

Research article



PLAY-BASED LEARNING FOR A CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AT LEKPU ECCD, THIMPHU: A CASE STUDY

Rinchen Yangdon, Sherub Tshomo



PARO COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, ROYAL UNIVERSITY OF BHUTAN,
BHUTAN

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*Corresponding Author: yangdonrinchen@gmail.com

Abstract

Throughout the world, play-based learning activities are important in children's education. Through play, children learn to become creative and constructive. Moreover, studies have shown that playing provides a safe and necessary way for children to practice and experience a variety of life skills, including problem-solving within a peer group while gaining and enhancing language skills. Through daily play, children gain valuable life experiences through various roles that support growth and ultimately translate into adulthood. However, children with disabilities do not get to play much because they find it harder to play than children without disabilities. Nonetheless, play is an essential part of human development and more so for children with disabilities because they have more to gain. Therefore, this study investigated the implementation of different types of play for a child with special needs and their impact on their learning and behavior at Lekpu ECCD Centre in Thimphu. To this end, the researcher used a qualitative approach, specifically; the social constructivist paradigm within which a single embedded case study design was employed. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with the principal, three facilitators and a parent. These interviews were audio-tapped, transcribed, coded and then analyzed, discussed and presented using thematic analysis. Additionally, data from observation and physical documents were also analyzed. The study revealed that it was difficult for the facilitators to implement different types of play depending upon the nature of the play, child's special needs and child's interest. However, the study discovered that play was an essential for developing key skills, including social, behavioral, language, and cognitive skills. The results also point to the need for additional training for the facilitators regarding implementing play activities, especially for a child with special needs in ECCD centers.

Key words: *Play-based learning, play activities, child with special needs/disability, Early Childhood Care and Development center.*

Introduction

Play can be characterized as an expression of children's actions and their creative meaning and is generally regarded as a cornerstone of children's behavior (Rieber, 1996 as cited in Lee-Cultura et al., 2021) because when children play, they

surrender to imaginative thinking and lose themselves in a multi-sensory experience derived from their own volition. Further, in the context of learning, play behavior promotes valuable outcomes, such as increased enjoyment, elevated engagement and amplified motivation, thus contributing to healthy childhood development (Lee-Cultura et al., 2021).

Play-based learning for the children is aligned with the concept of the Montessori Method. It is a spontaneous, expansive educational system designed to afford a child's liberty to move and act in a prepared environment encouraging self-development (Orem, 1965 as cited in Schilling, 2011). In her Method, Dr Montessori does not have the teacher as the centre of attention, nor does she have a prescribed curriculum, instead according to her beliefs, the children themselves must be the center of education. Further, Navarra (n.d.) explains that the Montessori Method is a child-centred approach in which children are viewed as active participants in their development, strongly influenced by natural, dynamic, self-correcting forces within themselves, opening the way toward growth and learning, where the teachers are considered nurturers, partners, and guides to the children. They depend on carefully prepared, aesthetically pleasing environments as a pedagogical tool.

The benefits of play have been also explored in terms of children's social and emotional development (Bodrova et al., 2013). This builds on the theory of Vygotsky where it is said that children develop not in isolation but in social matrix such as interaction in social organization (Nicolopoulou, 1993). Therefore, play is perceived to develop social domains of the children.

Generally, in Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD), the children are engaged through play. The play is supported by both the theory of Montessori and Vygotsky. According to Montessori, it has an impact on the children's development and learning. Similarly, Vygotsky supports that children develop through social interaction. Particularly the children with autism lack social skills (Yeo & Teng, 2015) and lack motor skills for children with physical disabilities. Therefore, children with disabilities in ECCD will be benefited tremendously.

Currently, there are 60 children aged between three to five years old including eight children with special needs. There are eight facilitators, including the Principal and two support staff. The center aims to help children develop holistic skills in various aspects such as language and communication skills, problem-solving skills, gross and fine motor skills, cognitive skills and social skills (Lhazom, 2021). Therefore, the center works hard in meeting the needs of diverse learners. Besides, they are extremely dedicated to supporting the children with special needs such as Olympic game, Halloween night, and cultural show so that the special needs children feel included and are never ignored through collaboration within the facilitators and with the parents.

The child chosen for this study was a four-year-old boy named Pema, who was raised by his grandmother and aunt because his parents are in Australia. He has been to the center this year. He has no formal diagnosis but, he has symptoms similar to autism, such as repeating the words, screaming when excited, and throwing tantrums when he does not get things his way. Sometimes, he does not listen to instructions and does not respond to comments. Due to these behaviours, it hampers his learning and it becomes difficult for the facilitator to control him and ultimately disturbs the whole class. Moreover, he is aggressive and grabs the toys. Also, he is not interested in doing his fine motor and concept development activities.

Therefore, when the play is implemented for a child with special needs, it helps them in their development of their social skills whereby the child knows the value of being in the groups and what they should do and should not do. Moreover, Ginsburg (2007) also elicit that environmental arrangement can also have a positive impact on expanding play skills and social interactions of children with special needs. So, appropriately arranging the play environment can be considered as an easy approach to facilitate social interactions among children. Movahedazarhouli (2018) states adult facilitation can include setting interactive activities and arranging play environment and materials such as limiting the numbers of play centers open, choosing appropriate toys like social toys or toys that encourage shared and cooperative play, so that all children's participation is essential. Therefore, Wong and Kasari (2012) emphasized that without adult facilitation, children with disabilities may prefer to play alone, isolating themselves from peers and social activities. In addition, peer provide opportunities for increasing social interactions among children with disabilities and their typically developing peers, that increases the social interactions between children with and without disabilities.

Literature Review

Different scholars and researchers have conceptualized play differently. For example, Gray (2013) defines play as a free activity, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely. Moreover, it is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. Play proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. Further, the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) characterized children's play as activity that is desired by the child, always involves an imaginary situation, and always involves rules that are in the minds of the players and may or may not be laid down in advance. Additionally, the Children's Play Information Service (2002) defined

play as a state of being in which an individual experiences increased energy focusing on an activity, cheerfulness and joy which is accompanied by smiles and laughter, feeling an ease of burden resulting from non-literality, renewed sense of optimism, and the beginning of new possibilities.

Therefore, according to Roskos and Christie (2013) the reason that play is difficult to define is that it looks different across developmental ages, cultures, and history. Even though there is no specific definition of play, researchers agree that there are several characteristics that comprehensively describe play. These include experiences that are pleasurable, active, freely chosen, directed by children and intrinsically motivating. Similarly, Saracho and Spodek (1998) claim that play is difficult to define because there are so many aspects of it. Therefore, educators and philosophers define play differently.

Still, play is joyful, flexible, and imaginative and vital for children's development. Also, "play is evaluated both by the children's degree of enjoyment and involvement and by its effectiveness in helping teachers reach educational goals" (Saracho & Spodek, 1995, p. 146). Accordingly, the social interaction between children increases during constructive play. It is through play that children learn about their environment and themselves. They enhance their creativity and imagination and can even take on leadership roles. As children play, they learn how to get along with others, communicate with peers, and solve problems. Therefore, as a child interacts with other children, their language skills develop and become stronger. Steglin (2005) emphasizes that together, children learn to explore, cooperate, take turns and share through play. Lastly, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2019) emphasize that for children to learn through play, teachers need to understand these play behaviors/characteristics in order to focus more on the process that occurs during play rather than the product.

Meaning of Special Needs

'Special needs' refers to a diverse range of needs often caused by a medical, physical, mental or developmental condition or disability. Special needs can include cognitive difficulties, physical or sensory difficulties, emotional and behavioral difficulties, and difficulties with speech and language. Thus, the professionals, who have the responsibility for helping children with special needs, like pediatricians, psychologists and educators, often use a functional development approach that is looking for delays in functional areas of child's development and a clinical diagnostic approach by using set criteria to diagnose conditions or illnesses to define special needs. In this study, the term special needs and disability are used synonymously.

Play appears to be necessary to the quality of daily life for young children with disabilities as it does for all young children. The study conducted by Buchanan and Johnson (2009) advocated the same right to play for children with disabilities granted to other children by society in general, a right acknowledged and codified in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Play and Disability

Speaking of play for children with disabilities as a population is as problematic as speaking of play for children as a whole. The spontaneity of play is lost, and the activity becomes problematic. According to Besio and Carnesecchi (2014), children with cognitive and intellectual impairment, especially those moderate to severe, have difficulties in communication, social interaction, and the development of imagination, and they hardly interact through play with their peers, preferring younger children, tend to propose repetitive tasks and rarely transfer the acquired skills to other contexts. Similarly, children with pervasive developmental disorders have difficulty participating in leisure activities; they are wary of interpersonal relationships and show little interest in what surrounds them except for some objects that attract them continuously and intensely (Besio & Carnesecchi, 2014). Approaching, interacting and sharing an object of interest with these children become difficult and hinders building a playful situation. A visual impairment causes a decrease in the quantity and quality of games. This results in convergence to activities that depend on preformed materials or computer use. Movement is not a spontaneous pleasure for young visually impaired children, and sensor motor play is of little interest. The visual component is crucial in many play activities, and it requires appropriate materials to support measures for their participation.

Since play is a window for children's cognitive development, children may be perceived as developmentally delayed than they actually are, leading to reduced expectations on the part of adults. This often leads to fewer opportunities to develop and demonstrate their cognitive skills, thus entering a vicious cycle that prevents children from developing to their full potential. These difficulties often become more severe as a child's needs increase. Often the accessible toys allow only basic game modes, whereas those offering higher cognitive challenges are not accessible. The most complex phases of play, which pave the way to hypothetical or strategic thinking, are often unreachable. This is due to the cognitive limitations and the functional impairments and lack of adequate solutions. Play does not yet have a central role in professionals' daily practices in clinical and educational services. The commitment of families, professionals and educators appear focused on functional recovery and the systematic acquisition of loss-making skills.

Furthermore, because of obstacles set by the functional limitations, children's families cannot decode and interpret children's proposals. Educational contexts are not fully inclusive in every country. Even educational methodologies and practices that encourage play in a group of children with high differences of functioning are not frequent. This may result in further deprivation given the importance of social sharing in peer play: in this sense, the inclusion of children with disabilities remains an unreach goal. But these children have the right to play, and without it, they could have a limited chance for development. The Convention of the rights of persons with disabilities signed at UN in 2006 recognize this risk and dedicates article 7 and 39 to the expression and protection of the rights of children with disabilities, emphasizing the need to guarantee them proper educational process in an inclusive and lifelong educational system, as well as the right to participate in recreational activities, sports and entertainment, including those that take place in schools. The described functional difficulties are associated with the lack of adequate materials and suitable environments, the difficulty in identifying the right socio-educational contexts, the lack of specific expertise in the training of professionals and the lack of direction of parents and peers. This situation results in partial, or even total, deprivation of play and outlines how the interventions must be on many levels, ranging from an individual to the instruments and contexts. The risk is that children with disabilities lose interest in the world around them and the will to demand their right to play, thus losing the opportunity to express them and explore the world despite the best efforts made by adults in family, clinical and educational contexts. Although psychologists and educators deem play central to the lives of children, they have neglected, until relatively recently, the play of children with disabilities. Before the 1980s, scant research existed on the play of children with disabilities, and the few available studies were so methodologically flawed and failed to control the effects of the play setting or for the children's familiarity with play things (Buchanan & Johnson, 2009). Other studies did not control the subjects' chronological age, nature, and degree of their developmental differences. Thus, this study aims to address the gap in the literature by examining how plays are implemented for a child with special needs in an ECCD center.

Play-Based Learning

Danniels and Pyle (2018) define play-based learning as learning while at play. Moreover, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2016, p. 36), "Play-based learning refers to early childhood learning opportunities that are rich in child-initiated play, especially when it involves the presence of caring, engaged, and responsive adult." Thus, play-based learning is an educational approach that recognizes that children are actively engaged in their learning. This relates to Piaget's (1962; 1967 as cited in Ogolo, 2021) work, which views the child as an explorer and active participant in their learning. As per Piaget's view, children develop at different stages, and practitioners need to employ developmentally appropriate practices to meet their learning needs. Therefore, one way of using developmentally appropriate methods that place the child at the centre of their learning is through play. So, to achieve this, teachers need to integrate play into every facet of teaching and learning.

According to the research conducted by Miller and Almon (2009), a healthy kindergarten classroom should maintain a balance between child-initiated play, where children explore the world with the active support of teachers, and teacher guided learning in a way that is rich, focused, and experiential. The ECCDs in Bhutan also agree to it as the children are given the freedom to play with active guidance by the facilitators and focussed entirely on experiential learning.

Further, a playful pedagogy is developed by Moyles (2010) to facilitate the implementation of play-based learning consisting of pure-play, playful learning and playful teaching. Moyles explains that pure-play is "initiated and led by the children and sustained and developed by them for their purposes." (p. 20). In addition, playful learning relates to "learning experiences that are child-or adult-initiated or inspired, which engage the child in playful ways" (p. 21). Finally, playful teaching is "teaching that utilizes the child's natural and innate joy in playful learning" (p. 21) (Moyles, 2010).

Research conducted in three kindergarten classrooms in Ontario by Pyle and Bigelow's (2015) discovered that teachers implemented play-based learning differently. The findings highlight that teachers viewed "play as peripheral to learning, a vehicle for social and emotional development, and a vehicle for academic learning" (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015, p. 388). Their views were based on their understanding of play's purpose and role in children's play. Teachers who believe that play are peripheral to learning view it as a break from academic learning. Further, they encourage child-initiated play and construct play contexts. Their role is to supervise behaviors and withdraw students for teacher-directed instruction and assessment (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). Teachers who believe play is a vehicle for social and emotional development reported that it provides opportunities for socialization and independent agency. For them, play should be child-initiated with open access to resources, and it should be structured to allow children to solve social problems. Their role is to model and support social

problem-solving tactics and join the children's play (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). Finally, teachers who view play as a vehicle for academic learning believe it helps children internalize new academic concepts. They believed that play should both be child-initiated and teacher-directed and should co-construct the play contexts. Their role is to extend children's learning, encourage discussions about play contexts, and introduce academic concepts to play (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015).

Also, a qualitative study conducted by Theobald et al. (2015) on Australian pre-scholars (3 and 4 years old) opinions on their play and learning in school noted that the children's perception of play varied from those of the adults. Children in their study identified activities as play when they had autonomy in the activity, and they identified activities as learning when their teachers were involved. Play-based learning varies from Canadian province to province, depending on the emphasis placed in the curriculum by the provincial government on the role of play in kindergarten. Similarly, in Bhutan, play-based learning varies from one ECCD centre to another depending upon the policy set by each center, be it government or private centers. Moreover, Peterson et al. (2016) noted that the implementation of play-based learning is dependent on the teachers' values, perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds. Yet, playtime should not be organized by the teacher to make children move through their stations in small groups selected by the teacher using a timer. Moreover, a classroom is not considered play-based if it has not been equipped with various play materials to sustain play.

Different Kinds of Play

Play matters because it creates an opportunity to bring out the best in every child, and it is an opportunity for the children to see the best in themselves. Depending on the disability, some children may not have the same access to play as children without disabilities. Moreover, it also affects the skill acquisition and potential for developing play skills through experience and interaction with other children. In addition, physical, cognitive, or behavioral disabilities can be restrictive in play situations, and other children frequently reject or avoid those who seem different from themselves. Following are the different types of plays:

Solitary Play: Solitary play means where the children play alone. Toys for independent play can be anything that babies, toddlers, or pre-scholars can play with on their own, such as stuffed animals, blocks, toys, dress-up costumes, dolls, and books. Any child can play independently, but this type of play typically begins to emerge by age two. At that age, children are still pretty self-focused and lack good communication and sharing skills. Likewise, a child with special needs prefers to play alone as they lack social skills.

Physical Play: Physical play gets the children moving from big movements like running and jumping to small movements like picking up a pencil or tying a knot. Further, Pieter de Vries (2021) defines physical play as a separate aspect of holistic human play behavior with appropriate specification as a value, without disassociating it from the holistic and immersive context within the experience of human play behavior. Bjorklund and Brown (1998) argued that different types of physical play could contribute to gender differences in spatial abilities. This type of play involves children being physically active, either indoors or outdoors. Studies show that the earlier the children become active, the more active they will choose to be when they are older. Physical play includes big movement play like outdoor play, swing, seesaw, slides, tunnels, football and basketball, and gym plays like racing, bouncing ball, obstacle play, balloon, yoga and Zumba. Hestenes and Carroll (2000) pointed out that children with physical disabilities may be restricted in mobility, whereas children with cognitive delays may have difficulty understanding the complexity of play in which their typically developing peers engage. Children who have a severe physical disability cannot play as freely as other children and often miss out on the opportunity to lay down these fundamental concepts (Dureman and Lamberger, 1965 as cited in Davies, 1995). This can lead to perceptual problems such as poor judgment of distance and speed.

Social Plays: Social play refers to playful interactions between children and parents or caregivers. At first, playing with one partner is complex, but by three or four years old, a play group can consist of three or more participants, as children acquire social coordination skills and social scripts. Games like: Mirror Mirror, Aie Ja May Ro, tickling and chasing games, like “I’m gonna get you!” Show and Tell, Board games etc., are examples of social games that generate excitement, surprise, and laughter. Moreover, children who have socio-emotional disabilities may have difficulty initiating or maintaining appropriate social interaction (Hestenes & Carroll, 2000). As children interact with more knowledgeable children, they can develop higher mental functioning such as language or problem-solving. Through social interaction, children extend themselves to the next level from the current state.

Sensory Play: From infants and toddlers to school-agers, children develop important sensory abilities, including sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste as they play. Whether it is dramatic, physical, musical, or nature play, all forms of play include sensory input. It is important to provide a play environment with diverse play equipment to help children explore their different sensory skills. For example, sand and water provide children with tactile, auditory, kinesthetic, and visual learning opportunities as they explore the qualities and attributes of liquids and solids. Moreover, the sensory play also includes activities that stimulate a child's senses and engage movement and balance. For example, the sensory play for all the children is blindfold game, water play, sand play, food play, grain play, salt play, play dough, and obstacle play.

Pretend Play: Pretend play involves pretending an object or an action. For example, a banana is a telephone. This play develops from 15 months of age with simple actions, such as pretending to sleep or putting the doll to bed and role-play. Socio-dramatic play develops from age three: pretend play with others, sustained role taking, and a narrative line. It can involve understanding others’ intent and language constructions. Children negotiate meanings and roles (“You be daddy, right?”) and argue about appropriate behavior (“No, you don’t feed the baby like that!”). For example, pretending to eat from a wooden plate, pretending to be police, role-play and pretending to have a tea party.

Object Play: According to Smith and Pellegrini (2013), object play refers to the playful use of objects such as building blocks, jigsaw puzzles, cars, dolls, etc. With toddlers, this is sometimes just manipulating the objects like assembling blocks, but sometimes involves pretend play such as building a house, feeding a doll. In other words, object play is called free play, where the children are allowed to try out new combinations of actions, free of external constraint, and may help develop problem-solving skills. Any benefits of object play need to be balanced against the instruction, bearing in mind the age of the children, the nature of the task, and whether learning is for specific skills.

Music and Art Play: Individuals who are artistic communicate in various ways, including through painting, music, and language (Saracho, 2002). This play allows the children to express and develop their creativity that is important to their growth and development. When allowed to create music play or an art piece, children can access their playfulness, creativity, and innovative spirits. Research shows that arts are critical in helping children develop self-expression and creativity. Additionally, children develop a more comprehensive vocabulary as they express their ideas behind the art they create.

Creative Play: Creative play is powerful when integrated with a kindergarten approach to learning that enables designing, creating, experimenting and exploring in an iterative process where players imagine, create, play, share and reflect (Resnick, 2007). Moreover, it allows children to explore, try out new ideas and use their imagination. They can use many different items, altering something and making something new. As a result, they propose that creativity is more than a cognitive ability; it may also take as a specific, movement-based, and body-bound nature known as motor creativity (Cleland & Gallahue, 1993). Exposing children to creative opportunities contributes to their development. Coming up with ways to play creatively does not have to be stressful or take a lot of time.

Imaginative Play: Imaginative play is when a child uses their imagination to role-play scenarios they have seen, experienced or would like to experience. It is a kind of open-ended, unstructured play, with no rules, goals, or results, except that children learn a lot along the way. For example, imaginative play can include pretending to cook, clean, host parties, become the head of the family, and be the teacher. There is no limit to what can be considered imaginative play, as long as the child uses their imagination to act out the scenario. Like understanding imagination as a domain-general

cognitive skill (Kuhn & Holling, 2009), motor creativity is seen as a set of abilities and aspects rather than a single ability. Similarly, Runco (2003) suggests that a child's imagination can be rather personal and distinguishes between subjective and analytical creativity in the context of creativity appraisal. For instance, the children were encouraged to use their imagination and enjoy while playing puppet play and flexible materials.

Benefits of Plays

The benefits of play are progressive in nature. Ogolo (2021) describes play as the right of every child because they have a natural tendency towards play, and most children enjoy playful activities. Therefore, it is essential to include play in their daily activities. Further, Stegeline (2005) states that the early developmental aspects of children's play, their social, emotional, cognitive, and physical, language, and creative skills are all developed through their play and exploration. Moreover, Saracho and Spodek (1998, p. 2) stated:

Play is a critical element of the early childhood curriculum. It influences children's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. Play allows children to communicate their ideas and feelings and to verify their knowledge of the world. Play is intrinsically motivated, interpreted for its own sake, and conveyed in a relaxed manner providing a positive outcome. Play is free and unconscious. Play activities or their origins have always been integrated in the early childhood educational curriculum.

When children engaged in play activities, they often develop life skills without even realizing it. They are free to participate independently or to negotiate sharing of the activity with others. Thus, play facilitates life skills and children's ability to function effectively within their environment. Early childhood programs are essential to the future of children and provide a foundation for children's learning and development (Roden & Szabo, 2017). Through inclusive play, children gain a positive sense of self, self-esteem, and positive reinforcement of their identity.

Many early childhood educators would agree that early childhood programs lay the foundation for the children entering school. Therefore, early childhood classrooms are a place for young children to learn, grow, build friendships and have fun. Moreover, it also provides an environment for children to engage in play and develop social, language, and cognitive skills while interacting with their peers. For instance, sensory play helps children with visual impairment learn from and have fun with various textures and shapes. Even without seeing colors, they can enjoy playing with crayons on textured paper. It also helps children develop fine motor skills using the small muscles in their hands and fingers. Children can discover what materials and textures they like and dislike in a safe, fun play environment through sensory play.

Further, children can learn about themselves, their environment, and functional literacy like reading and writing through play. So, it is up to the educators to set up a welcoming learning environment for the children to interact with one another while inquiring about the materials they are given. The play is facilitated by adults (Roden & Szabo, 2017). Through play, children can explore different types of materials, and learn life-long skills that will help them in their schooling and their adult life. Through this process of hands-on play-based learning, children can develop the skills to succeed in their everyday lives.

Research shows that the decline in free play among children correlates with a decrease in empathy. Through inclusive play, children of all abilities develop social skills and embrace the unique qualities of their peers. Play areas with special calming can help children with autism, and sensory integration disorders find comfort, relax, and re-focus when they need breaks. For example, for a child with hearing or a visual impairment, play can help strengthen their other senses to help them navigate and explore the world. Many children with autism are soothed by vestibular sensory input (sense of movement), which swings and hammocks can provide. Color-coded pathways can help children with cognitive impairments memorize the route to their favorite play areas, building confidence and focus. Moreover, studies show that outdoor play may be deeply effective in easing Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder symptoms, promoting a sense of calm and focus.

Physical activity has also been shown to contribute to brain growth and attention to academic subjects. Therefore, Tsompanaki (2019) stated that the pre-school years are an ideal time to introduce activities to improve motor skills. Similarly, solitary play is important because it teaches a child how to keep them self entertained, eventually setting the path to being self-sufficient. Likewise, art and music play enhance play environments by expanding the ways children can learn and explore their creativity in the world. Further, imaginative play helps develop the children, improving their social and language skills, boosting their creativity and problem-solving abilities, keeping them active, and most importantly, making them happy.

Research Design

Case Study

For this research, the researcher decided to do a case study. A case study is commonly understood as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon the ‘case’ in depth and within its real-world context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (Yin, 2014, p.16). This case study on play-based learning for a child with special needs was based on a constructivist paradigm within the framework of qualitative research methods (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Accordingly, this research has constructed the narrative on play-based learning based on what is observed at ECCD centre. Qualitative research involves field work requiring to physically go to the people, site, and setting to collect information and understand the human perspectives and behavior. Therefore, this research is the product of direct observation of the events and the participants at the research site.

The qualitative research approaches are categorized into different types: ethnography, grounded theory, narrative, phenomenology and case study. Among various qualitative designs, a case study design was selected for this study based upon the kinds of information and types of data collected by the researcher. Chandra and Sharma (2007) state that a case study was a method of exploring and analyzing the life of a social unit- be it a person, a family, institution, culture group, or even an entire community. Therefore, single embedded case study is employed where a child with special need was studied as case in this research.

The findings of this study were presented in the form of themes, descriptive and subjective. These characteristics enabled the construction of knowledge from data collected in the form of words. Therefore, being in the classrooms, I observed events that seemed to reoccur within the setting.

Sampling

A case study can involve one individual, several individuals or a group depending upon the case (Creswell, 2009). However, the researcher focused on one case for the current study, drawn based on purposive and convenience sampling. The purposive sampling was chosen because, as Lodico et al. (2010 as cited in Kamenopoulou and Dukpa, 2017) state a purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select participants who can provide the richest and most relevant information to address the research question. Moreover, as Crossman (2020) states purposive sampling is more practical when a targeted sample needs to be reached in a short amount of time.

For this case study, the principal, who was the proprietor of the centre, three ECCD facilitators dealing with a child with special needs and a parent was involved because these are the most influential individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being explored and can articulate their lived experiences (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, Creswell (2009) says that in qualitative research, participants should be someone who can best help.

Data Collection Procedures

This section consists of an explanation of tools used to collect data and how the researcher went about to collect data from the participants. Creswell (2009) emphasizes that data collection steps include setting the boundaries for study, collecting information through unstructured observations, interviews, documents and visual materials. Moreover, similar questions were designed for the principal, facilitators and to the parent of a child. Hence, semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis were used to collect the data.

Data Collection Tools

Interview: Namgyel (2003) states that an interview is the personal record of an event by the individual experiencing it, told from that person’s point of view. As a novice researcher, a semi-structured interview was used to allow enough flexibility to rephrase the questions to fit into the interview. According to Fallon (2008 as cited in O’Keeffe et al., 2016), semi-structured interviews can quickly produce rich and detailed data sets offering an accurate assessment of the characteristics of individuals and phenomena. Moreover, Hancock and Algozzine (2006) suggest that it is particularly well-suited for case study research as researchers ask predetermined but flexibly worded questions. They also mention that semi-structured

interviews invite interviewees to express themselves openly and freely and to define the world from their perspectives, not solely from the researcher's perspective.

The interview was scheduled based upon parent, principal and facilitator's convenience. Interview discussion aimed to collect information concerning their knowledge of the play activities and perceptions on the impact of play-based learning on their child. A list of pre-prepared questions was used to guide while conducting interviews. As stated by Hancock and Algozzine (2006), "the best way to record interview data is to audio-tape the interaction" (p. 40). Therefore, all the interviews were recorded using mobile phones with prior consent from the participants, and maintained handwritten notes. The audio-taped interviews were transcribed later.

Observation: The next research tool used for the current study was classroom observation. Jaffe (2006) claims that classroom observations used to document instructional strategies, curricular topics, and the classroom milieu further enrich the interview data, by recoding practical evidence through photographs of classroom teaching and interaction. Similarly, Yin (2014) emphasizes that direct contact with participants enables them to get primary sources of information rather than from a secondary source. Therefore, the researcher adopted direct observation (Yin, 2014) of child and facilitators for three times in a week for two consecutive weeks. Moreover, the physical environment such as playground, materials, and activities were observed. It was found out that the children with special needs were given one-on-one support and also does lot of modeling so that the children learn a lot. So, when the researcher got first-hand experiences with the participants, it was easier to record information as it was revealed.

Document Analysis: In addition to using interviews and observations, case study researchers often advised to review existing documents to gather information related to the research questions (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Document analysis is critical to obtain the language and words of participants and can be accessed at a time convenient to the researcher. Also, unlike observation and interview, it is resistant to observer bias. Therefore, in this study, official records maintained in the ECCD Center like student's work samples, facilitator's activity plans, and Individualized Learning Plan were used to gather in-depth information. These documents were used to see how play-based learning benefits a child with special needs in ECCD center.

Validity and Reliability: According to Gibbs (2007 as cited in Creswell, 2009), qualitative validity refers to checking for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures, while qualitative reliability indicates that the researcher's approach was consistent across different researchers and different projects. Similarly, Namgyel (2011) states, "validity is the degree to which the qualitative data, we collect accurately gauge what we are trying to measure" (p.102). To maintain the validity and reliability of this study, firstly, the researcher had verified the interview questions in consultation with the supervisor. Then, while drawing the themes in data analysis, the researcher discussed with the friends and finally, member-checking was done by sending the interview transcription to respective interviewee to check whether manipulation was there or not. In this way, validity and reliability of this study was maintained. Therefore, the researcher made sure that the data are factual, accurate and not distorted through participation. In this study, triangulation of data and member-checking to validate the research findings were used (Creswell, 2009).

Triangulation of Data: Researchers use different data by examining evidence from the sources and using it to build a coherent justification of themes (Creswell, 2009). This study triangulates multiple sources of evidence collected through interview, observation and analysis of physical document. Thus, triangulation of data through these sources has helped strengthen the research findings by making it possible to be more accurate, valid, and reliable.

Member-checking: Member-checking was determining the accuracy of the qualitative findings through comparing the opinions among the participants and making a final report on the themes (Creswell, 2009). The participants provided the tentative interpretations to see if the results were plausible (Merraim, 1998). Therefore, interview transcriptions were sent back to individual interviewee through email to check whether the data that they had provided were manipulated or not to maintain the validity and the reliability of the study.

Ethical considerations: Identifying ethical issues and addressing them is vital in any research. According to Creswell (2009), the researcher has an obligation to respect the informants' rights, needs, values, and desires. As suggested by Creswell (2012) the researcher approached the potential issues carefully, and maintained the confidentiality of responses by using pseudonyms in the report. Participants' were assured that their names will never be released, and there were no

personal identifiers in the data collected, field notes and transcripts. All of the data are locked up and password protected on an electronic device.

More importantly, the ethical guidelines for Educational Research adopted by Paro College of Education were followed to ensure that the study does not breach any research ethics. As it was mandatory to seek the consent of the participants, a letter was sent to the Principal of the ECCD center with the support from the Program leader to get an informed consent of the participants. Further, the consent from the participants was got by first explaining them understand the purpose of my study and then informed them that their participation is based on their interest and willingness.

Data analysis

After collecting all the required data, the data were analyzed, and the findings were presented. As said by Creswell (2009) data analysis involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analysis and moving deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of data. Data obtained through different sources were analyzed using thematic analysis. Caulfield (2019) defines thematic analysis as a method of analyzing qualitative data. It is usually applied to a set of texts, such as interview transcripts. Then, examines the data to identify common themes like topics, ideas and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly. The conceptual framework of the thematic analysis for my interviews was mainly built upon the theoretical positions of Braun and Clarke (2006). Braun and Clarke (2013) also define thematic analysis as a data analysis method that helps identify themes and patterns of meanings across a dataset in relation to a particular research question. According to these authors, this method involves seven steps: transcription, reading and familiarization, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finalizing the analysis.

Moreover, Figgou and Pavlopoulos (2015) claim that thematic analysis involves coding qualitative data into clusters of similar entities, or conceptual categories and identifying consistent patterns and relationships between themes, so as to come up with a theoretical explanation of the phenomenon under study. Therefore, thematic analyses were chosen as they produce an insightful analysis that answers particular research questions' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.97). A theme may be initially generated inductively from the raw data or generated deductively from theory and prior research (Boyatzis, 1998). With an inductive approach, the themes identified are strongly linked to the data themselves and may bear little relation to the specific questions asked to the participants. Nowell et al. (2017) explain the inductive approach as a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame or the researcher's analytic pre-conceptions. In this sense, this form of thematic analysis is data-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In contrast, the deductive approach is driven by the researchers' theoretical or analytic interest and may provide a more detailed analysis of some aspect of the data but tends to produce a less detailed description of the overall data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition, Braun and Clarke (2006 as cited in Jugder, 2016) explain themes or patterns within data which can be identified either in an inductive 'bottom up' way or in a theoretical, deductive 'top down' manner. An inductive approach involves allowing the data to determine the themes, whereas a deductive approach involves coming to the data with some pre-conceived themes that are expected to find based on theory or existing knowledge. Furthermore, King (2004) suggested, that the best place to start is with a few pre-defined codes to help guide analysis. Novice researchers may attempt to examine and interpret every code to an equal degree of depth. Instead, they may seek to identify the most relevant themes to build an understanding of the phenomena under investigation (King, 2004). Therefore, an inductive approach was used to derive the themes and sub-themes which are important were further analyzed and compared with existing literature in this study.

Furthermore, confidentiality was maintained using the code names throughout the data analysis. There were five participants in this study and were coded P1 for principal, P2 for facilitator 1, P3 for facilitator 2, P4 for facilitator 3 and P5 for the parent. The data was available only to the researcher. All the documents pertaining to research were locked up for future reference.

Data Presentation

Firstly, data transcription was done for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through coding and condensing the codes, and finally presenting the data. The data was provided by five participants (the Principal, three facilitators and a parent), which was presented in four overarching themes followed by sub-themes generated through an inductive thematic analysis approach. The themes and sub-themes are presented in the concept map (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Mapping of themes and sub-themes

Kinds of Play

Lekpu ECCD has ensured to implement different kinds of plays depending upon a child's interest and taking into consideration the child's special needs. Therefore, the first theme answers the first research question:

- What kinds of play or play activities are used to teach a child with special needs?

Use of Different Types of Play

Many of the participants have pointed out that they used different types of play such as social games, sensory play, outdoor free play, indoor free play, dance and music, pretend play, interactive play, and big movement play that benefits the children with and without special needs. For example, P1 explained that:

Sensory plays are very necessary for the children with special needs, in that, we have water play, sand play, a lot of food grains, some plays with lots of movement so that you have to move around and then some plays do not require moving much, but you sit there and play without having to exert too much of the child's energy or the facilitator's energy.

Also, the children in the ECCD center are mostly taught through play, where most of the play for the children with special needs start with bubble play and water play. For instance, P2 elaborated that "we teach through pretend play, outdoor games, sensory play, interactive play, big movement, creative play and move and learn. We incorporate social games and encourage them to be in groups so that they get their turns to play." Further, it corroborated with the direct observation done

in the classroom where they used different types of play. In addition, this can also be validated by the permanent product shown in Figure 2.

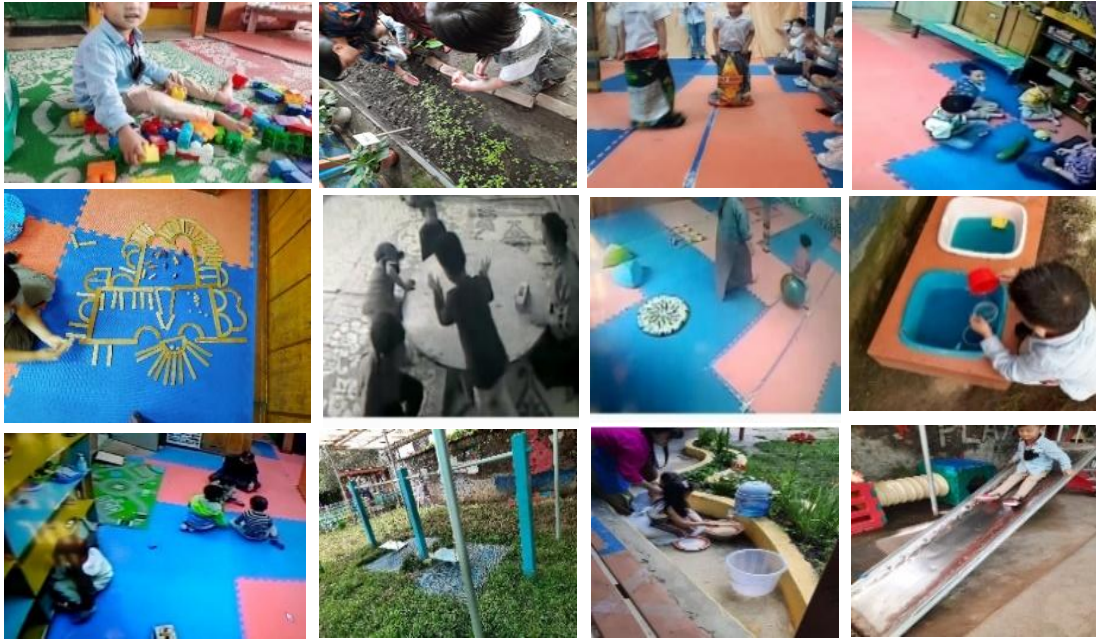


Figure 2: Different kinds of play

Plays Based on Child's Interest

Different plays are used based on the interests of a child with special needs. For example, P1 mentioned that, "...traditional choired or dance so he enjoys that so being there he if you look sometimes he will be doing the dance." Likewise, P4 also revealed that, "When we teach we based on their strength and weakness and then use play like pretend play." Moreover, P3 stated:

We use fine motor and gross motor, and we use more social games to interact and communicate with each other...so if the children are taught through drama, the children can take a role each and do the pretend play.

It was also verified from the direct observation done in the class where a child with special needs enjoys plays based on their interest. Further, it corroborates with the permanent product shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Pema enjoys when the play is of his interest.

Implementation of Play

Implementation is the process of putting a decision or plan into effect. It helps us achieve our goals and allows for more efficient use of time and other resources. Therefore, implementing the play activities to the children with and without special needs, it has emerged into several sub-themes such as i) know child's interest, ii) scheduling and planning of play, iii) accommodation and modification in planning, and iv) nature of play. The second theme answers the second research question:

- How are the plays or play activities implemented in the ECCD center?

Know Child's Interest

Knowing the child's interest in planning and implementing the play activities was important because many of the participants pointed out that if the planning was done as per the child's interest, then the play activities to a child with special needs are implemented effectively. This is evident from the lines of P3:

It all depends upon the children's needs and interests. If the children's interest is more in gross motor and less in social games, we have to plan the activities according to their interests. If we plan the activities as per their interest, then it's not that difficult to implement. Therefore, it's important to know the child's interests.

Similarly, P1 elaborates:

...before we start the curriculum, we get to know them, so we know what they like to play, what they show more interest in, what kind of play the parents want for their children, and accordingly, we designed the play.

Scheduling and Planning of Play Activities

Scheduling and planning play activities was the most important component in implementing the play activities for a child with special needs. P1 stated that:

They have the children for about 7 hours a day with them at the center. So, they have scheduled the timing in such a way that they have 20 minutes of eight periods in the morning hours as the children are active and energetic then and 12 minutes of seven periods in the afternoon.

Further, she elaborates:

We, over time, have realized that the children are more active and more receptive in the morning hours. So before lunch, you might have noticed a lot of high energy, and then after lunch, we don't have that much play.

Furthermore, based on the observation and the documents, it was observed that the morning classes are 20 minutes each and the afternoon classes 12 minutes each. This was further validated with the timetable of the center given in Table 1.

| Sl. No. | Time | Activities | Hygiene Time |
|---------|---------------|-------------------------|--|
| 1 | 8:00-8:30am | Arrival and free play | |
| 2 | 8:30-8:40am | Assembly and attendance | |
| 3 | 8:40-9:01am | 1 st period | |
| 4 | 9:01- 9:22am | 2 nd period | |
| 5 | 9:22-9:43am | 3 rd period | Hygiene and Water break (small toilet) |
| 6 | 9:43-10:04am | 4 th period | |
| 7 | 10:04-10:25am | 5 th period | |
| 8 | 10:25-10:46am | 6 th period | Hygiene and Water break (small toilet) |

| | | | |
|----|---------------|-----------------------------|----------------|
| 9 | 10:46-11:07am | 7 th period | |
| 10 | 11:07-11:30am | 8 th period | |
| 11 | 11:30-12:45am | Lunch break and recess time | Dental Hygiene |

Afternoon Clubs and Games Timing, 2021

| Sl. No. | Time | Activities | Hygiene Time |
|---------|---------------|---|--|
| 1 | 12:45-12:57pm | 1 st period | |
| 2 | 12:57-1:10pm | 2 nd period | |
| 3 | 1:10-1:22pm | 3 rd period | |
| 4 | 1:22-1:34pm | 4 th period | |
| 5 | 1:34-1:46pm | 5 th period | Hygiene and Water break (small toilet) |
| 6 | 1:46-1:58pm | 6 th period | |
| 7 | 1:58-2:15pm | 7 th period | Hygiene |
| 8 | 2:15-2:30pm | Meaning through toys/books Children leave the center | |

Table 1: ECCD Center Timetable

One participant said that they have to plan the play activities beforehand so as to not face difficulty while implementing them. The majority of the participants pointed out that they do the planning of the play activities individually, but most of the time, they sit together and discuss and then plan. P1 said, “all of us together my team and I we design the play but actually the children and the family have not directly but indirectly they have designed the play.” In addition to that, P4 highlighted that “mostly the facilitators do the draft we plan the same play but with different activities within to cater to all special need children and it works for all children.”

Accommodation and Modification

Accommodation and modification are strategies used to ensure better implementation of play activities for a child with special needs at Lekpu ECCD. This was clearly explained by P1:

...when we are getting to know him and trying to bond with him, we use his family card, his grandmother. We observe them both...he has three other friends as his peer supporter. When we give him instructions, it's either one on one or initially we started with one on one but now, he can be instructed with them all but he needs constant reminders.

It was also observed that a child with special needs was always given the accommodation like preferential seats, one-on-one guidance, and always focused on having small groups when there was a special child in the class. Another P4 also said "in case of Pema, we need to have two activities ready all the time. If one activity does not work, then we need to do another one." Besides, P5 also stated that "we praise Pema with lots of reinforcement like good, excellent, placing our thumb on his nose and saying very good to him to complete the task." Therefore, almost all the participants pointed out that they are doing accommodation and modification for the children with or without special needs in the center while implementing the play activities. For example, P4 stated that:

We accommodate them by providing different gripping materials. We use a bigger size pencil, and in the case of crayons, we provide them with the crayon holder with rubber. Like other children, they also do the collage by themselves and sometimes hand over hand. In the case of tracing, we need to do hand over hand for special child.

This can be substantiated with the permanent product shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4: Accommodations

Further, P2 mentioned that:

If the class does not go well today, we do that in the next class and discuss with the colleagues and madam how we can incorporate that play in the class for the special child, and then we modify the activities, and accordingly, we make the lesson plan.

Nature of Play

Depending upon the nature of the play, a child with special needs will positively impact the child's learning. Many of the participants have stated that there were many impacts implementing plays for a child with special needs. P4 said that "the gross motor (sports) benefits. Another one is he loves the music a lot. So, if the gross motor activities are with music he really loves it, so he interacts and communicates with us." In addition to that, P3 explained that "they can learn more by being together and from each other. So they can learn by looking at their friends and ultimately there will be an improvement in the children." Furthermore, social games play a vital role in shaping a child. For example, P2 narrated that:

We use more of social games like outdoor play, pretend play and indoor play. If we involve them in those plays in particular, then they stay focused and attentive. Moreover, they can concentrate on the particular activity. For social games, they can concentrate in the class, they can also make friends.

For instance, P1 revealed that there was an improvement for a child with special needs:

Now, he is able to say that he plays cars or he played car he doesn't say of course the past tense but he says I play car and he is able to say that so he feels included. He is able to somehow get the others to join him, so in that sense he is improved and helped him.

Similarly, P3 mentioned that:

He could stay in the class by himself. Now, he does not need parent to guide him, even he does not need the follower (facilitator who goes along with him from class to class) with him, he can do equally with other kids.

Most importantly, P5 declared that:

He learned to say appa and ama, then came up with the word mummy and good morning. If we say him to speak, he speaks a word. Now he can eat by himself. I am glad that my child could eat by himself, go to toilet by himself, can say appa, ama and mummy. Sometimes the facilitators and madam records the video and sent us to see his improvement.

Support Services

It was generally felt that the successful implementation of play-based learning was largely dependent on the amount of support services provided by different stakeholders. The third theme answers the third research question:

- What are the support services received by the ECCD center in implementing play?

Supports from Different Stakeholders

With regard to the kind of support services, it was strongly felt that there should be enough supports and collaboration by different stakeholders in supporting a child with special needs through play-based learning in ECCD. For example, P1 stated that:

Perkins has been supporting us technically. They come and they observe us while we are with the children and then they will give us feedbacks and sometimes they have included us in their little trainings and workshops and also Phuensem, the parent groups have included us our staffs recently this year quite a few months ago they were also included.

Support from Parents.

Parents play a vital role in shaping the life of a child. Without their support, there would not be changes in a child. Therefore, it was important to have support services by the parents. For instance, P3 mentioned that “we sent home task, they let their children to do it and even they consult us if their children are not able to do it. So in this way the parents support us.” Also, P5 stated that “we can help our child more at home. Moreover, we can support the children more because as the children are at their growing stage, they need to be taught more.” Similarly, P2 also pointed out:

We need to have support from both the sides, I mean from the parent's side and from us. So, in that way, we can automatically support the children. Main thing is we need support from both sides. Parents also gave us the full support in supporting the children.

It was also observed that parent collaborates and involves with the facilitators in supporting a child with special needs and try to encourage their children in a small way. This can also be authenticated through the permanent product provided in Figure 5.



Figure 5: Parental collaboration

Peer Support

Peer support is a strategy that involves placing children in pairs or in small groups to participate in learning activities and social skills. Many of the facilitators mentioned, “all the children helps a child with special needs, carries their water bottle and some holds their hands and during lunch, they help in bringing their lunch box and to open the tiffin for a child with special need.” This is evident from the permanent products provided and also it was observed from the classroom observations that their peers or friends support them in the class and while transiting from class to class (see Figure 6).



Figure 6: Peer supporting a child with special needs

Challenges

Despite having an energetic and active principal and facilitators, they always work hard to be the best center in implementing the play activities and thus supporting children with and without special needs. But, still, they face certain difficulties in implementing the various play activities, especially to a child with special needs. Having done with the

thematic analysis, there is an emergence of many sub-themes under challenges. Overall, this theme answers the fourth research question:

- What are the challenges faced in teaching a child with special needs through play-based learning?

Lack of Training: One of the important challenges was the lack of training. This led to them facing difficulty in dealing with a child with special needs and hinders the effective implementation of play activities. For example, almost all the facilitators pointed out that they lack the training on play-based learning but have had some training on inclusive education. For example, P2 said that, “we did not get training on play-based, but we got few trainings on special education.” Equally, P3 stated that, “I did not get any training on play-based, but I got training on inclusive education such as theatre play which is a play through drama or skit.”

Moreover, facilitators also stated that the training that they received were the School Based In-service Programs (SBIP) conducted in the center. This is evident from the lines of P4, “most of the training we received is facilitated by the one whoever has gone for the training conducts the SBIP to the facilitators after coming back to the center”. Further, she claimed that “most of the training we received is facilitated by the principal”.

Difficulty in Implementing the Play Activities: P4 has mentioned that it was difficult to implement the play activities for a child with special needs:

For a child with special needs, outside free play is quite difficult to incorporate because we need to look after other children with a single facilitator. So when we focus on a special child, there are every chance that other children might get hurt, so it is quite risky having outside free play.

Furthermore, P1 explains that “somebody needs to be there modeling what we are trying, what we want him to do, so that part is challenging the having him try to understand what we are doing in the social game”. Also, she said that:

It depends upon their moods. If a child's mood is not good the whole day, a child won't pay attention otherwise, when they have the mood and are unable to do the activity, we switch the activities to encourage him/her. The mood matters a lot.

Time: The next emerging challenge was the time factor because when they plan the activities and implements them to the children; it takes a long time depending upon the mood, nature of play and the special needs of a child. For example, P1 pointed out that:

I make it understandable for a child who cannot see properly. For a child who does not have the attention skill, for a child who has behavioral issues, all of that to consider, it takes time, so time is a factor.

In addition to that, P3 said that, “children who are really having difficulty in gross motor like children who are physically disabled, it's difficult to handle it and even if we hold and let them play, it takes a lot of time.” Further, P4 mentioned that, “we need to change activity... and then extend the activity.” Even though the Ministry of Education (MoE) has included them in many of their training and workshops, time was never appropriate for them to attend as they cannot leave the children alone in the center without the facilitators. This was evident from the lines of P1 that:

They were very supportive, and they have included they tried to include us in their workshops, but the timing never works out for us because over here, having the special education need children with us, we cannot afford to be not present.

Lack of Resources: One of the most emerging issues was the lack of resources in terms of human resources, where they have a difficult time managing the children with a limited number of facilitators and lack of accessible environment. From the observation, it was noticed that the classrooms were so small and compactly filled with more children. This was evident from the lines of P3 that, “we suffer from the class filled with 8, 9 and 10 children.” Furthermore, P1 stated that, “well, I am hanging on by a really small string, so it’s actually not enough I, at the beginning of the year wanted to cut down on the number of the children.” They had just a few facilitators, and it was really difficult for them to handle the children with special needs. Moreover, the transition from one class to another was not accessible for a child with special needs, especially for a child who is physically disabled.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how play-based learning was implemented for a child with special needs in Lekpu ECCD in Thimphu. Therefore, this chapter discusses the data presented in the earlier chapter based on four broad topics.

Use of Different Plays and their Impact

One of the outcomes of this study was the use of different plays for children with or without special needs and their impact. Irvin (2017) stated that play contributes to developing a diverse array of capacities in a child. Moreover, it was interesting to find out that they used various play as per the interests and needs of a child because it benefited the child in their learning and social skills. Indeed, a child with special needs learns when the play activities based upon their interest. For instance, Pema loves physical play a lot which involves body movements. Activities like dancing and outdoor games seemed to greatly impact him as he used to be attentive and listen to the instructions given by the facilitators in the class.

Similarly, sensory play was found to be one of the most effective plays for a child with special needs in Lekpu ECCD because mostly the loose parts were used as the resources to teach them the concepts. The facilitators sit together and make tactile resources for the children to feel and learn with the loose parts that they find around because it is cost-effective and user-friendly to the children. Most importantly, touch is essential for children who are blind to gather information about their surroundings and to perform everyday tasks because it gives information not only characteristics of the objects, such as their shape, size, and texture but on the functional aspects of objects (Withagen et al., 2010). In line with that, the tactile aids are really important for children with visual impairment and for the children who learn through their sensory skills. So, in ECCD, most of the activities are based on sensory play where children touch and experience, and it helps them in their learning. Rushton (2011) also stated that stocking the writing area with various materials based on students' needs, such as sandpaper letters for finger tracing, sand trays for writing letters, brushes, paints, and jumbo pencils, benefits the child in their learning.

Research conducted by Roden and Szabo (2017) mentioned that early childhood programs are essential to children’s future and provide a foundation for children’s learning and development. In agreement with their studies, the children learn more through interaction with their friends in the community. Many of the participants pointed out that the children learn more being together with their peers and from each other. Moreover, they also learn by observing their friends. Yet, it was quite difficult to implement social plays for a child with special needs as they show less interest due to their poor communication skills. In addition, Hestenes and Carroll (2000) emphasized that children who have socio-emotional disabilities may have difficulty initiating or maintaining appropriate social interaction. Nevertheless, the center works hard in incorporating the social plays to the children guided by the facilitators. Therefore, the facilitators in Bhutan need to use varieties of plays for the overall development of the children from an early age.

Implementation of Play

From the results of this study, one could conclude that the implementation of play was crucial, especially for a child with special needs, because it needs proper planning. One participant stated that planning the play activities was essential to have a smooth implementation of the play. As elucidated above, if the planning was done as per the interest, needs of the special child and the nature of the play, then it greatly impacts a child’s learning. In Lekpu ECCD, before actually implementing the

play activities to the children, the facilitators get to know a child about their likes and dislikes regarding the play. They also observe in what plays they are showing more interest. Further, they get the child's parent's concern about the kind of plays they want for their children. Then, they decide to choose and design the play for the children.

In order to have a good implementation of play, scheduling of play is important because if the plays are not scheduled, and the planning is not done properly, then naturally, the implementation part will fail. Lekpu ECCD is one of the well-structured centers in terms of resources, planning of plays and many more. Further, it was found that the center has scheduled the time that they have to 20 minutes of eight periods in the morning hours because the children are active, energetic and more receptive and consequently 12 minutes of seven periods in the afternoon as the children get tired towards the afternoon as well as becoming lazy after lunch. In line with that, Morris (2017) also believed that children have more energy and are not tired in the morning whereas, children are more likely to be tired in the afternoon, which can lead to an inability to focus on learning tasks.

It was expected that Lekpu ECCD would report accommodation and modification to a child with special needs while implementing the play activities. Beech (2003) narrated that accommodations and modifications are an important part of planning the educational program for a child with special needs to participate successfully in regular classes. In addition, many children with a disability may need small changes to the way they are taught. Moreover, accommodations help children work around limitations related to their disability. For instance, children who are blind may need to use braille, students who use wheelchairs may need a ramp or elevator to move independently in the center, and deaf or hard of hearing may need a sign language interpreter. Accommodations make sure that children with disabilities can participate as fully as possible in the general curriculum and ultimately have an independent life.

Similarly, the findings found that different accommodations are used, such as hand over hand, cutting down the class size, preferential seat, crayon holder, bigger size pencil, clutch, one-on-one instruction, and constant reminder. Also, the modifications are done on the play activities if it does not work for a child with special needs. For example, they prepare two or more play activities for a child with special needs and sometimes, if the play activities do not work, then they extend the activity to the next class in which they do the modification of the activity. When these accommodations and modifications are done, equal opportunity is given to a child with special needs to learn. In agreement, National Policy on Persons with Disability (2019) article 7.1.3 also stated that the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) should make reasonable accommodations to increase access to early education, school, and vocational, tertiary and lifelong education through inclusive admissions policies, inclusive approaches and Special Educational Need (SEN) programmers, as well as strengthening access to the specialized institutes. Therefore, for many children with disabilities, the key to success lies in having appropriate accommodations and modifications made to the instruction and other classroom activities. Due to this, all the educators need to do proper planning depending upon the learning style and needs of the children to have a better implementation of the lesson.

Collaboration

Interestingly, the participants declared that they collaborate with different stakeholders in terms of training and the children are learning. It was found that Phuensem, the parent group, has supported the center in providing them with the training. Similarly, Perkins has also been supporting them technically. So, they come and observe how they are dealing with the children, and then they provide feedback. Sometimes, they have included them in their little training and workshops. Yet, collaboration has “become a catchall to signify just about any type of inter-organizational or inter-personal relationship, making it difficult for those seeking to collaborate to put into practice or evaluate with any certainty” (Gajda, 2004, p. 66).

As expected, collaboration between parents and the center had increased the active involvement of parents in developing their child's education program. Conversely, the parent who participated in the present study stated that they are willing to collaborate with the center, but then the time does not favor them as they have their responsibility to be carried out. Nevertheless, they collaborate whenever the tasks were assigned at home and when there was a program at the center. In line with this, effective collaboration is not composed of just one set of elements, but instead, it is made up of uniquely different characteristics explicitly tailored for each particular collaborative relationship (Austin, 2000; Perrault et al., 2011). Moreover, a study conducted by Jigyel et al. (2018) support parental involvement in their children's education is supported by effective communication and collaboration between school and home.

Further, one participants stated that we need support from both side (parent and center) because together, we can provide full support to the children. As elucidated earlier, the parents are invited by the center during the programs to feel encouraged, motivated and, most importantly, the parents feel involved. In agreement, the literature also stated that the most important aspect of collaboration is inviting the parents into open two-way communication (Swap, 1993). This practice alone asserts that the school is interested in parent input (Swap, 1993) and sets the tone for a collaborative environment.

The most interesting part of collaboration discovered during this study was the peer support where the children without disabilities help a child with special needs. This is one of the most appreciating cultures practiced in the center. Many of the

participants said that the children without disabilities help a child with special needs to carry their water bottles, hold their hands, and help them in transiting from one class to another. Compared to other general schools, the students are on their own, and do not help each other, nonetheless, as Friend and Cook (2007) state true collaboration comes only after a period of time in which trust and respect are established. Likewise, in the center, the children build a strong bond of relationship so that a child with special needs can fully trust the children without disabilities. Moreover, the center also encourages the children to befriend with everyone despite their disabilities. Therefore, there is a critical need for education policies to include detailed guidelines of how collaboration can work successfully in an inclusive setting.

Challenges Faced in Implementing the Play

Professional training is important for the better implementation of play activities to a child with special needs. If educators are trained and have enough knowledge of the play, they will eventually provide better services to the children. Nonetheless, the results of this study present that they faced challenges in having enough training for the facilitators since many of the participants stated that they get limited training on play-based learning and to deal with children with special needs. Many of them said that they had received the training or workshops facilitated by their principal in the center or sometimes by the one who has attended the workshops. This clearly states that whatever they practiced was based on the little knowledge they got from their principal. In line with this, Fullan (2001) stated that professional development is not about workshops and courses, instead, it is about developing more powerful ways of learning that occur day after day.

It was not surprising that they faced difficulty while implementing the play activities for a child with special needs. It was obvious that the facilitator struggled to deal with children with or without disabilities. It was said that when they focus on a child with special needs, directly or indirectly, they neglect the children without special needs. Furthermore, the children's mood also matters a lot while implementing the play activities to the children because if the children's mood is not good, the children do not pay attention in the class for a day. In this way, it hampers their learning.

Similarly, time also plays a vital role in implementing the play, but from the study, it was found that it was a challenge where the facilitators focused that they need to have more time while planning the play activities for a child with special needs because first, they need to plan based upon their needs and the mood. Next, they need to have multiple play activities for them. Not only that, even when the MoE has given them the workshops, they weren't able to attend as they could not leave the classes empty and because of that timing, it never worked out for them.

Lack of resources is also one of the challenges faced by Lekpu ECCD. It is the human resource and the physical resources in terms of structure. The Head of the center stated that they have a few facilitators where it was difficult for them to handle nine to 10 children in the class, including the children with special needs. The principal stated that she wanted to cut down the number of students initially, but they could not as more parents came seeking admission. In addition to that, it was challenging for them to take care of the children with special needs. For instance, as stated by P4, it was really difficult to focus on special child when they have a total of nine children in the class with at least two children with special needs. Therefore, to provide effective play activities to the children, there should be enough facilitators with enough knowledge on play activities to implement.

Moreover, the classroom is so pact that it was not accessible for a child with a physical disability to transit from one class to another. Of course, a child with special needs was given full support, but still, it was difficult for them to guide one on one. Nevertheless, some of the special child has their caregiver along with them, and these caregivers were allowed to come to the center because this child has more attachment with them, and that's how they support a child with special needs. Hence, it is recommended that the head of the centers or schools have an accessible environment with enough educators or teacher assistant to support the children with special needs.

Recommendation, Limitation and Conclusion

Recommendation

The study recommends that the educators understand the diverse learning capabilities of the children and create an interactive and conducive environment so that the children with special needs are given extra care to cope with others.

Moreover, as far as possible, the children need to be engaged more in building social skills to develop their self-esteem and confidence.

The study also recommends that to have effective learning and changes in a child, there should be better collaboration between home and school, where the parents need to play an active role in supporting the facilitators and as well as the facilitators need to listen to the voice of the parents. Therefore, there should be some laws that parents and facilitators need to have for better collaboration.

Moreover, MoE needs to have a strong and uniform policy on play-based learning for the children in ECCD centers, be it private or government ECCDs. There should not be any bias in implementing the policy. After all, it caters to the same category of children. Moreover, the respective principals should align with the guidelines instructed by MoE to ensure uniformity in the implementation of the play-based activities. Most importantly, be it private or government ECCDs, they should cater to children with special needs and provide the same opportunity as the children have the right to education.

Further research can be conducted on specific parts of the play instead of all types of play. This research study focused on implementing play-based learning for a child with special needs. Play-based learning is a broad topic. It would be beneficial to break up different types of play (social play, outdoor free play, sensory play, etc.) and incorporate play-based learning focusing on just one type of play for a child with special needs. Moreover, further research can also be conducted on the benefits of facilitator-led play-based activities to children with special needs. Likewise, future research can be conducted to investigate play-based learning in government ECCD because this study focuses on private ECCD. This is necessary to get a balanced view of play-based learning implemented in government and private ECCD since both cater to the children's same age group.

Limitations

This study was based on a unit of the case, a child. Due to the nature of the study, the generalizability of the findings could be limited. Further, Yin (2014) stated that case study findings might not be generalizable to larger populations. Also, the study was conducted in one of the private ECCD centers with inclusion in the country in an urban setting, so, the study's finding may not be generalized to others.

Another limitation of this study was the mismatch of placement and research topic. Initially, the whole study was planned to focus on one of the schools with the Special Education Need program, however, during the distribution of the placement, unfortunately, the planned research ideas could not be implemented in the ECCD center. Therefore, the whole procedure of the research was changed within a short period of time. Hence, there could be shortcomings in the study.

Another limitation was the interviews from the facilitators and principal that were conducted. Therefore, it was not able to draw comprehensive data as expected. Rephrasing questions from the original was too taxing to probe questions to the participants as desired. Next, conducting an interview with the parent was more challenging because they did not have the time and were not willing to express or share as they seemed to be quite reluctant while interviewing.

Moreover, the researcher's presence in the classroom could be seen as an intrusion and could have altered the collected information. However, attempts were made to minimize such limitations as far as possible. As a novice researcher, lots of limitations are foreseen, such as fear of getting limited information due to limited time to collect the data, which might lead to inaccurate information. There are also high chances that the data might have missed as the researcher is doing it for the first time. Moreover, lots of difficulties were faced while browsing the literature and then connecting with the findings.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the play activities implemented in teaching a child with special needs in Lekpu ECCD. This study answered the research questions. It aimed to share literature and findings with facilitators and other educationists in the kingdom to better implement play activities in the ECCD centers.

This research discovered that in the field, both facilitators and children are performing at their optimal potential. Facilitators are trying to exercise as many methods as possible to make children learn. They do not focus on academics, but their responsibilities are manifold, including behavioral development, life skills, and gradually preparing children to be independent. However, facilitators face difficulty in dealing with a child with special needs with the little knowledge they have. It demands them to give one-on-one support to a child with special needs, which was really challenging for them when they needed to look after other general children.

One of the facilitator's greatest problems was the lack of training on special needs or play-based learning. Of course, they got limited training facilitated by their principal, but that does not seem to help them have enough skills to deal with a child with special needs. Due to this, it hampers them ineffective implementation of play activities to a child with special needs.

Moreover, the training or workshops would also motivate the facilitators to work harder so that play activities will be effective and learning will take place in children.

While carrying out this study, the best practices of Lekpu ECCD center that the facilitators and the principals were all ladies, and their bond of relationship was so strong that these ladies work collaboratively in terms of planning as well as in any programs conducted in the center. Likewise, the children in the center are so supportive in helping each other, even for a child with special needs. The facilitators are young, energetic and active. Similarly, the principal is also so active and energetic and has good leadership qualities and supports her staff professionally and technically.

It was also interesting that the center was well structured in terms of planning, resources and implementation. A child with special needs was given full support with accommodations and modifications. Moreover, it was interesting to find out that Perkins technically supported them before the pandemics, but because of this pandemic, they need to explore themselves and learn and then practice. Therefore, to have better implementation of play activities to a child with special needs, there should be enough knowledge on its field so that the facilitators can provide better support to the children.

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