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Play-based pedagogy: An approach to advance young children's holistic development

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Background: Children's holistic development includes physical, cognitive, socio-emotional, moral and affective development and lies in early childhood development education (ECDE). According to research, children learn through different age-appropriate teaching and learning pedagogies. Therefore, the importance of implementing a play-based methodology in the early years. This study was underpinned by the theory of play as a spiral of learning.

Aim: This study aimed to demonstrate how a play-based pedagogy could be utilised to enhance holistic development in young children.

Setting: Three ECD centres in Gauteng, South Africa participated in the Thutopapadi (play-based learning) research. The action learning set (ALS) consisted of one Grade R teacher and two practitioners; the Grade R facilitator and three North-West University researchers.

Methods: We employed a qualitative approach within the participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) design to interrogate the extent to which a play-based pedagogy could be useful in enhancing the holistic development of young children. Transcriptions of meetings held by the ALS and photovoice were used to generate data. The participants reflected on and communicated about themes discussed during the ALS. We used the principles of thematic content analysis to analyse the generated data.

Results: The results of this study proposed that to support holistic development in young children, practitioners and parents should maximise the use of a play-based methodology in both social and learning environments.

Conclusion: Follow-ups should be made to ensure that the pedagogy that is being used in early childhood development education centres corresponds with the needs for the development of young children.

Keywords: holistic development; PALAR; play-based pedagogy; young children; early learning.

Introduction

The play-based pedagogy is an approach that can be dated back to the late 19th century. Froebel was the first to figure out the educational benefits of play in a formal way in the 1890s (Eberle 2014; Ogunyemi & Ragpot 2016). In an attempt to explain the significance of play in education, Froebel designed a series of educational toys called 'Froebel's gifts', which he believed to help with children's cognitive development (Froebel 1887). Later, Maria Montessori added to the development of Froebel's idea when she promoted play in her approach to early childhood education where she introduced a hands-off approach to play, viewing the practitioner as an unobtrusive observer (Bassok, Latham & Rorem 2016). The above ideas imply that young children can learn best when they are engaged in uninterrupted play.

Han et al. (2015) state that in the 1920s, Steiner-Waldorf advocated for play in education where the practitioner was regarded as a very domineering member of play. This educative style, based on Rudolf Steiner's educational philosophy, suggested the provision of momentous structure in the play setting, which led children's games and the practitioner to be the 'chief storyteller' in the classroom. The Reggio Emilia approach (1950s–1970s), in turn, emphasises the active participation of the practitioner during play with the children in a valuable, co-learning atmosphere by sitting alongside children and facilitating play (Dotson-Renta 2016; Ogunyemi & Ragpot 2016). Nicholson (2019), as well as Bassok et al. (2016), state that the Forest Schools' methodology (1990s to present)

Notes: Special Collection: Early Childhood Development in Theory and Practice.

emerged in Scandinavia and spread throughout the world in the 1990s and 2000s. Notably, the Forest Schools' approach encourages outdoor play activities, which are regarded as highly tolerant for risk taking so that children can challenge themselves and develop self-reliance in unstructured outdoor environments.

Considering the approaches mentioned in the previous paragraph, play-based pedagogy is explained by Eberle (2014) and Christie and Roskos (2015) as a comprehensive incentive that may be the most substantial element contributing towards the well-being and development of young children within their early years of life. This implies that play-based pedagogy is essential to children's growth and development. Both Zosh et al. (2018) and Han et al. (2015) emphasise that playing supports the holistic development of young children by equipping them with skills to resolve problems, to communicate and interact with others, to build friendships and relationships with peers and significant adults, to develop fine and gross motor skills and to learn the self-regulation skills needed to grow and learn. Holistic development refers to all areas of development in the young child, such as the moral, affectionate, physical, intellectual (cognitive), emotional and social development, as well as language development, to help meet the demands and challenges of daily life (Lombard & Du Toit 2021).

We regarded a play-based pedagogy to be significant in supporting learning in early childhood education. When children play with peers or adults, they learn essential skills to help them grow and be ready to face and succeed in the daily challenges and demands of life, such as learning and socialising. During play activities, children's moral skills can be developed when they learn to understand the feelings and emotions of others. They also learn how to deal with emotions such as anger, sadness and disappointment. Fine and gross motor skills are supported by play activities such as cutting, pasting and colouring (fine motor skills) and climbing, running and skipping (gross motor skills). Play develops intellectual skills when play activities that support children's critical, creative, problem-solving, logical and analytical thinking skills are carried out. When children play in groups, they learn to communicate, cooperate and interact with others, socially and emotionally. As language and speech are an integral part of child development, children learn to master language skills, such as enhanced vocabulary, sentence structure, following instructions and conveying their messages effectively (Stach & Veldsman 2021). According to Christie and Roskos (2015) and Zosh et al. (2018), play-orientated early childhood programmes are chief contributors to long-term academic gains because they allow children to be creative through the course of developing their resourcefulness, dexterousness and physical, cognitive and emotional strengths. Thus, it is suggested that children should engage and interact with the world around them through play at a very early age.

Despite many constructive endorsements for a play-based pedagogy, it is not as valuable for all children, and play is not always a biological or a spur-of-the-moment activity in children's homes and community cultures. Some children are quite unfortunate to have abundant available resources and live in virtual peace, but they do not receive many opportunities to enjoy the full benefits of play (Han et al. 2015; Ogunyemi & Ragpot 2016). In most cases, such children are brought up in a manner that is progressively hassled and pressured to the extent that they may constrain the protective benefits they would gain from child-driven play. Ali et al. (2018), Eberle (2014) and Nthontho (2017) suggest that the environment in which these children are living may be a limiting factor for free play. As playful learning promotes the physical, cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes essential for school reading and academic success (Han et al. 2015; Zosh et al. 2018), schools are responsible for endorsing a play-based pedagogy to support children's holistic development.

Child development occurs from the bottom up. This means that the foundational sensory skills (see, hear, feel, touch, smell and taste) must be mastered before the next developmental step can be integrated, resulting in being able to do more and more as one grows (Lombard & Du Toit 2021). The brain of the young child acts on a sensory stimulus that sends information through the sensory pathways to the brain, which connect at various levels for the child to make sense of his or her world. As children aged 0–9 years are most receptive to learning during play and exploration, a play-based pedagogy is globally regarded as the best approach to learning in the early years (Burgemeester 2019). Based on the above views regarding the significance of a play-based pedagogy in the holistic development of children in early childhood development and education (ECDE) centres, we feel that it is crucial to understand different types of play that can be of considerable use in the teaching of young children. In the current study, we emphasise six types of play, namely dramatic play, fantasy play, exploratory play, manipulative play, small-world play and games with rules (Christie & Roskos 2015; Han et al. 2015; Nicholson 2019).

Both Honeyford and Boyd (2015), as well as Nthontho (2017), maintain that dramatic play usually involves the use of instructional play-based strategies, such as dramatising a conversant story, role-playing community and family members; hence, it includes multiple participants. This type of play is considered to be important in the development of moral values amongst young children. Frost (2015), Christie and Roskos (2015) and Ali, Chowdhury and Obaydullah (2019) explain that during dramatisation, some societal norms and values will be emphasised to all the people, including the actors and the audience. Children's sense of affection is also developed during playtime (Ali et al. 2019). This study regards dramatic play as beneficial when teaching young children.

Fantasy play, also known as make-believe play, pretend play, role play, dramatic play, representational play, imaginary play, imaginative play or socio-dramatic play, is a valuable play-based strategy where a child takes on a pretend role alone (dramatic play) or where the child interacts and communicates with another child, children or adult who is also in a pretend role (Van Heerden & Esterhuizen 2021). Although fantasy play is pretence and make-believe, it can also be grounded in reality (Brewer 2014). We believe that fantasy play is a tool in the development of the social aspects of children, such as language development and intrapersonal development where they learn to associate with other children. This means that these are best to be used in the language subject and life skills. Barnett and Owens (2015), Frost (2015) and Honeyford and Boyd (2015) stress that verbal communication, high levels of social and interaction skills, the creative use of play materials, imaginative and divergent thinking skills and problem-solving capabilities in children are enhanced through play. This opinion is a clear indication that activities that are posed in a play-based pedagogy have a hypothetical lead towards progressively more complex forms of learning, skills and understanding, predominantly in the cognitive and social domains.

Another type of play is exploratory play, where children have no objective other than exploration. Young children do some experimentation with available resources, such as digital tools, prisms, magnifying glasses and materials such as clay and water colours (Bateson & Martin 2013; Nicholson 2019). As exploring and playing often go hand in hand, it is evident that a play-based pedagogy is a hands-on type of play that can be used to teach subjects such as mathematics and science to young children.

In manipulative play, young children work with parts within materials, including building sets, puzzles, lumps or blocks, beads, and so forth (Christie & Roskos 2015). This type of play not only develops fine motor skills but also sharpens the problem-solving skills of young children. Through the manipulation of different materials, young children will also do some movement, which is essential for physical and gross motor development. Small-world play is another very interesting type of play that is useful for the development of young children. Whitebread and Basilio (2013) and Barnett and Owens (2015) explain it as a play method that utilises minuscule paraphernalia, including small collectables, animals, fixtures and trays. There is a very close relationship between manipulative play and small-world play.

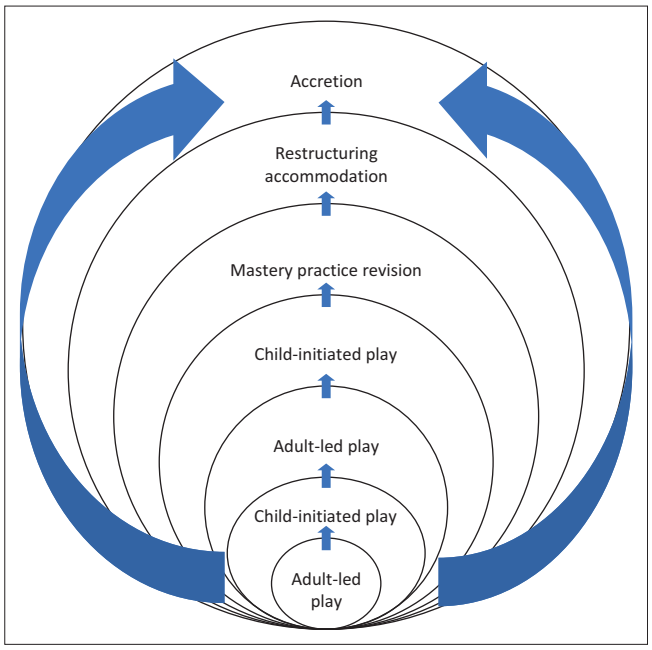
Games with rules can also be used to teach young children (Ali et al. 2019). This type of play may incorporate board games that focus on developing specific concepts, such as shapes, colours, letters, sounds and counting (Bassok et al. 2016; Nthontho 2017), and they are sometimes constructed by young children by negotiating rules to be followed therein. All these kinds of play are crucial in the holistic development of children. Researchers such as Ali et al. (2019), Barnett and Owens (2015), Cheng (2011) and Honeyford and Boyd (2015) have validated the formidable connections that exist between play and the gaining of skills in the different subject areas, such as mathematics, literacy, science and information and computer technology, during the early years of learning.

In the understanding of the above information, it is fundamental to acknowledge that a play-based pedagogy has the possibility of facilitating the transmission of knowledge from one subject area to another (Frost 2015; Whitebread & Basilio 2013). This means that young children make part of a discourse community in which meanings, intentions and activities are communicated through mediating means. Barnett and Owens (2015) further the view that a play-based pedagogy has great possibilities for creating both educational and social enhancement amongst young children, as they can reproduce and go beyond what is given. This implies that a play-based pedagogy offers a transition between the possible and the actual. For this reason, we argue that a play-based pedagogy is a child-centred approach that promotes the holistic development of children by following their natural inquisitive and explorative disposition as it connects them to learning situations and capabilities (see Bateson & Martin 2013).

In this context, it is important for practitioners to collaborate with parents in enhancing the utilisation of play so that young children can develop holistically. When parents are actively involved in their children's development and early education, they tend to stay involved throughout their school career. Parental involvement not only supports the child's development but also improves learning outcomes, because it gives them a complete picture of the child's progress and enables them to address possible developmental problems as they appear (Spreeuwenberg 2019). Frost (2015) highlights that parents greatly contribute to preparing children for pre- and primary school. We consider them (parents) to be principally the first educators in a child's life as they support children's play at home and encourage learning before any formal education; therefore, parents enhance young children's learning. Ali et al. (2019) and Ali et al. (2018) reveal that most parents appreciate play, but they do not have clear and specific knowledge of the benefits of play in children's development. Therefore, the focus of this study is to support a play-based pedagogy towards the holistic development of young children in South Africa. The following section will deliberate on the theoretical framing of this study.

Theoretical framing of the study

This study was framed on the theory of play as a spiral of learning, which was propounded by Moyles in 1989 (see Figure 1). We conducted this study following the idea of teaching and learning being illustrated in the theory of play as a spiral of learning (Moyles 1989; Wood 2010). The idea allows young children to explore themselves in two phases of play, namely free play and guided play. The idea stresses the fact that any subject can be learnt at different interludes. Therefore, the phases used in this study followed the ideas that are proposed in the spiral learning theory. In this sense, we found the framework to be very important in advancing the holistic development of young children. The first free play permits



Source: Adapted from Moyles, J., 1989, *Just playing? The role and status of play in early childhood education*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes

FIGURE 1: The theory of play as a spiral of learning.

children to take the lead in the game where they explore and create their own game with no assistance from the adults. In the following phase, adults (practitioner and parents) take the lead in modelling processes, guiding and directing the child's play and assessment in a more structured method (Bruce 2011; Mourao 2014; Swanwick 2016). Interestingly, continuously repeating the two processes is crucial because it leads children to gain new skills that are necessary for their development. Portiková (2015) and Robinson, Mourão and Kang (2015) add that repeated, child-initiated and guided play supports young children to discover more; learning then becomes easy as the material is reinforced and they get more practice that facilitates total development. This theory is relevant to this study, as it includes adults as significant figures in using a play-based pedagogy approach when teaching young children. Below is a schematic representation of the theory.

The schematic figures shows the development of children from the bottom to the top. The above schematic figure entails that knowledge and skills are progressively accrued (Mourao 2014; Swanwick 2016), as the play spiral is repeated several times. Therefore, through spiral play, young children become more and more familiar with different activities, which supports their holistic development. Wood (2010) explains spiral play to be good, as it provides a balance between child-led and adult-led activities, which have a positive impact on learners' development and autonomy. Therefore, in this study, we view the theory of play as a spiral of learning to be very relevant to the study because it can allow the practitioner to realise the strong and weak points of the young child by continuously repeating the two phases and converging the weak areas for development. The theory of play as a spiral of learning places play at the centre of the early childhood curriculum (Bruce 2011; Portiková 2015). Although Mourao (2014) and Swanwick (2016) argue that child-initiated play is essential in children's development, in this study, we regarded both free play and guided play as important in the learning of children. Therefore, we used this theory to demonstrate that a play-based pedagogy is the best approach towards the holistic development of young children. The preceding focuses on the methodology that was used in the current study to address the main research question: How can a play-based pedagogy be utilised to enhance holistic development in young children?

Research methods and design

Bertram and Christiansen (2020) believe that qualitative studies allow participants to create their own knowledge within experiences. In this study, we used a qualitative research approach because the purpose of the research was to investigate the views of participants on the way a play-based pedagogy supports the holistic development of young children. Choosing a qualitative approach as the starting point, we employed a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) method as the research design because Wood (2020) explains that within a PALAR design, participants are encouraged to think collaboratively about phenomena. Participatory action learning and action research allowed us to engage in the study as observers, critical reflectors and participants to explore the role of play-based learning (PBL) in the holistic development of young children.

Research design

Participatory action learning and action research was deemed suitable for the study because we could participate as equal partners in the process of action learning whilst facilitating the research process, as suggested by Wood (2020). Zuber-Skerritt (2015) point out that PALAR promotes sustainability because participants who are engaged in this type of research are provided with the opportunity to develop skills and knowledge to continue working on their own whilst also learning about the value of collaboration and caring for others. Eight participants were purposively selected to form the action learning set (ALS). An ALS is a small group that plans and chooses how the process will go forward when the members discuss issues and reflect on ideas of previous meetings (Morrison 2017). In our ALS, we followed Wood's (2020) advice to collaborate as equal partners when we discover, reason, think critically and reflect on the way a play-based approach could support the holistic development of young children. The three R's of PALAR (Zuber-Skerrit 2019) guided the interaction of the participants in the ALS, namely having a trusting relationship, continuous critical reflection and recognition of the learning and knowledge generated by the participants.

Context of the study

The ALS was formed by one gatekeeper, two Setswana-speaking Grade R practitioners and one English Grade R

TABLE 1: Biographical details of the research participants.

Pseudonyms	Gender	Age group	Ethnic group	Designation
P1	F	45+	isiZulu	Grade R facilitator
P2	F	45+	English	Grade R practitioner
P3	F	45+	Sesotho	Practitioner and centre manager
P4	F	35	Sesotho	Practitioner
P5	M	35	Shona	Researcher
P6	F	45+	Afrikaans	Researcher
P7	F	45+	Afrikaans	Researcher
P8	F	45+	Afrikaans	Researchers

M, male; F, female.

practitioner from the Sedibeng EastDistrict in Gauteng, South Africa. In addition, one Shona-speaking and three Afrikaans-speaking participants from the university also participated in the ALS (see Table 1). An independent gatekeeper, a person known to all the participants, was requested to purposively select participants. The role of the gatekeeper was to negotiate directly with the research participants and to act as an objective mediator to enhance trust amongst the members of the ALS (see Wood 2020). In addition, the gatekeeper screened all the correspondence from the researchers to ensure objectivity.

Table 1 reflects the diversity of the South African context, including the different languages spoken by the participants, namely English Afrikaans, Shona, Sesotho and Setswana. One of the participants suggested using the Sesotho word *thutopapadi* (meaning 'PBL') to define the ALS. One male and seven female participants participated in the study, with ages varying from 35 to 45 years.

Because of governmental restrictions during the lockdown, online sessions (via Zoom), each lasting 45 min – 60 min, allowed the ALS to think collaboratively about ways PBL could support the holistic development of young children. The PALAR process usually consists of more than one cycle where a research question is addressed during each cycle (Wood 2020). We employed three cycles (four sessions per cycle) in which the secondary research questions were addressed. In Cycle 1, the ALS addressed the first secondary question: How well-equipped are teachers and departmental officials regarding knowledge of and skills in PBL in ECDE?

During this cycle, a relationship session was organised to negotiate needs, discuss the mutual purpose and determine the roles and responsibilities in the ALS. The recorded ALS discussions were used to generate data.

Cycle 2 began with a reflection on Cycle 1 to determine any new needs that the participants had identified. Then we addressed the second research question: How can the capacity for PBL in ECDE be strengthened through a collaborative approach amongst stakeholders?

Photovoice was used to generate data.It is a visual data generation method to help participants to reflect on and communicate issues in an ALS (Budig et al. 2018). Cycle 3 began with a relationship-building session to reflect on the themes that had surfaced during Cycle 2. The ALS then addressed the third research question: What guidelines can be developed to inform training to increase the capacity of PBL for ECDE? During this cycle, recorded ALS discussions were used to generated data.

Data analysis and ethics

During each cycle, Braun and Clarke (2013) six-phase thematic analysis method was used to analyse the data. First, we familiarised ourselves with the data by gaining an overview of what had been collected. Then we used coding to highlight different sections, which included phrases or sentences. Thereafter, we could generate themes by identifying patterns in the codes. Then we were able to review the themes to ensure that we had identified them accurately. We then defined the themes and described and named them to make sure that they would be easily understood. Writing up the themes was the last phase to ensure that we could display the themes in a written report.

Integrity was ensured by following the five quality indicators as set out by Herr and Anderson (2005), namely outcome validity to determine to what extent our actions solved the problem; process validity to explain how lifelong learning could be promoted; democratic validity by making sure that all the participants participated equally; catalytic validity to make sure that transformation had taken place; and dialogic validity to make sure that reflection took place.

The ethics committee of the university and the Department of Education of the Gauteng province granted ethical clearance and permission to conduct this low-risk research project. According to the vision and principles of PALAR, participants should be well informed and committed and feel engaged (Zuber-Skerritt 2019), therefore, an ethical agreement was negotiated with the participants. Voluntary participation was ensured, and the participants were required to sign a letter of consent prior to participation. It was clearly explained that the participants could withdraw from the study at any time should they not feel comfortable with participating in the research. This ensured autonomy and respect, that the participants' contributions were respected and their voices were heard.

In the following section, the results will be presented in an integrated manner in response to the questions addressed by the ALS.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the North-West University, Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (EduREC) (No. NWU-01232-20-A2).

Results

The results of this empirical study are based on the main research question: How can a play-based pedagogy be

utilised to enhance the holistic development of young children? The results suggested that a play-based pedagogy is an indispensable pedagogy in the development of young children in all aspects of life, that is, moral, affectionate, physical, intellectual, emotional, social and language development. During the ALS discussions, the participants explained play-based pedagogy as follows:

> 'Children are learning in a playful manner … so the play should be structured so that we [*practitioners*] can [*be*] looking at something they want to develop in the children … It is not as rigid as the formal methods used for learners in higher grades. Yes, they should not be subjected to a situation that will allow them to think or realise that they are learning, though it [*learning*] is really happening informally in a playful way. This is important because it is less stressful to the children.' (P1: 45+ year old isiZulu Grade R facilitator)

We regard P1's opinion to be centred on the informal way of learning that should take place through the use of play-way methods when teaching young children. This implies that the participant consigns a play-based pedagogy to be very important for the development of young children. P7 shared her sentiments as follows:

> 'I want to agree with Anna that it is a small or three words, which entail everything, I see it as you're strengthening many areas of development of the child. We normally refer to "holistic development."' (45+ year old Afrikaans researcher)

Based on the voice of P7 above, it is suggested that a play-based pedagogy is a tool that is the backbone of the development of children during their early years. The two views were concurred by P5 who explained as follows:

> 'They learn through play while they don't realise that there are a lot of all of [*sic*] activities, they are doing to develop themselves intellectually, socially, emotionally, morally and physically… I see it is quite a fundamental methodology or approach that seeks to develop a child holistically. At the end, it is time for us as educators, researchers, to learn from those activities, as small children will be doing.' (35 year old Shona researcher)

The participant emphasised the fact that a play-based pedagogy involved many activities that were useful in helping young children's holistic development. This resonates with the types of play as highlighted earlier in the introduction of this study.

The views from participants denote the significance of the utilisation of a play-based pedagogy approach in supporting the holistic development of young children. This idea resonates with the theoretical framework used in this study, which emphasise the importance of child-initiated play and guided play in developing different domains of young children. Moreover, the literature reviewed earlier in this study explained six different types of games that are helpful in supporting child development (Christie & Roskos 2015; Han et al. 2015; Nicholson 2019). The emphasis of the data above leads to themes identified by the ALS that indicate that a play-based pedagogy may support the moral development of young children, because children learn social skills during play. Children's sense of affection may also be supported by a play-based pedagogy, as children may feel that they belong when playing with other children and adults. Play improves physical development and skills in children. Fine, as well as gross motor skills develop when children participate in play activities. A play-based pedagogy may support the cognitive or intellectual skills of children. The reason be that children may come across activities that develop critical and creative thinking and problem solving. The ALS discussion also pointed towards the value of play for socio-emotional development. Children learn social-appropriate behaviour, such as waiting their turn, when they play. Emotional skills are also developed, because they learn that you must share and cannot always be the winner during games. Language development improve as children learn new concepts and how to participate in a conversation. In the following section, we discuss six themes that derived from the study in detail.

Theme 1: A play-based pedagogy and the moral development of young children

Young children acquire many moral values as they play with their peers (Klim-Klimaszewska 2015). The participants reported that playing different games might enhance young children's moral development. In response to the question that sought to understand how play could support moral development, P3 had the following view:

> 'Through play-way methods, I believe it's where the kids are being able to play freely and learn some societal values.' (45+ year old Sesotho practitioner and centre manager)

We understood the following opinion to value a play-based pedagogy instead of ignoring the importance of children learning the standards, principles and ethics of their societies:

> 'To me, play-based learning should actually start at home from the very beginning, where children role-play what they see happening in their immediate environment under the guidance of parents … As practitioners, we will continue to direct the children to plays which teach them things which are acceptable in the school community and at home, not necessarily to give them pencils to start writing.' (P2: 45+ year old English Grade R practitioner)

In addition to societal beliefs, P2 explained play to be initiated at home where parents are at the centre of teaching their children acceptable morals, which will equally become the responsibility of practitioners too. She emphasised all the teaching and learning to be done in a play-way manner. P1 echoed the same thoughts:

> 'Yes, you can instil good behaviour among young children through engaging in different games. They need to be occupied greatly as early enough for them to learn by observing each other during play.' (45+ year old isiZulu Grade R facilitator)

The data presented under Theme 1 suggest a mutual agreement amongst the participants that moral development amongst young children can be advanced with PBL. Presented below are data that emphasise the idea that play can lead to the development of a sense of affection amongst young children.

Theme 2: Developing young children's sense of affection through play

The use of a play-based pedagogy in teaching young children helps to develop their sense of love and belonging (Denise 2019). During the ALS discussions, the participants confirmed that young children's sense of affection was developed during play. One of the participants shared the following:

> 'Play really assists in making young children share materials with each other, which leads to the sense of love to one another.' (P5: 35 year old Shona researcher)

This viewpoint accentuates the aspect of caring for one another being perpetuated by play amongst young children. We regard this to be a very important component as caring is a focal expression of Ubuntu (humanity amongst others), which is key to human life. The aspect of caring develops even before the sense of affection develops (Cherry 2021). Only when children receive nurturing care, they will develop a sense of affection. In the same sense, P2 shared:

> 'You know, I really think play-based learning makes children to [*sic*] feel that they are a family with their peers, and if the practitioners are also involved in the games, it shows that they love the children; therefore, even the development wise [*sic*], it becomes easy for the young kids.' (45+ year old English Grade R practitioner)

P2 explained that positive relationships between children and adults would lead to the development of affection. From this understanding, we derive that a sense of affection can be highly developed in young children through play. Our next theme discusses the development of physical skills through a play-based pedagogy.

Theme 3: A play-based pedagogy towards young children's physical development

Physical development is integral to the holistic development of young learners because it is a starting point for learning (Krog 2013). According to the generated data, children's physical growth is enhanced when they engage in play. P5 presented a photovoice example (Figure 2) to illustrate the importance of play in enhancing the physical development of young children:



Source: Perez-Llantada, M.P. & Woldesenbet, M., 2019, *Self-made playground: The house of the lost children*, viewed 26 April 2022, from https://thecityateyelevel.com/app/uploads/2019/11/SELF-MADE.pdf

FIGURE 2: Example of photovoice to illustrate physical development.

> 'This picture shows a play centre where young children can play. Although it may be of a low standard, it shows that parents were involved in creating and constructing a playground from recycled material. The children now have equipment to play on and practise different aspects of their development, especially physical development.' (35 year old Shona researcher)

The picture and the explanation given by P5 explicitly demonstrate that when young children are engaged in an outdoor activity, it fundamentally has a positive impact on their physical development. Importantly, whilst children are playing on their own, the practitioner should be monitoring the process in order to avoid any harm to the learners. P7 gave the following response:

> 'As children play, they develop strong bodies and minds … so outdoor activities are a significant part of their play. That is why there are supposed to be play centres that are well equipped so that children can play.' (P7: 45+ year old Afrikaans researcher)

With the above response, P7 concurred with P5 on the importance of outdoor activities for toddlers. Furthermore, P7 emphasised that play centres needed to have enough equipment for children to use. P1 emphasised the importance of some of the activities that young children engage in whilst they are indoors:

> 'We give them crayons to make their finger muscles strong and get [*them*] used to controlling and gripping the pencil. They will then be given play activities for them to colour different objects. I see it to be so important for the children.' (45+ year old isiZulu Grade R facilitator)

Based on the verbatim transcriptions of the participants, we argue that a play-based pedagogy is crucial for the physical development of young children; hence we advocate for the implementation thereof, as explained in the theoretical framework of this study, namelyplay as a spiral of learning. The next theme focuses on the intellectual development of young children versus play.

Theme 4: Play versus the intellectual development of young children

It is believed that for children to develop intellectually, they should be taught in an environment where formal methodologies are used to teach children to read and write. In as far as this belief can contribute to intellectual development, we argue for a play-based pedagogy as a catalyst for the intellectual development of young children, as supported by empirical evidence from the practitioners and researchers who participated in this study. The participants made the following contribution regarding the matter:

> 'Play-way methods enhance active learning, exploratory skills and critical thinking among Grade R learners. They can have different types of play – creative, imaginative, pretend – which are functional and enjoyable learning experiences.' (P7: 45+ year old Afrikaans researcher)

> 'I think play-based learning is quite a fundamental method in the sense that it really caters for young children who do have a very short concentration span.' (P4: 35 year old Sesotho practitioner)

The two utterances above emphasise the fact that when young children play, they develop creativity. This entails that creativity materialises when critical thinking and cognitive skills development come together to generate something new or different:

> 'The homework that we give them is playing with a puzzle, cutting pictures, bringing it to class the next day. This is all to make sure that children master certain concepts which are essential in all the [*sic*] three subjects taught at this level rather than making them stand alone.' (P2: 45+ year old English Grade R practitioner)

We understood the aforementioned opinion to mean that parents should contribute to enhancing intellectual development through play. This shows that there must be proper communication between parents and practitioners for meaningful implementation of a play-based pedagogy as a tool for holistic development. P5 gave the following response:

> 'Play-based learning encourages [*the*] transfer of learning, where all those [*sic*] three subjects might be taught in one play-based activity. What they have learnt is not transferred to mathematics or life skillsony, but those subjects are intertwined. They should not be presented separately.' (P5: 35 year old Shona researcher)

The above statement explains that young children learn different concepts whilst they are engaging in a specific type of play. This is an important aspect that leads to cognitive development. Through this, young children may be able to relate what they did during play to concepts in different learning areas. This idea echoes the literature that indicates that a play-based pedagogy facilitates the movement of knowledge from one learning area to another (Frost 2015; Whitebread & Basilio 2013). According to P1, children do not read the words, but they read pictures and narrate what is going on there:

> 'I think the Department of Basic Education workbooks work very relevant to play-based learning. In that workbook there are stickers and pictures which are very good for developing different skills; for example, they look at the pictures and they can tell you what happened in the story in their own words. They can also cut and paste pictures or stickers on the spaces provided in the workbook.' (P1: 45+ year old isiZulu Grade R facilitator)

The next theme focuses on the social and emotional development of young children through play.

Theme 5: The social and emotional development of young children is a result of a play-based pedagogy

During the ALS discussion, we found that the use of a play-based pedagogy was also essential for the development of social and emotional skills amongst young children. The participants had the following to say:

> 'Play-way methods are very important in supporting our children to learn … social and emotional skills, which also lead to self-regulatory abilities … and cooperative learning, which is sometimes led by the adults.' (P7: 45+ year old Afrikaans researcher)

> 'As they play, life skills are part of teaching and learning. Yes! Through role-play, children will be learning social roles. Again, physical play also helps children develop tolerance skills, as well as stress and crankiness management.' (P1: 45+ year old isiZulu Grade R facilitator)

The two participants above share the understanding that play-way methods enrich the ability of young children to socialise and learn to control anxiety and a bad temper. In addition to that, two other participants gave the following responses:

> 'Through dramatic play, children imitate what other people in different societies, like practitioners, doctors, police officers, do, and that is very important for their socio-emotional being.' (P6: 45+ year old Afrikaans researcher)

> 'In the multicultural class, children learn from each other, from different cultures, become aware of different languages and cultural norms and values.' (P4: 35 year old Sesotho practitioner)

We comprehend their views to emphasise that a play-based pedagogy plays a significant role in transferring cultural beliefs from person to person. The next theme focuses on developing language skills amongst young children through play.

Theme 6: Developing language in young children through play

Language is a crucial part of every aspect of human life. With this understanding, the participants expressed their opinions regarding how language could be developed through a play-based pedagogy. Their responses are as follows:

> '[*A*] play-based [*method*] is there to develop language in the learners. If we can implement PBL [*play-based learning*] in [*the*] teaching of … young learners, they can easily develop the [*sic*] language.' (P5: 35 year old Shona researcher)

> 'The Department is making sure that schools have resources which they can use to enhance play among the children, meaning we are trying to reinforce the language of play through learning. Practitioners should use songs, rhymes and playful activities.' (P1: 45+ year old isiZulu Grade R facilitator)

> 'Play-based learning can be used for language problems.' (P6: 45+ year old Afrikaans researcher)

The three participants concur that language can easily and best be developed in young children through play. Interestingly, P1 confirmed that the Department of Education supported schools by providing equipment for the implementation of PBL. However, P2 opposed that opinion by giving the following response:

> 'I disagree that language can be developed in a short time. I still have kids who struggle with the language six months into the year … we do actions, facial gestures, body language, but they are still struggling with language. Language cannot be developed in a shorter time. When kids are with us, we use English, when they go

home, they speak their home languages. The language is difficult.' (45+ year old English Grade R practitioner)

From the response of P2, we picked up that practitioners were teaching young children in a formal way. Her expression 'we do actions, facial gestures, body language' shows that practitioners are the ones who use actions, gestures and body language when teaching; hence young children do not develop the language skills as expected.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to find out how a play-based pedagogy could be utilised to advance the holistic development of young children. The research question was answered by looking at the moral, affectionate, physical, intellectual, emotional, social and language development of the young child and how a play-based pedagogy could support these skills.

The participants view a play-based pedagogy as a teaching and learning strategy that concentrates on the development of multiple skills amongst young children. P1 stressed the point that a play-based pedagogy was not an inflexible method of teaching and learning. In this understanding, we (the authors) regard a play-based pedagogy as a child-friendly teaching and learning method. There is congruence between these views and the theoretical framing of this study, for Mourao (2014) and Swanwick (2016) explain that skills and knowledge are gradually acquired by young children as they play. Furthermore, P1 said that 'play should be structured'. These words emphasise the important role adults play in using a play-based pedagogy. We found this to be strongly connected to both the theory that emphasises that adult-led play is very useful to young children's development (Portiková 2015; Robinson et al. 2015). In addition, the literature that was reviewed in this study emphasised the roles of practitioners and parents in the implementation of a play-based pedagogy (Bateson & Martin 2013; Frost 2015). Our understanding from the empirical data is that a play-based pedagogy is key to young children's moral, affectionate, physical, intellectual, emotional, social and language development.

Theme 1: The empirical data show that a play-based pedagogy can support moral development amongst young children. P3 believes that a play-based pedagogy helps to teach societal values to young children, whilst P1 suggested that young children could learn good behaviour from a play-based pedagogy. This is supported by the literature, as Ali et al. (2019), Christie and Roskos (2015) and Frost (2015) stress that dramatic play is fundamental in demonstrating the norms and values of both the children's communities and the school. We concluded that a play-based pedagogy can play a vital role in developing the moral well-being of young children. P2 brought in the concept of parental and practitioner involvement in play. Drawing from the theory of play as a spiral of learning, as explained by Wood (2010) and Swanwick (2016), the role of adults is of great importance in the use of a play-based pedagogy when teaching young children. The literature also affirms that the involvement of adults in children's development cannot be overemphasised (Ali et al. 2018; Frost 2015). We, therefore, agree with the fact that a play-based pedagogy can promote moral development amongst young children.

Theme 2: P1 and P2 demonstrated an understanding of a play-based pedagogy as a method of teaching and learning for young children. Through our analysis of the two opinions, we identified that a play-based pedagogy has a great possibility of nurturing confidence in young children. We propose that although there is no supporting literature in this study regarding the building of confidence through play, a play-based pedagogy can enhance the ability of children to take risks and try new things on their own. This is in line with the theory of play as a spiral of learning, which stresses that child-initiated play is decisive for the development of young children (Mourao 2014; Swanwick 2016). This implies that children gain confidence by discovering that their desires are a priority to their parents or practitioners. Moreover, the involvement of adults in children's play is crucial because we believe that young children use adults as their source of security and love at home when they explore and learn. Hence, they gain self-assurance as they come across things they can do all on their own. Therefore, we put forward in this study that a play-based pedagogy is crucial for the development of affection amongst young children.

Theme 3: Based on the viewpoints of the participants, this study claims that a play-based pedagogy is useful for supporting young children's physical development. It is crucial that young children are exposed to both indoor and outdoor play activities. Bassok et al. (2016) and Nthontho (2017) support this idea, as they emphasise that games with rules should be used to teach young children within and outside the classroom. Indoor and outdoor play activities assist in developing the physical aspect of children. In this sense, we argue for active play by toddlers, as it is critical for their physical development. Games such as small-world play help children refine their dexterity, body equilibrium and gross motor skills by engaging in large movements such as crawling and walking, and fine motor skills by engaging in smaller movements such as picking objects up (Barnett & Owens 2015; Whitebread & Basilio 2013). This statement implies that play activities during childhood make young children healthier because they help children use their natural stores of energy and promote better eating and sleeping habits. Therefore, we contend for play-based pedagogies to be taken seriously in order to encourage healthy habits amongst young children that they can carry through to adulthood.

Theme 4: From the data presented in the previous section, the cognitive development of young children is best improved using a play-based pedagogy. Participant P7 stated that play facilitated intellectual development. She used the term 'active learning', which suggests the impact of play on

children's learning. We understand this term to mean that through a play-based pedagogy, young children may be able to comprehend and apply the knowledge gained in different games to specific subjects. This is in congruence with the reviewed literature, as Christie and Roskos (2015) and Zosh et al. (2018) describe a play-based pedagogy as having a lasting cognitive gain for young children. This means that young children can make sense of different play activities and apply them in the context of the environment because these skills involve the management of attention, memory, control and flexibility. As indicated by P2 when she said that toddlers could relate to a story from pictures, we believe that telling a story from pictures is an example of using critical thinking. As evident in the empirical data, the learning areas for young children are not taught in isolation but are integrated into play activities. Therefore, we realise that young children learn numeracy and literacy skills by playing with various toys and books, and they demonstrate their thinking as they talk about what they are doing. There is a fundamental connection between play and the acquisition of knowledge, which is related to different cognitive domains, including mathematics, literacy, science and information and computer technology (Ali et al. 2019; Barnett & Owens 2015). This implies that intellectual development amongst young children is, to a large extent, enhanced by the use of a play-based pedagogy.

Theme 5: The presented data indicate that the participants agreed on the assumption that a play-based pedagogy was ideal for social and emotional development amongst young children. The participants used expressions such as 'to learn … social and emotional skills' (P7: 45+ year old Afrikaans researcher), 'learning social roles … children develop tolerance skills' (P1: 45+ year old isiZulu Grade R facilitator), 'important for their socio-emotional being' (P6: 45+ year old Afrikaans researcher) and 'become aware of different languages and cultural norms and values' (P4: 35 year old Sesotho practiioner). These expressions suggest that a play-based pedagogy allows young children to learn to work with others towards shared purposes, thereby being able to build self-confidence, negotiate, cooperate and share ideas. Barnett and Owens (2015) point out that the use of PBL promotes educational and social transformation amongst children. In this context, we regard a play-based pedagogy to be important in developing social skills and building friendships amongst learners, practitioners and parents. On top of that, using a play-based pedagogy strengthens children to work through their emotions because they can express their feelings through different activities, such as physical play, storytelling and art, amongst other things. Ali et al. (2019), Christie and Roskos (2015) and Frost (2015) maintain that the use of dramatic and fantasy play as teaching and learning methods is important, as they make children forget stressful experiences. It is fundamental to note that social skills are a vital part of language development in all its forms.

Theme 6: Drawing from the empirical data, language development happens not only through formal teaching, but also when children play with others and through interaction with mentors and teachers. In such interaction, they develop important speech and language skills, as well as listening skills. According to Ali et al. (2019) and Frost (2015), types of play such as drama and fantasy have a significant influence on the development of children's language skills. It is also important to note that even when young children play as individuals, their language can also be developed because they habitually narrate their actions and sometimes engage in self-talk as they play with various toys. In the same context, the theory of play as a spiral of learning is quite applicable to children's language development, for Bruce (2011), Portiková (2015) and Swanwick (2016) allude to the belief that the continuous changing of adult-led and learner-initiated activities reinforces the development of speech and language skills. We understand that when children are playing, they will be communicating purpose and organisational ideas to one another. If there is a misunderstanding, children are guided to talk through the issue and work out a compromise (Swanwick 2016; Wood 2010). This means that structured play is a typical setting for language learning because when children are exposed to additional vocabulary, they enrich their own variety of words and integrate them into their language.

Contribution of this study to the body of knowledge

This study contributed to closing the gap on the value of a play-based pedagogy and, hence, emphasised the implementation thereof in classrooms. This was done through its emphasis on the collaboration of practitioners and parents in the use of a play-based pedagogy for the holistic development of young children. The study may be helpful to school managers when making decisions regarding teaching and learning materials needed for young children. Furthermore, the study may be of assistance in resolving existing conflict amongst managers, parents and practitioners regarding a pedagogy that is appropriate in as far as the teaching of young children is concerned. The study may also lead to the improvement of teaching and learning policies that are user-friendly and suit the diverse developmental needs of young children.

Limitations of the study

Although the current study makes a significant contribution, it also has some limitations. The study was conducted using a very small selection of participants. It was also conducted in only one district of one province of South Africa. These factors do not allow for the findings to be generalised to the broad South African population. Furthermore, the selection comprised researchers and practitioners, leaving out other important stakeholders such as parents, non-governmental organisations and school managers.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggested the intensive implementation of a play-based pedagogy in teaching young children so that they would develop holistically. Emphasis was placed on moral, affectionate, physical, intellectual, socio-emotional and

language development. We concluded that there must be collaboration between practitioners and parents in making a play-based pedagogy a reality, thereby achieving holistic development amongst young children. Furthermore, the use of PALAR in the study enhanced the knowledge of the practitioners and researchers on the use of a play-based pedagogy for the development of young children. In light of the results and conclusions made, we recommend that ECDE centres should have play centres that are equipped with different apparatus so that outdoor activities can be conducted. Another recommendation is that learning through play should be planned. It is important that practitioners plan for lessons that will take place, whether inside or outside the classroom.

Final thoughts

This study was inspirational to all of the participating researchers because we had the same responsibilities of generating knowledge to do the research as a team. We realised that although the practitioners seemed to have the content knowledge regarding a play-based pedagogy that enhances children's holistic development, there is more that needs to be done to make sure that a play-based pedagogy is used in all ECDE classrooms. The study also proved to have the potential to be of great value to parents, practitioners, researchers and, most importantly, young children. As we conducted a community-based study, it was valuable to disseminate the results to the ALS in order to take action as a team. It is also important to note that the findings do not belong to only the participating researchers but to all members of the research team.

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Authors' contributions

All three authors contributed equally to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript.

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Data availability

Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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