

Influence of play-based learning on socio-emotional development among early childhood children in Afijio Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria

Elizabeth Olaoluwa Adubuola¹, Taofeek Akolade Gbadeyanka^{1*} , Baniyaminu Opeyemi Hamzat², Nasimot Opeyemi Oyewumi²

¹ Federal College of Education (Special) Oyo, Oyo State, Nigeria

² Federal College of Education, Iwo, Osun State, Nigeria

* Corresponding Author E-mail: gbadeyanka.taofeek2187@fcesoyo.edu.ng

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ABSTRACT

With two key objectives, this study delves into the impact of play-based learning programs on the socio-emotional development of early childhood children in Afijio Local Government Area, Oyo State, Nigeria. Firstly, it examines whether these programs affect socio-emotional development differently based on gender. Secondly, it investigates how school type, whether private or public, influences the effectiveness of play-based learning on socio-emotional development within this region. This study employs a non-randomized quasi-experimental design. The study engaged 132 early childhood children aged 3-5 years from two schools in the area. An Emotional Regulatory Skill Test (ERST) was designed and demonstrated strong reliability ($\alpha = 0.84$) and content validity. Results revealed that play-based learning programs are intentionally designed for gender-neutral effectiveness, promoting inclusivity and equality. A significant effect of play-based learning programs on socio-emotional development based on school type was found, with private schools providing enriched environments and public schools leveraging diversity for growth. These findings underscore the transformative potential of play-based learning in fostering inclusive socio-emotional development among early childhood children, advocating for gender-equitable programs, and suggesting allocating additional resources to public schools for enriched play-based experiences. Ultimately, the study offers a vision of a harmonious future where socio-emotional development knows no gender boundaries, and every child thrives, regardless of school type.



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INTRODUCTION

Over time, annalsplay assumes its irreplaceable role in human development (Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019). It transcends mere amusement, becoming a potent catalyst for learning and advancement (Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2014). Within this realm, children set sail on a voyage of

self-discovery, interweaving the tapestry of their understanding and engaging with their peers. The educational realm now recognizes play's profound influence in nurturing holistic development, especially socio-emotional growth (Chopra & Khanna, 2019). Through play-based learning, an educational strategy that harnesses the boundless power of play for scholastic objectives, the seeds of young learners' social and emotional competence are sown (Wood, 2013).

Drawing inspiration from the conviction that play serves as the primary conduit for the tender minds of our youth eloquently conveys this notion (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Emotional understanding is etched onto the pages of imaginative and cooperative play, artistry in which children master the expression and navigation of their sentiments while sculpting empathy, as seen in the work of Saracho and Spodek (2010). These skills forge the bedrock of robust relationships and enable the flourishing of children academically, socially, and emotionally.

In the theatre of play-based learning, children's innate curiosity and instinctual drive to explore their surroundings harmonize with their desire to express their creative essence. Here, they partake in scenarios mirroring real life, where emotional responses and social dynamics are artfully experimented upon. The spontaneity and autonomy inherent in this performance provide a stage where children traverse the entire spectrum of emotions, forging an intimate connection with their inner feelings and crafting a repertoire of strategies for emotional equilibrium, a masterstroke aptly described by Dockett and Perry (2014).

This illustrious play-based learning, a multifaceted gem, presents itself in various forms, from the boundless freedom of free play to the structured artistry of guided play. It beckons children into a realm of cooperative play, where negotiation, conflict resolution, and the virtue of taking turns are etched into their futures—an insight affirmed by Lillard et al. (2013). Beyond this, it extends its embrace to children from less privileged backgrounds, bridging disparities and offering rich, engaging learning escapades, as Rogers (2005) emphasizes. Furthermore, it is a sanctuary for children with special needs, nurturing meaningful engagement and skill development within an inclusive environment, a testament to its boundless generosity (Pellegrini, 2009).

To unleash the power of play-based learning in children's socio-emotional development during early childhood, we turn to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which emphasizes that children can achieve more when guided by a teacher. Frequent interactions within play-based learning create opportunities for scaffolding, wherein knowledgeable peers or adults assist children in understanding and managing their emotions during play, contributing to socio-emotional development (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978).

Children's inseparable bond with play stands as an undeniable truth and their inherent right, as emphasized by Jantan (2013). It plays a pivotal role in a child's journey towards realizing their utmost potential. It extends across cognitive, physical, social, and emotional dimensions, as corroborated by Rosli and Lin (2018) and Ali and Mahamod (2015). Pellegrini's (2009) study unveiled that play-based learning environments provide children with opportunities to regulate emotionally, manage emotions in a safe setting, and develop empathy and perspective-taking.

The pinnacle of social development emerges when children navigate their surroundings alongside peers or adults through social interactions, illuminated by Dzainudin et al. (2018). Play becomes a fertile ground where adults actively participate in children's endeavors (Jantan, 2013). This pedagogical process, rooted in play-based activities, unfolds as a well-structured framework, cultivating cooperative skills, socially appropriate behavior, and heightened social competence, a journey articulated by Loy (2017) and Vygotsky's scaffolding concept (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978).

Bodrova and Leong (2007) further emphasize that play-based learning encourages self-awareness and self-regulation. As children immerse themselves in imaginative play, they become attuned to their emotional responses and adapt their behavior accordingly. Longitudinal research by Saracho & Spodek (2010) underscores the lasting effects of play-based learning on socio-emotional development, demonstrating that children who experienced play-based education in their early years displayed higher levels of emotional intelligence, improved interpersonal relationships and greater resilience compared to their peers who did not have the same opportunity. Consequently, prompted by the insights gained from the preceding discussion, the researchers were inspired to investigate the influence of play-based learning on the socio-emotional development of early childhood children within the Afijio Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria.

This exploration aims to reveal the undeniable transformative potential that can illuminate a path toward a brighter and more harmonious future for these children. As a result, this study aims to fill a critical gap in our understanding of this crucial topic. The purpose of this study was specifically to investigate the potential impact of play-based learning programs on the socio-emotional development of early childhood children, examining whether there are significant gender-related differences in Afijio Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria, and determine whether play-based learning programs have a significant influence on the socio-emotional development of early childhood children, taking into account variations based on school types, within Afijio Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria.

METHOD

The researchers employed a non-randomized quasi-experimental design. The population for the study comprised all early childhood children in the Afijio Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria. At the same time, the target sample consisted of 132 early childhood children aged 3-5 years in two schools in the sampled Local Government. The researchers created the Emotional Regulatory Skill Test (ERST) and employed both as a pretest and post-test for the children. The instrument's content validity was confirmed through evaluation by two early childhood experts. To assess the instrument's reliability, it was administered twice to a different group of early childhood children from the trial testing, and the reliability coefficient obtained using the Pearson Product Moment Coefficient (PPMC) was 0.84. The research hypotheses were evaluated using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) at a significance level of 0.05 alpha.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The H_{01} showed no significant difference in the effect of play-based learning programs on the socio-emotional development of male and female early childhood children in Afijio Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria. R Square was 0.632, then adjusted R Squared was 0.615. The result of the first hypothesis can be drawn in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. ANCOVA table on significant effect of play-based learning programs on the socio-emotional development of male and female early childhood children.

Source	Type III Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig	Remark
Corrected Model	662.225a	4	165.556	37.277	0.000	
Intercept	242.340	1	242.340	54.566	0.000	
Pretest	23.670	1	23.670	54.566	0.023	
Group	350.827	1	350.827	78.994	0.000	
Gender	0.066	1	0.066	0.015	0.903	Not
Group * Gender	6.190	1	6.190	1.394	0.241	Significant
Error	386.383	87	4.441			
Total	9466.000	92				
Corrected Total	1048.609	91				

The results in [Table 1](#) showed the effect of play-based learning programs on the socio-emotional development of male and female early childhood children in Afijio Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria. The results show no significant interaction effect of play-based learning programs and gender on the socio-emotional development of early childhood children. The calculated F-value of 1.394 is not significant at 0.05 alpha levels. Therefore, the stated null hypothesis is accepted.

On the other hand, H_{02} was no significant difference in the effect of play-based learning programs on the socio-emotional development of early childhood children based on school type in

Afijio Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria. R Square was 0.717, then adjusted R Squared was 0.704. The calculation of the second hypothesis can be shown in [Table 2](#).

Table 2. ANCOVA table on the significant effect of play-based learning programs on the socio-emotional development of early childhood children based on school type.

Source	Type III Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig	Remark
Corrected Model	752.148a	4	188.037	55.182	0.000	
Intercept	285.977	1	285.977	83.924	0.000	
Pre-test	16.883	1	16.883	4.955	0.029	
Group	392.432	1	392.432	115.164	0.000	
School Type	53.600	1	53.600	15.730	0.000	
Group * School Type	47.580	1	47.580	13.963	0.000	Significant
Error	386.383	87	3.408			
Total	946.000	92				
Corrected Total	1048.609	91				

Results in [Table 2](#) showed the significant effect of play-based learning programs on the socio-emotional development of early childhood children based on school type in Afijio Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria. The results show a significant effect of play-based learning programs on the socio-emotional development of early childhood children based on school type. The calculated F-value of 13.963 is significant at 0.05 alpha level. Therefore, the stated null hypothesis is rejected.

Discussion

Hypothesis one shows no significant interaction effect of play-based learning programs and gender on the socio-emotional development of early childhood children. The researchers found that the program's effect on socio-emotional development may not significantly differ between genders because the program is intentionally designed to be equally effective for all children, regardless of gender. Also, a lack of a significant interaction effect in this context could indicate that the play-based learning programs successfully foster socio-emotional development without favoring one gender, reflecting the program's commitment to promoting inclusivity and equality among early childhood children. It supported the findings of [Schousboe and Winther-Lindqvist \(2013\)](#), who pointed out that play-based learning enhances socio-emotional skills such as empathy, emotional regulation, and social competence. [Lietaert et al. \(2015\)](#), whose work disagreed with the findings, revealed that boys benefit more from play-based learning activities that align with their active play preferences. Conversely, girls may excel in the cooperative aspects of play-based learning, reinforcing their social and emotional skills ([Pellegrini, 2009](#)).

Finally, research hypothesis two shows a significant effect of play-based learning programs on the socio-emotional development of early childhood children based on school type. The researchers believed this significant effect can be attributed to resource variations, teacher training, class sizes, curriculum integration, parental involvement, peer dynamics, and assessment methods. This finding is in line with [Dockett and Perry \(2014\)](#), who found out that public schools that typically operate with fewer resources have the potential to serve a more diverse children population which diversity can provide valuable opportunities for children to develop socio-emotional skills by interacting with peers from various backgrounds. Also, [Bergen \(2009\)](#) asserted that private schools often boast more substantial resources, including smaller class sizes, well-trained teachers, and access to a broader range of educational materials. These advantages can enhance the quality and depth of play-based learning experiences, facilitating greater socio-emotional development.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study pave the way for a brighter future where every child's socio-emotional development is nurtured and celebrated, irrespective of gender or school type. Our research has demonstrated no significant interaction effect of play-based learning programs and gender on the socio-emotional development of early childhood children. This finding carries a powerful message: play-based learning, when thoughtfully designed, fosters inclusivity and equality among learners, transcending gender stereotypes. It was established that the type of school plays a significant role in the effectiveness of play-based learning programs. With their abundant resources, private schools create environments that facilitate a more profound socio-emotional development experience.

In contrast, public schools leverage diversity to promote socio-emotional growth. It is crucial to continue promoting and implementing play-based learning programs that prioritize gender equity. Educators and curriculum designers should ensure that play-based activities are diversified, addressing various interests and needs. Also, policymakers and educators should consider these findings when designing and funding early childhood education programs. Efforts should be made to provide public schools with additional resources, training, and support to enhance the quality of play-based learning. Furthermore, private schools should continue to prioritize socio-emotional development in their curricula.

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