated through charts, offering a comparative analysis. An insightful examination of the impact of socio-economic backgrounds on resource access was highlighted through visual elements.

The presentation delved into community attitudes using a word cloud, capturing the essence of perceptions surrounding Play-Based Learning. Cultural relevance was assessed and presented via table, shedding light on the significance of cultural considerations. Teacher comfort levels were explored through a bar chart, providing valuable insights into the educators' perspectives. An infographic was employed to draw attention to infrastructure and resource gaps, offering a clear visual representation. Additionally, a list of recommendations, generated from participant feedback, was presented to address identified areas for improvement. The visual representation concluded with a holistic overview, emphasizing prioritized improvement areas to guide future initiatives.

Analysis

During the analysis, a dominant theme emerged, emphasizing the significance of interactive play activities as a core component of the learning experience. Discrepancies in resource access across different centers were identified, shedding light on potential

inequities within the educational landscape. The examination also revealed notable improvements in problem-solving skills, indicating the positive impact of play-based learning on cognitive development. Age-related differences in cognitive gains were recognized, offering valuable insights into the varied developmental trajectories of participants. A notable correlation between parental involvement and enhanced cognitive outcomes was observed, underscoring the role of family engagement in children's learning experiences. Economic barriers affecting resource access were identified, highlighting challenges that needed consideration for effective program implementation.

Positive sentiments were expressed by participants toward the adoption of play-based learning, emphasizing its perceived benefits. However, reservations were noted among some stakeholders regarding the transition from traditional teaching methods. The analysis also highlighted varying levels of comfort among educators, suggesting the need for tailored professional development initiatives. Challenges related to infrastructure and resource availability were identified as key impediments to the seamless integration of play-based learning. Throughout the analysis, recurring themes in recommendations emerged, reflecting the collective insights of participants. Finally, based on participant consensus, priority areas were identified, offering a strategic focus for future interventions and improvements.

Interpretation

A significant theme that emerged from the data was the high level of engagement among educators in play-based learning, emphasizing its prominence within educational practices. The observation of limited resource access across various contexts pointed to potential challenges in maintaining a consistent play-based learning experience. Despite these challenges, the data consistently indicated the positive impact of play-based learning on cognitive development, underscoring its effectiveness. The recognition of the need for age-sensitive implementation strategies emphasized a nuanced approach to cater to the diverse developmental stages of learners. The influence of socio-economic factors on both parental involvement and resource availability implied the importance of tailoring interventions based on economic contexts.

The structured table presentation effectively aligned with the study's objective, providing a clear path from presentation to analysis and interpretation, particularly concerning the theme of Socio-Economic Factors. The overall positive community support for play-based learning, coupled with cultural considerations, signified a favorable environment for implementation. However, there was an acknowledgment of concerns about pedagogical shifts, emphasizing the importance of addressing these apprehensions for successful adoption. The interpretation highlighted the crucial role of teacher training in ensuring the effective implementation of play-based learning.

The urgent need to address infrastructure and resource gaps was a key takeaway, pointing towards critical areas for improvement. The recommendations derived from the data predominantly focused on continuous professional development for educators and strategic resource allocation. The interpretation underscored the importance of ongoing support in key areas to facilitate the sustained success of play-based learning initiatives.

Findings

The study on the effectiveness of a play-based learning curriculum in Montserrado County, Liberia, revealed promising trends in early childhood education. Play-based learning engagement among educators was evident, demonstrating a commitment to interactive teaching strategies. However, resource disparities posed challenges, impacting the uniform implementation of the curriculum. Age-related variations in cognitive development outcomes emphasized the need for tailored approaches for different age groups. Socio-economic factors played a significant role, with parental involvement positively correlated with cognitive outcomes. While the community supported play-based learning, reservations existed, requiring careful navigation for a successful transition. Implementation challenges, including teacher comfort levels and resource constraints, highlighted areas for targeted interventions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study underscores the positive impact of play-based learning on cognitive development in Montserrado County. To optimize this approach, addressing resource inequalities, providing targeted professional development, and fostering community engagement are essential. Recommendations include continuous teacher training, strategic resource allocation, and community awareness programs to ensure the successful integration of a play-based learning curriculum in early childhood education in Montserrado County.

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