

CROSS-COUNTRY DOCUMENT ANALYSIS OF PLAY-BASED LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN ZAMBIA AND BEYOND

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Abstract

This research examined the incorporation of play-based learning in Early Childhood Education (ECE) policies across Zambia and twenty other diverse countries. Through document analysis, it uncovers commonalities and disparities in play-based learning principles. While both Zambian and global documents emphasise the significance of play in child development, they differ in scope, regional practices, and emphasis on global advocacy and cultural variations. Zambia's documents highlight specific practices, while global perspectives offer a broader international view. Both stress the multifaceted benefits of play in physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth. In summary, the findings underscored a global consensus on the significance of play-based learning in early childhood education, emphasising its role in holistic child development. Additionally, they highlighted the imperative of recognising cultural diversity and aligning policies with child rights, particularly in the Zambian context. Furthermore, the recommendations were aimed at bolstering the effectiveness of play-based pedagogies in early childhood education. They advocated for celebrating diversity, fostering holistic development, and ensuring the availability of appropriate resources and guidelines to support this approach. These recommendations ultimately seek to enhance the quality of early childhood education in Zambia by embracing cultural diversity, promoting global collaboration, and aligning play-based pedagogies with local and international best practices.

KeyWords: Cross-country, Document Analysis, Early Childhood, Play-based Learning, Zambia

Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) was officially incorporated into the formal educational framework of Zambia in the year 2014. However, it is worth noting that ECE had previously been acknowledged within the country's legislative framework, as evidenced by its inclusion in the Pre-Independence Day Nurseries Act of 1957 and its continued recognition in the post-independence era through the Sub-O Education policy (Munsaka and Kalinde, 2017). The discourse surrounding

its inclusion has evolved over time, transitioning from an initial focus on the rationale behind its incorporation to a more recent emphasis on the methodological aspects, particularly pertaining to the adoption of appropriate pedagogical approaches (Lungu and Matafwali, 2020; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, and Singer, 2019; Munsaka and Kalinde, 2017).

Numerous education policy documents in Zambia have underscored the pivotal role of ‘play’ in the pedagogical process for young children. This strategic emphasis on ‘play’ as a means of imparting knowledge and skills to children, is evident in various authoritative documents, including but not limited to the Continuous Professional Development Manual for ECE teachers (2020), Education Sector Skills Plan (2017-2021), Early Childhood Teachers Diploma Syllabus (2015), the Zambia Curriculum Framework (2013), the Teacher’s Curriculum Implementation Guide (2013), the Primary Syllabus (2013), the Early Childhood Syllabus (2013), and the seminal policy document titled “Educating our Future” (1996).

The consistent inclusion of play-based approaches in these policy documents signifies a deliberate and enduring commitment by the Zambian education system to leverage ‘play’ as an effective and developmentally appropriate pedagogical tool in the ECE domain Zambia Education Curriculum Framework, (2013). ‘Play’ is indeed a natural and essential aspect of childhood development, recognised across diverse cultures (Kalinde and Vermeulen 2016; Duncan and Tarulli, 2003; Hart and Risley, 1995). It serves as a fundamental mechanism through which children explore their environment, develop cognitive and social skills, and make sense of the world around them (White, 2012; Bredekamp, 2011; Ginsburg, 2007). Play-based learning has gained prominence in ECE as a pedagogical approach that leverages children’s innate inclination toward ‘play’ to facilitate meaningful learning experiences (Pellegrini, and Holmes, 2019; Berk and Winsler, 2019).

Play-based learning refers to teaching and learning that is facilitated through activities centered around ‘play’. These activities may encompass a wide range of creative and interactive methods, such as singing, movement, dance, and storytelling (Berk and Winsler, 2019; Vandenberg and Smart, 2019; Zambia Curriculum Framework, 2013; Resource Book for Early Childhood Care Development and Education, 2004). Such an approach to education encourages children to engage actively in the learning process, fostering their cognitive, social, and emotional development in a holistic manner (Learning through Play in Early Education, 2021 and Kalinde, 2017). Despite the numerous benefits associated with play-based learning, there remains a lack of comprehensive cross-country comparative studies that investigate the extent to which different nations prioritise and implement these approaches in their educational systems. Such studies would provide valuable insights into the factors influencing the incorporation of play-based learning practices, the variations in policy approaches, and the potential impact on learner outcomes across diverse cultural and educational contexts. By comparing educational documents and policies related to play-based learning

in different countries, researchers and educators can identify best practices and successful strategies that have been implemented. This can help inform improvements in the educational system of one's own country as was the case in this study.

1.2 Aim and Research Questions

Play-based learning has been recognised globally as a significant pedagogical approach in Early Childhood Education (ECE). This research employed document analysis to scrutinise the presence of play-based learning within ECE policies on a global scale. Through this comparative examination of official policy documents, the research unveiled prevalent trends in the development and representation of play-based learning policies. Moreover, it illuminated the potential synergies of these policies in the advancement of play-based learning practices within Zambia and other national contexts.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the stated significance of 'play' in official documents related to early childhood education in Zambia and twenty other countries?
2. What is the perceived relationship between 'play' and learning as articulated in the Zambian early childhood education policies and twenty other countries?
3. How is the connection between 'play' and child development explained within official documents on early childhood education in Zambia and twenty other countries?
4. What are the defined elements of the 'play' environment and the availability of resources as outlined in Zambian policies and twenty other countries?

1.3 Delimitation and Limitation

This study acknowledged the multifaceted nature of play-based learning implementation within educational contexts. Prior research has adeptly elucidated the challenges and constraints confronted by educators when endeavouring to effectively enact play-based learning (Matafwali and Lungu 2020; Munsaka and Kalinde, 2017; Matafwali and Munsaka 2011). However, it is essential to clarify that the primary focus of this study resided in the analysis of the substantive content contained within policy documents pertaining to play-based learning.

Furthermore, it was imperative to delineate the inclusion criteria employed in the selection of policy documents for examination in this study. Specifically, only policy documents that explicitly reference 'play' and play-based learning were considered for inclusion in the research endeavour. It is noteworthy that no extant publication has undertaken a comprehensive comparative analysis of policy pronouncements in Zambia concerning play-based learning across diverse countries. As such, the scope of this study was confined to a thorough review of online literature and scholarly journals that expound upon the content pertinent to play-based learning within policy documents originating from a sample of twenty distinct nations.

2. Methodology

This research undertaking involved an in-depth examination of the concept of play-based learning, as articulated within a corpus of fifteen educational documents originating from Zambia, alongside an additional twenty policy documents were obtained from a diverse array of countries to deliberately ensure a global perspective. Data collection encompassed various countries across different continents. In Europe, the nations that were included were Germany, Poland, and Sweden. The Asian region comprised Afghanistan, Japan, India, the Philippines, and Palestine. Canada represented North America in the study. The African continent was represented by Egypt, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Namibia, Nigeria, the Gambia, Cameroon, Tanzania, and Zambia. The selection of these specific countries was contingent upon the availability of relevant policy documents in the public domain, and as such, the resultant sample might not necessarily guarantee a globally representative cross-section.

It is important to note that policy documents are important in steering educational practices and ensuring regulatory compliance within their respective countries. Consequently, the research adopted document analysis as its primary methodological approach, given its recognised efficiency and cost-effectiveness in facilitating multinational investigations (Marshall and Rossman 2016; Smith, 2015). The analytic procedure entailed finding information related to ‘play’ in the documents, extracting meaningful insights, and synthesising information into discernible themes (Bowen, 2009).

3. Findings

In the realm of education in Zambia, a comprehensive framework spanning several years has been established starting with the most recent being *Learning through ‘Play’ in Early Education: Teacher’s Manual (2021)*, *Continuous Professional Development Manual for ECE teachers, (2020)*, *Guide on Production of Low-Cost Play Teaching and Learning Materials (2019)*, *Education Sector Skills Plan, (2017-2021)*, *Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) for Zambia (2016)*, *Early Childhood Teachers Diploma Syllabus (2015)*, *Early Education Standards Guidelines (2014)*, *Child Development Assessment Tool for Zambia (CDATZ), (2014)*, *Zambia Curriculum Framework (2013)*, *Teacher’s Curriculum Implementation Guide (2013)*, *The Primary Syllabus (2013)*, *Early Childhood Syllabus (2013)*, *Resource Book for Early Childhood Care Development and Education (2004)*, *Educating our Future (1996)* and *Educational Reforms (1977)*.

The educational documents under consideration organise their findings into distinct thematic sections, namely: the significance of ‘play’, the nexus between play and learning, the relationship between play and child development, the elements of the ‘play’ environment and available resources, and the utilisation of play-based pedagogical approaches.

3.1 The significance of play

‘Play’ is recognised for its pivotal role in accelerating the learning process in children by serving as a conduit for sensory experiences that can effectively facilitate learning (The Early Education Standards Guidelines, 2014; Resource Book for Early Childhood Care Development and Education, 2004). This perspective is in the Early Education Standards Guideline (2014), which identifies ‘play’ as the most natural and potent mode through which children acquire knowledge and skills. ‘Play’ is said to exhibit various features and types that contribute to its significance in ECE which encompass the spontaneous and voluntary nature of ‘play’, its intrinsic motivation, and its capacity to foster creativity and problem-solving skills (Resource Book for Early Childhood Care Development and Education, 2004). Moreover, ‘play’ is said to manifest in diverse forms, including symbolic ‘play’, socio-dramatic ‘play’, and physical ‘play’, each offering unique learning opportunities (Resource Book for Early Childhood Care Development and Education, 2004).

The benefits of ‘play’ in ECE are outlined as manifold. One of its paramount advantages lies in enabling children to learn at their own pace (Continuous Professional Development Manual for ECE Teachers, 2020). Additionally, ‘play’ is explained as promoting interaction among children, serving as a fertile ground for social development and collaborative learning (Continuous Professional Development Manual for ECE teachers, 2020; Zambia Curriculum Framework, 2013). Through ‘play’, children learn to regulate their behaviour. Understanding the developmental stages of ‘play’ is essential in optimising its educational potential. These stages typically encompass solitary ‘play’, parallel play, associative play, and cooperative play, with each stage contributing distinct cognitive, social, and emotional advancements (Resource Book for Early Childhood Care Development and Education, 2004).

3.2 Comparing and contrasting the significance of ‘play’ in Zambian and Global Documents

In Zambia and twenty other countries (from Europe), such as Germany, Poland, and Sweden the significance of ‘play’ was compared. The Asian region comprised Afghanistan, Japan, India, the Philippines, and Palestine. Canada represented North America in the study. The African continent was represented by Egypt, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Namibia, Nigeria, the Gambia, Cameroon, and Tanzania. There is a strong emphasis on the importance of ‘play’ in ECE. ‘Play’ is seen as a fundamental and natural way for children to learn, explore, and develop essential skills. Here are some key points of comparison and contrast:

Similarities

1. Holistic development: ‘Play’ is emphasised as contributing to the holistic development of children, addressing various aspects such as physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development.

2. Learning: ‘Play’ is recognised as a valuable mode of learning in Zambia and other global countries represented by the following countries: Germany, Japan, India, the Philippines, and Palestine. Canada, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Namibia, Nigeria, the Gambia, Cameroon and Tanzania. It is highlighted as a means through which children acquire knowledge, problem-solving skills, and creativity.
3. Social skills: ‘play’ is stressed in developing social skills as children learn to cooperate, communicate, negotiate, and build relationships through ‘play’.
4. Emotional regulation: ‘play’ is emphasised for providing a safe space for children to express and regulate their emotions thereby managing their feelings and developing emotional intelligence in multiple contexts.
5. Creativity: ‘Play’ is encouraged for creativity and imagination in allowing children to invent scenarios, solve problems, and express themselves creatively in Zambian education policies and Germany, Poland, and Sweden. India, Canada, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Namibia, Nigeria, the Gambia, Cameroon and Tanzania.
6. Physical development: Physical play is highlighted in both as essential for the development of motor skills, coordination, and physical fitness.

Differences

1. Specific context: In Zambia, there is specific mention of the Early Education Standards Guideline (2014) and the Continuous Professional Development Manual for ECE teachers (2020) as sources of guidance for the importance of ‘play’ in ECE. In contrast, the global documents provide a more generalised perspective on ‘play’ in ECE without specific references to guidelines or manuals.
2. Regional and global references: Examples of countries included in the differences are from countries such as Egypt, Tanzania, Gambia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Cameroon, and Uganda, offering a more diverse perspective.

3.2 The nexus between Play and Learning

As stipulated by the Early Childhood Teachers Diploma Syllabus of 2015, the curriculum underscores the centrality of play in the knowledge acquisition process. This notion is further reinforced by the Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) for Zambia in 2016, which emphasises that learning in ECE should manifest as exploratory engagements within the realm of play. The intrinsic link between ‘play’ and learning is elucidated in the Resource Book for Early Childhood Care Development and Education of 2004. Here, it is articulated that ‘play’ serves as a vehicle for sensual experiences that hold the potential to catalyse the process of learning. Furthermore, the pedagogical landscape in ECE, as delineated by the Zambia Curriculum Framework of 2013, resonates with the idea that teaching and

learning predominantly adopt an informal approach, characterised by guided and unguided play.

One of the pivotal insights garnered, from the aforementioned continuous professional development Manual for ECE teachers in 2020, is the assertion that learning through play permits children to progress at their individualised pace. The manual also underscores the role of ‘play’ in the development of critical life skills. The curriculum for ECE, as envisioned by the Zambia Curriculum Framework of 2013, prescribes a dominant presence of ‘play’ and pre-learning activities across various learning domains, encompassing social studies, integrated science, numeracy, literacy and language, and expressive arts.

It is stated that the informal yet guided and unguided teaching approaches prevalent in ECE, should account for approximately 40 per cent of the learning process (Continuous Professional Development Manual for ECE Teachers, 2020). Furthermore, the Education Curriculum Framework of 2013 delineates the educational landscape by allocating a notable proportion of teaching and learning activities. Specifically, within this framework, a clear demarcation is established, designating academic learning to constitute 40 per cent of the educational process, while the remaining 60 per cent is apportioned to the pivotal role of play in facilitating teaching and learning endeavours.

3.2.1 Comparing and contrasting the nexus between play and learning in Zambian and Global Documents

‘Play’ and learning are emphasised in both the Zambian and global documents and their role in facilitating holistic learning and development. However, there are some differences and nuances in how this concept is discussed and implemented in Zambia compared to the global perspective.

Similarities

- 1. Play-based learning:** In both the Zambian and global perspectives include Germany, Poland, and Sweden. Egypt, Eswatini, Ghana, Rwanda, Namibia, Nigeria, the Gambia, Cameroon, and Tanzania), the value of play-based learning in ECE is recognised. They emphasise that play is not separate from learning but an integral part of it, encouraging active participation, engagement, and enjoyment (The Early Education Standards Guidelines, 2014; Kenyan Curriculum Framework, 2013).
- 2. Cognitive development:** From the Zambian and global perspectives from Germany, Poland, Sweden, Afghanistan, Japan, India, the Philippines, Palestine, Canada, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Namibia, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Tanzania, play is acknowledged for supporting cognitive development by enhancing problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and the understanding of various concepts, including mathematics and science.

3. **Language development:** The Zambian and global perspectives from Poland, Sweden, India, Canada, Kenya, Rwanda, Namibia, Nigeria, the Gambia, Cameroon, and Tanzania, highlight how play activities promote language development through conversation, storytelling, and role-play, helping children acquire vocabulary and communication skills.
4. **Social skills:** The importance of play in developing social skills like cooperation, sharing, empathy, and conflict resolution is mentioned in both contexts.
5. **Creativity and imagination:** ‘Play’ is recognised as a means of nurturing creativity and imagination, which are seen as essential for a child’s overall development.

Differences

1. **Individualised pace:** The Zambian documents highlight the concept that learning through ‘play’ allows children to progress at their individualised pace, a point that is not explicitly mentioned in the policy documents from Sweden, India, the Philippines, Palestine, Canada, Rwanda, Namibia, Nigeria, the Gambia, Cameroon, and Tanzania.
2. **Percentage of learning:** The Zambian document (Continuous Professional Development Manual for ECE Teachers, 2020) mentions that approximately 40 per cent of the learning process in ECE should involve informal yet guided and unguided teaching approaches. The Education Curriculum Framework of 2013 also delineates academic learning to constitute 40 per cent , while the remaining 60 per cent is apportioned to the pivotal role of play in facilitating teaching and learning endeavours. This specific percentage is not mentioned in the global documents from Afghanistan, Japan, India, the Philippines, Palestine, Canada, Egypt, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania which focus more on the benefits and principles of play-based learning.
3. **Educational policies:** There is mention of how play-based learning aligns with the goals outlined in various other countries’ educational policies, such as India’s Education Policy of 2020 and the Minister of National Education of 14 February 2017 in Poland. In contrast, the Zambian documents do not explicitly reference other educational policies.
4. **Regional and global references:** In contrast, the global perspectives are drawn from various countries like Egypt, Tanzania, Cameroon, Gambia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Uganda, Eswatini, Sweden, Palestine, the Philippines, India, Poland, and Afghanistan, providing a broader international perspective on play-based learning.

3.3 The Relationship between Play and Child Development

In the Resource Book for Early Childhood Care Development and Education (2004), a comprehensive exploration of ‘play’ features, types, and its manifold benefits for diverse developmental stages is provided. Furthermore, in the Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) how ‘play’ aligns with cognition,

language and literacy, physical development and well-being, social and emotional development, as well as spiritual and moral development are indicated as domains encompassing various subdomains that are essential to a child's holistic growth.

First and foremost, 'play' is indicated as acting as a dynamic catalyst in stimulating cognitive faculties by allowing children to engage in problem-solving, strategic thinking, and the development of analytical skills (Resource Book for Early Childhood Care Development and Education, 2004; The Early Education Standards Guidelines, 2014). Transitioning to the language and literacy domain, it is suggested that 'play' not only enhances language acquisition but also nurtures receptive language skills by empowering children to express themselves verbally and through written communication, fostering literacy development and the acquisition of language proficiency. In the realm of physical development, 'play' is said to assume a multifaceted role in gross motor development, fine motor development, eye-hand coordination, safety awareness, in addition to proper nutrition (Early Childhood Education and Care, Educational guidelines, 2003). The social and emotional domain is said to be enriched by 'play' as a means for social interaction, nurturing interpersonal skills, self-awareness, social competence, self-expression, and self-concept. 'Play' is suggested as providing a safe space for children to explore their emotions, interact with peers, and develop the essential building blocks of emotional intelligence.

Lastly, spiritual and moral development, encompassing religious and moral values, is not untouched by the influence of 'play' (Early Learning and Development Standards for Zambia, 2016; Resource book for Early Childhood Care, Development and Education, 2004). Children, through 'play', gain knowledge of values, including respect for human and moral values. 'Play' provides opportunities for them to reflect upon and internalise these values, contributing to their ethical and spiritual growth. In alignment with these insights, the Continuous Professional Development Manual for Early Childhood Education (2020) emphasises that 'play' is a dynamic vehicle through which children grow physically, emotionally, and socially. It highlights the role of 'play' as a catalyst for social interaction, supporting the learning process in accordance with the Zambia curriculum framework of 2013. Furthermore, the manual acknowledges that 'play' aids children in regulating their behaviour and extending their concentration spans.

'Play' is a cornerstone of child development, fostering growth in multiple domains. As indicated in the Resource Book for Early Childhood Care Development and Education (2004) and the Continuous Professional Development Manual for ECE teachers (2020), 'play' can contribute significantly to cognitive, language, literacy, physical, social, emotional, as well as spiritual and moral development. Understanding the intricate interplay between 'play' and these developmental domains is essential for educators and caregivers as they endeavour to create nurturing environments that promote holistic child growth.

3.3.1 Comparing and Contrasting the Relationship between ‘Play’ and Child Development in Zambian and Global Documents

The Zambian and the global documents of Afghanistan, Japan, India, the Philippines, Palestine and Canada, emphasise the importance of ‘play’ in child development, highlighting its significant impact on various aspects of a child’s growth. Here’s a comparison of the key points made in both:

Similarities

1. **Physical Development:** Just like in Zambia, policy documents of India and Poland also acknowledge that ‘play’ contributes to physical development by promoting fine and gross motor skills, coordination, and strength. Activities such as running, jumping, and manipulating objects are mentioned as ways through which ‘play’ aids physical development.
2. **Cognitive Development:** Zambia, Eswatini, Germany, Poland, Japan, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda, and Namibia emphasise that ‘play’ enhances cognitive development by stimulating problem-solving abilities, critical thinking, creativity, and the understanding of cause-and-effect relationships. The development of cognitive skills is seen as a crucial outcome of ‘play’.
3. **Social Development:** Both Zambian and global documents highlight the role of ‘play’ in social development for the learning of social skills such as cooperation, sharing, communication, and empathy. Interactions with peers are considered essential for building relationships and developing social competencies.
4. **Emotional Development:** The Zambian and global documents of Poland, and Sweden, India, the Philippines, and Palestine, Canada, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Namibia, Nigeria, the Gambia, Cameroon, and Tanzania recognise ‘play’ as a means for children to express and understand their emotions thereby helping them develop emotional regulation skills for coping with stress and anxiety. Emotional development is seen as an important aspect of play-based learning.

Differences

1. **Specific domains:** The Zambian documents provide a more structured breakdown of child development into specific domains, including cognitive, language and literacy, physical, social and emotional, and spiritual and moral development. It mentions subdomains within each category. In contrast, the spiritual moral development seems unique to Zambia.
2. **Regional and global references:** Countries referred to in illustrating ‘play’ and child development include Cameroon, Nigeria, Egypt, Malawi, Uganda, Sweden, Canada, Palestine, Philippines, India, Japan, Germany and Afghanistan.

3.4 The Elements of ‘Play’ Environment and Resources in Zambian Documents

In Early Childhood Education (ECE), the provision of a well-equipped play park is underscored as an imperative requirement, aligning with the Early Education Standards Guidelines of 2014. Within this context, the emphasis is placed on the availability of indoor play materials tailored to the specific age group, ensuring a conducive environment for early learning and development. Moreover, the Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) for Zambia, as articulated in 2016, extend their recommendations to incorporate the utilisation of cultural resources within the sphere of play. The Zambian documents refer to country-specific documents, such as the Early Education Standards Guidelines of 2014 and the Child Development Assessment Tool for Zambia (CDATZ) from 2014, indicating the importance of adhering to national standards and resources.

Delving further into the practical aspects, the Guide on Production of Low-Cost Play Teaching and Learning Material from 2019 serves as a valuable resource. This guide offers a comprehensive list of ‘play’ items and provides step-by-step instructions on crafting them. The ‘play’ items are thoughtfully categorised according to different learning areas, encompassing language and literacy, social studies, environmental sciences, pre-mathematics, and expressive arts. This categorisation can aid teachers in tailoring their approach to meet specific developmental objectives.

Dramatic play is suggested as an integral component of early childhood education, which demands a range of materials, including costumes and props. These resources allow children to immerse themselves in imaginative scenarios, enhancing their cognitive and emotional development. In addition to dramatic play, various play-segmented areas are recommended within the ECE classroom. These areas encompass arts and crafts, block play, music, book corners, science and technology, and the outdoor nature corner. Each of these segments serves as a unique platform for children to explore and engage with diverse aspects of their environment, nurturing holistic development (Child Development Assessment Tool for Zambia, (2014).

Equally, the Child Development Assessment Tool for Zambia (CDATZ) from 2014 provides further insights into the selection of ‘play’ materials. Notable recommendations include soft toys, plastic clay, a pair of scissors, a skipping rope, small bowl papers, clothes, and crayons. Importantly, the CDATZ encourages the use of improvised alternatives, fostering resourcefulness and adaptability in the educational process.

3.4.1 Comparing and Contrasting the Elements of ‘Play’ Environment and Resources in Zambian and Global Documents

The Zambian and Germany, Poland, and Sweden, Afghanistan, Japan, India, Philippines, Palestine, Canada, Egypt, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda,

Namibia, Nigeria, the Gambia, Cameroon, and Tanzania provide insights into the requirements and recommendations for creating a conducive classroom environment for play in early childhood education (ECE). However, there are some similarities and differences between the local and international perspectives:

Similarities

1. **Safe environment:** Zambia and countries such as Kenya, Germany, Poland, Sweden, and Ghana emphasise the importance of a safe and secure environment for ‘play’, ensuring that children are protected from potential harm.
2. **Variety of materials:** Zambia and Japan, Gambia, Cameroon, and Tanzania highlight the need for a diverse range of play materials and resources to stimulate different types of play and creativity.
3. **Adult guidance:** Zambia, Cameroon, Tanzania, Kenya, Canada, Eswatini, Rwanda, and Egypt acknowledge the role of adults, including teachers and caregivers, in facilitating ‘play’. Adults are seen as providing guidance, ensuring safety, and enriching the play experiences.
4. **Time for play:** Zambia and Nigeria, Ghana, Malawi, the Philippines, and Palestine emphasise the importance of allocating sufficient time within the ECE curriculum for ‘play’, allowing children to engage in both structured and unstructured play.
5. **Freedom and autonomy:** Zambia, India, Afghanistan, Malawi, Rwanda and Tanzania agree that children should have the freedom to choose their ‘play’ activities, promoting autonomy and decision-making skills.
6. **Cultural emphasis:** Particularly in the case of Japan and Poland, there is mention of the incorporation of cultural and traditional elements into ‘play’. This aspect is not explicitly mentioned in the Zambian documents.

Differences

1. **Cultural context:** The Zambian documents specifically mention the need to utilise cultural resources within play, aligning with the Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) for Zambia. This highlights the importance of incorporating local cultural elements into play. The documents include; the Continuous Professional Development Manual for ECE teachers (2020), Zambia Curriculum Framework (2013), Continuous Professional Development Manual for ECE teachers (2020), and Resource book for Early Childhood Care Development and Education, (2004).
2. **Specific resources:** The Zambian documents provide specific recommendations for ‘play’ materials, such as soft toys, plasticene clay, and crayons, based on the Child Development Assessment Tool for Zambia (CDATZ). In contrast, the global documents as found in policy documents of Germany, Poland, Canada, Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria, and India offer more generalised guidelines without specific resource recommendations.

- 3. Country-specific examples:** The global perspectives include examples from various countries, such as Egypt, Tanzania, Cameroon, Gambia, Malawi, Uganda, Eswatini, Canada, Palestine, and the Philippines, illustrating global perspectives on ECE play environments.

3.5 The Utilisation of Play-based Pedagogical Approaches

Play-based pedagogies are explained as encompassing a diverse array of educational approaches that prioritise active engagement, exploration, and creativity within early childhood education (Resource Book for Early Childhood Care Development and Education, 2004). These approaches encompass various forms of ‘play’, each tailored to foster specific developmental domains and cognitive skills. Key elements of play-based pedagogies include dramatic play, arts and crafts activities, block play, music, a dedicated book corner, opportunities for science and technology exploration, and the provision of outdoor nature experiences.

Within the framework of play-based pedagogies, teaching methods are child-centred, emphasising the child’s active participation in the learning process. Some notable methods that align with these pedagogies include role play, drama, problem-solving activities, information transfer through hands-on experiences, group work, field trips, demonstrations, storytelling, incorporation of rhymes and songs, nature walks, simulations, and project-based work. These methods are characterised by their learner-centric nature, encouraging children to take an active role in their own learning (Early Childhood Teachers Diploma Syllabus, 2015; Resource Book for Early Childhood Care Development and Education, 2004).

The primary features of child-centred methods within play-based pedagogies include the following:

- 1. Authentic teaching and learning materials:** The use of materials and resources that mirror real-life objects and experiences, enabling children to connect their learning to the world around them.
- 2. Variety of activities based on real-life experiences:** A broad spectrum of activities designed to replicate real-world situations, allowing children to apply their knowledge and skills in practical contexts.
- 3. Age-appropriate grouping:** Placing learners in age-appropriate groups to ensure that the learning activities and content align with their developmental stages and abilities.
- 4. Continuous assessment:** The ongoing assessment of children’s progress and understanding, enabling educators to tailor their approaches to meet individual needs and track growth over time.

3.5.1 Comparing and Contrasting the Utilisation of Play-based Pedagogical Approaches in Zambian and Global Documents

The Zambian and Global documents (Japan, India, the Philippines, Canada, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Namibia, Nigeria, Gambia) discuss play-based

pedagogies in early childhood education, but they have some key differences and similarities. Here's a comparison and contrast between the two:

Similarities

1. **Definition of play-based pedagogies:** Both agree on the description of play-based pedagogies as stated in policy documents of Germany, Poland, Japan, Palestine, Egypt, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, the Gambia, Cameroon, and Tanzania. They emphasise that these pedagogies prioritise active engagement, exploration, and creativity in early childhood education.
2. **Child-centred approach:** Zambia, Germany, Poland, Sweden, Japan, India, The Philippines, Palestine, Egypt, and Eswatini, emphasise the active participation of children in the learning process.
3. **Use of authentic materials:** Zambia, Namibia, Nigeria, Gambia, Cameroon, Germany, Poland, and Sweden both stress the importance of using authentic teaching and learning materials that connect children's learning to the real world.
4. **Continuous assessment:** Zambia, Rwanda, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Sweden, and Poland emphasise the importance of continuous assessment to track children's progress and tailor teaching approaches to individual needs.

Differences

1. **Scope:** Most Zambian documents primarily focus on play-based pedagogies within Zambian context. They mention specific activities and methods used in Zambian early childhood education, such as nature experiences and outdoor activities. In contrast, a broader perspective without specific activities on play-based pedagogical practices from around the world is given.
2. **Classical approaches:** The policy documents in Italy, the United Kingdom, and Germany discuss various international approaches to play-based education, such as the Reggio Emilia Approach (Italy), Montessori Method (Italy), Forest Schools (Scandinavia and UK), and Waldorf Education (Germany), which are not mentioned in the Zambian documents. This highlights the diversity of play-based practices globally.
3. **Educational systems:** Some of the policy documents in Sweden, Canada, the Philippines, Palestine, Namibia, Kenya, Egypt and Tanzania mention how play-based pedagogies are incorporated into different countries' educational systems, including the United States, Canada, Finland, and developing countries. In contrast, the Zambian documents primarily focus on describing the pedagogical methods without discussing how they fit into Zambia's broader educational system.
4. **Emphasis on cultural variations:** The documents in Kenya, Uganda, Germany, Sweden, and Ghana acknowledged that play-based pedagogies can vary depending on cultural norms and values, suggesting that these practices may adapt to accommodate different cultural contexts. The Zambian documents do not explicitly address this aspect of cultural variation.

5. **Global advocacy:** Most policy documents in Germany, Poland, Sweden, Asia Afghanistan, Japan, India, the Philippines, Palestine, Egypt, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Nigeria, the Gambia, Cameroon, and Tanzania, highlight the role of international organisations like the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in advocating for play-based pedagogies as a universal right for children and an essential component of early learning. The Zambian documents do not mention such global advocacy efforts.

3.6 Conclusions and Recommendations

The conclusions and recommendations presented herein are formulated with the primary objective of elucidating both commonalities and distinctions in the treatment of play-based learning elements, within educational documents, across Zambia and an array of twenty other countries. The overarching aim is to pinpoint potential disparities that signal areas warranting attention and enhancement within Zambia’s educational documentation framework.

Emphasis on ‘play’ in early childhood education (ECE): Both the Zambian and Global documents (Japan, India, the Philippines, and Palestine. Canada, Egypt, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Namibia, Nigeria, the Gambia and Cameroon) underscore the critical role of play in ECE. Play is recognised as a fundamental and natural way for children to learn, explore, and develop essential skills. This consensus reflects a global understanding of the significance of play in early learning.

3.6.1 Conclusions

Global emphasis on play: Both the Zambian and documents of Germany, Poland, Sweden, Asian Afghanistan, Japan, India, the Philippines, Palestine, Egypt, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Nigeria, the Gambia, Cameroon, and Tanzania affirm the pivotal role of play-based learning in early childhood education and development. They recognise ‘play’ as a multifaceted approach contributing to physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth universally.

Cultural and linguistic variations: The documents from Germany, Poland, Sweden, Asian Afghanistan, Japan, India, the Philippines, Palestine, Egypt, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Nigeria, the Gambia, Cameroon, and Tanzania emphasise the importance of incorporating cultural and linguistic elements into play-based learning, and adapting these practices to suit diverse cultural contexts. This diversity enriches play-based education on a global scale, acknowledging the significance of cultural variations.

Child rights and education policy integration: The Zambian documents do not mention the Child Rights Act (2003), highlighting ‘play’ as a fundamental right of children. However, this crucial link between child rights and the education policy

is not consistently integrated into the broader educational documents, indicating a need for policy alignment in Zambia's ECE system.

Structured domains: Zambia's documents adopt a structured approach to child development by breaking it down into specific domains, such as cognitive, language and literacy, physical, social and emotional, and spiritual and moral development. This structured framework provides a comprehensive understanding of child development within the Zambian context, offering valuable insights for educators and policymakers.

3.6.2 Recommendations

Cultural integration and global collaboration: Encourage the integration of cultural and linguistic elements into play-based learning in Zambia while promoting global collaboration among countries and international organisations. This approach will enhance the cultural relevance of Early Childhood Education (ECE) practices and facilitate the exchange of best practices in play-based pedagogies on a global scale.

Diversity of play-based approaches: Emphasise the diversity of play-based approaches by introducing classical international models like the Reggio Emilia Approach, Montessori Method, Forest Schools, and Waldorf Education to Zambia's ECE framework. This exposure can enrich the local understanding of play-based pedagogies.

Integration into educational systems: Ensure the seamless integration of play-based pedagogies into Zambia's national educational policies and frameworks. Simultaneously, explore how these pedagogies fit within the broader educational system to create a cohesive ECE approach.

Cultural adaptation: Recognise that play-based pedagogies may need to adapt to accommodate different cultural norms and values within Zambia. Encourage flexibility in implementing these practices to align with local contexts.

Global advocacy: Promote the role of international organisations, such as UNICEF and UNESCO, in advocating for play-based pedagogies as a fundamental right for children and an essential component of early learning in Zambia. Align local efforts with global advocacy to prioritise 'play' in ECE.

Teacher training: Invest in comprehensive teacher training programs in Zambia that focus on the effective implementation of play-based pedagogies. Equip educators with the necessary skills to create engaging play environments and guide children's learning through play.

Holistic development: Encourage the adoption of a holistic approach to child development in ECE programmes. Emphasise the importance of 'play' as a means to support children's growth in physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and even spiritual and moral domains, promoting well-rounded development.

Celebrate diversity in 'play' approaches: Recognise and celebrate the diversity of play-based pedagogies and practices across different regions and countries. Encourage educators and policymakers to embrace this adaptability of 'play' to different cultural contexts while still prioritising its fundamental role in ECE.

Resource considerations: Ensure that ECE environments are well-equipped with age-appropriate materials and resources to support play-based learning. While taking into account local contexts, consider the development of specific guidelines and recommendations for resources tailored to the needs of each region or country.

Child-centered approach: Promote a child-centered approach in ECE, emphasising that children ‘play’ an active role in their own learning. Encourage the cultivation of independence, decision-making, and problem-solving skills through play-based pedagogies.

Play for learning: Consider the unique approach taken by Zambia in the Education Curriculum Framework of 2013, where a substantial portion (60 per cent) of teaching and learning activities is allocated to play-based learning. Explore the potential benefits of such an approach and its applicability in other educational contexts.

Structured breakdown of child development: Encourage the adoption of a structured breakdown of child development into specific domains and subdomains, similar to what is outlined in the Zambian documents. This can provide a comprehensive framework for understanding child development and guide educators in supporting children’s growth across various dimensions.

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