

Effects of Pretend Play on Pre-Primary Pupils' Emotional Skills in Bassa, Plateau State

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Abstract. The study examined effects of pretend play on pre-primary pupils' emotional skills in Bassa, Plateau State. The purpose of the study was to determine the improvement that preschoolers' emotional skills will have when exposed to pretend play opportunities. The research design that was used was the quasi experimental non equivalent pre-test post-test research design. The population of the study consisted of 4,052 pre-primary pupils of 76 public pre-primary schools. The study sample comprised of 40 pupils in two intact classes which were the experimental and control groups respectively. The instrument for data collection was the Emotional Skill Rating Scale (ESRS) and data were analyzed using the One-Way Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) of two independent samples. The findings of the study revealed that the emotional skills mean scores of the experimental group were higher than the emotional skills mean scores of the control group. It was recommended that pre-primary teachers should deliberately create pretend play opportunities for children to engage in spontaneous play activities with their peers, in order that the requisite emotional skills for lifelong success will be acquired.

Keywords: Pretend Play, Pre-primary Pupils, Emotional Skills

1. Introduction

Emotional skills form the basis upon which humans build the competence to handle difficult emotions. Emotional skill refers to the acquisition of competence that enables effective regulation of personal feelings in order to accomplish life goals and aspirations. It is also the awareness of feelings and the ability to handle difficult emotions such as frustrations and depression.

It is important to build emotional skills from the early years because when these skills are well developed in childhood, children learn to recognize their feelings, label their feelings, understand that others have feelings as well, and begin to empathize with others. Also, children's development of emotional skills helps to improve their health, mental wellbeing, and general development. Thus children are better prepared for advanced interpersonal relationships at the end of pre-primary school.

According to Ukoha & Ukwuoma (2006), pre-primary pupils are found to be emotionally unskilled. They exhibit aggressive behaviours like pushing, hitting, biting, and snatching toys from each other during activities in their classrooms and play grounds, and they do not show affection. This situation negatively affects children's general developmental functioning and preparedness for formal education. At age six, when children are transiting to formal schooling, they demonstrate difficulties in relating with peers, and express feelings in

inappropriate ways (Cooper, Masi & Vick, 2009). These difficulties are found to increase mental health risk, underachievement in academic performance and disruptive behaviours in classrooms.

Care-givers development of young children's developmental skills have focused more on cognitive skills (Selzing-Musa, 2014), while conscious and deliberate training of emotional skills is not given the desired attention. Caregivers have tried to develop emotional skills through guidance in on-going interactions with peers, modeling, explicit intervention, but not so much have been achieved.

The emotional skills pre-primary pupils are expected to begin to develop include: empathy, resilience, self-regulation, and self-esteem (Barblett & Maloney, 2010). For the present study, the components of emotional skills that will be focused on are empathy and self-regulation. Empathy is the ability to show understanding and compassion toward the feelings of others and the willingness to affect others positively; it is psychological motivator for helping individuals in need. Self-regulation is how feelings are managed and expressed and the extent to which individuals overcome impulsive conditions in order to aim at higher goals. Children are daily exposed to new experiences that upset them, but when sensitive and intentional provisions are made, self-regulation skills may be learnt.

Play in the context of young children is a child-chosen, child-directed, and spontaneous activity that is intrinsically motivated and is being engaged in for its own sake without fear of failure (Haggai & Selzing-Musa, 2013; Lobman & Clark, 2015). Children can be involved in various types of play; like free play, guided play, structured play, role play and pretend play which this study focuses on. Pretend play is a subset of play activities characterized by an 'as if stance' (Lillard, Lerner, Hopkins, Dore, Smith, & Palmquist, 2013). In pretend play, children act like different people in different times and places. Pretend play reaches its peak in the pre-primary ages; three to five years of age. This study seeks to investigate the effects of pretend

play on pre-primary pupils' emotional skills in Bassa Local Government Area of Plateau State.

2. Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are to:

- Find out the effects of pretend play on pre-primary pupils' empathy skills.
- Investigate the effects of pretend play on pre-primary pupils' self-regulation skills

3. Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance:

- There will be no significant difference between pre-primary pupils' empathy skills mean score in the experimental and control groups after exposure to pretend play.
- There will be no significant difference between pre-primary pupils' self-regulation skills mean score in the experimental and control groups after exposure to pretend play.

4. Methodology

4.1 Design

The study used the quasi-experimental non equivalent pre-test post-test design because the study is concerned with young humans, whose behaviours are likely to change or be influenced at any time within the study period.

4.2 Population and Sample

The population of the study consists of 4,052 pre-primary pupils of 76 public pre-primary schools in Bassa Local Government Area. Public pre-primary schools are public linkages situated in public primary schools which are established to cater for the learning, development, care, nurturance, and protection of all young children before their entry into primary school. The study population comprises of boys and girls of the same socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

The study sample consists of pre-primary pupils of one selected pre-primary school. Class 'A' has 20 pre-primary pupils while class 'B' has 20 pre-primary pupils from the same socio-economic backgrounds. The study sample is obtained through purposive sampling method by taking the available pre-primary schools in the locality which have pre-primary classes with two arms to serve as intact groups that will constitute the experimental and control groups who will be 40 pupils in all.

Table 1: Sampled Groups

S/N	Group	TOTAL
1.	Experimental group	20
2.	Control group	20
	Total	40

4.3 Instrument

The 'Emotional Skill Rating Scale' (ESRS) was used by the researcher to observe pre-primary school children's emotional skills before and after the treatment. The instrument was made two of sections. Section A of the instrument consists of preliminary information of pupils (respondents); name of school, identification number of child, sex of child, age of pupil, and name of observer. Section B of the instrument consists of eight sub skills; four skills each for the empathy and self-regulation sub skills of the emotional developmental domain. Some of the items under the sub section of Empathy are child consoles peers when crying/sad, child cries along with peers, child is warm to peers and child offers help to peers in need.

4.4 Validity and Reliability

The content validity of the Emotional Skill Rating Scale was subjected to experts' scrutiny. Four experts; two each from Test and Measurement and Educational Psychology evaluated the instrument and all agreed that the items of the instrument were appropriate and the instrument measures what it intends to measure.

The construct validity of the instrument was measured using factor analysis interpretation. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin [KMO] measure of

sampling adequacy was .714, indicating suitability of the instrument for factor analysis.

The reliability of the instrument was determined through measure of internal consistency. Using Cronbach Alpha method of estimating reliability, the reliability coefficient for the Emotional Skill Rating Scale, (ESRS) were .970. Data was analyzed with The One-Way Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) of two independent samples.

4.5 Procedure for Data Collection

4.5.1 Administration of pre-test

The administration of the pre-test was done using the Emotional Skill Rating Scale before six weeks of treatment. The pre-test observation was administered by the researchers and research assistants in both experimental and control groups for 45 minutes. The pre-test was administered by the researchers and research assistants using the ESRS to rate pupil's levels of emotional skills for possible comparison with the post-test.

4.5.2 Administration of Treatment

Children were provided pretend play opportunities in the experimental group to engage in spontaneous activities for six weeks. Classrooms were arranged into learning centres and equipped with manufactured and locally sourced play materials (toys) like toy cars, blocks, cooking toys and toy provisions by researchers. Themes of the pretend play included transportation, petty trading, cooking, building and farming. The themes were changed weekly, for three days in a week for six weeks with the sixth week engaging children in eclectic themed pretend play

4.5.3 Administration of Placebo

The control group was an intact group that was made up of one pre-primary class. For three days in a week for six weeks, pupils were engaged in teacher directed reading and storytelling sessions for 45 minutes. At storytelling and reading time, children were told stories by the teacher. This was to ensure that the control group engaged in

teacher directed activities that did not resemble the activities of the experimental group.

4.5.4 Administration of Post-test

The administration of the post-test was done using the Emotional Skill Rating Scale after six weeks of treatment. The post-test observation was administered by the researchers and research assistants in both experimental and control groups for 45 minutes for three days in a week. The post-test was administered in the

same manner as the pre-test and the researchers and research assistants used the ESRS to rate pupil’s levels of emotional skills for possible comparison with the pre-test.

The scoring of the ESRS was done by assigning values to each scale on the extent of engagement of children in each emotional trait under study as children in experimental and control groups engage in their different activities. Social skills traits of pupils were scored as follows: Always-3, Sometimes-2, Seldom- 1, and Never-0.

5. Results

Hypothesis 1 (Ho₁):

There will be no significant difference between pre-primary pupils’ empathy skills mean score in the experimental and control groups after exposure to pretend play.

Table 2: Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) of Effects of Pretend Play on Nursery Pupils’ Empathy Skills

Source	SS	Df	MS	F	P
Adjusted mean	0.47	1	0.47	4.5	0.040657
Adjusted error	0.47	37	0.13		
Adjusted total	4.34	38			

Table 4 shows that the critical P value 0.40657 is less than the calculated F value of 4.5. The results on table 4 indicate that the empathy skills of nursery pupils differed significantly as a result of the pretend play intervention. Therefore the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that there is a significant difference in the empathy skills of nursery pupils who were exposed to pretend play and those who were not.

Hypothesis 2 (Ho₂):

There will be no significant difference between nursery pupils’ Self-regulation skills mean score in the experimental and control groups after exposure to pretend play. This hypothesis was tested using one-way ANCOVA. The result is presented in table 5.

Table 3: Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) of Effects of Pretend Play on Nursery Pupils’ Self-Regulation Skills

Source	SS	Df	MS	F	P
Adjusted mean	7.34	1	7.34	40.33	<.001
Adjusted error	6.73	37	0.18		
Adjusted Total	14.07	38			

Table 5 shows that the critical P value of <.001 is less than the calculated F value of 40.33. The results on table 5 indicate that the self-regulation skills of nursery pupils differed significantly as a result of the pretend play intervention. Therefore the null hypothesis is rejected. This shows that there is a significant difference in the self-regulation skills of nursery pupils who were exposed to pretend play and those who were not.

6. Discussion of Findings

The first major finding of the study indicated that the empathy skill mean score of pre-primary pupils in the experimental group was higher than the empathy skill mean score of pre-primary pupils in the control group. In other words, after exposing preschoolers to pretend play intervention, children were observed to console peers when crying, cry along with peers, were warm to peers and were also found to offer help to peers in need.

The second finding of the study indicated that the self-regulation skill mean score of pre-primary pupils in the experimental group was higher than the self-regulation skill mean score of pre-primary pupils in the control group. In other words, after exposing preschoolers to pretend play intervention, children were observed to hit other children less, seldom bit other children, seldom destroyed peers' properties and reduced screaming uncontrollably

7. Conclusion

The findings of the study have shown that pretend play is effective in the development of empathy and self-regulation components of emotional skills which are essential for success in the education and lifelong relationships of preschoolers.

8. Recommendations

In the light of the findings of the study, the researchers recommend the following:

- Emotional skills development should be accorded the same importance as cognitive skill development by caregivers, so that children will be equipped with the necessary emotional skills to cope with daily challenges of life.
- Pretend play opportunities should be provided by caregivers in all pre-primary classes in order to have children freely engage in their chosen activities so as to learn the necessary emotional

skills required for future academic and lifelong success.

- Pretend play materials such as costumes, objects, toys, etc should be provided for preschoolers' use in schools in order to strengthen their emotional development.
- Care givers should encourage children's engagement in pretend play activities by providing play materials, preparing play environments, and developing positive attitude towards play so that children will develop the requisite emotional skills.

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