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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Public Pre-Primary Teacher's Knowledge of Play-Based Pedagogy for Developing Children's Literacy Skills in Ukerewe District, Mwanza-Tanzania^aAgricia Maxmillian, ^bClara Rupia, ^bFrank Mwamakula^a Kakerege Ward, Ukerewe, Mwanza, Tanzania^b Department of Education Foundations, St. Augustine University of Tanzania**Corresponding Author**Agricia Maxmillian, Email: comfortmaxmillian@gmail.com**Author's Contributions**

All authors contributed equally to this research.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines public pre-primary teachers' understanding of play-based pedagogy and its potential to enhance literacy skills. Play-based pedagogy is considered the most effective method for teaching young children the three Rs: reading, writing, and arithmetic. The research focuses on the literacy skills of teachers in Tanzania's state pre-primary schools, specifically in Ukerewe, Mwanza. Grounded in Vygotsky's Social-Cultural Theory (1978), the study involved participants from four public elementary schools, totaling seventeen individuals. Among them were eight pre-primary teachers, four public primary school head teachers, four Ward Education Officers (WEOs), and one District Education Officer (DEO). A qualitative approach was employed, utilizing a case study design and purposive sampling to select volunteers. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and observations. The findings identified several challenges hindering pre-primary teachers in public primary schools from improving their children pre-literacy skills. These challenges include a shortage of teachers, overcrowded classrooms, difficulties with the mother tongue, and a lack of play-based teaching and learning materials. The study recommends that the government enhance the school environment by promoting classroom play activities. It is essential to develop more play-based teaching and learning resources to improve pre-literacy skills. Additionally, hiring qualified early childhood educators and offering ongoing professional development for teachers are crucial for achieving better educational outcomes.

Keywords: Teachers' knowledge; pre-primary; play-Based pedagogy; literacy skills; cognitive**INTRODUCTION**

Pre-literacy skills are essential for a child's overall development and can be effectively taught through play (Karaoglu, 2020). Pre-literate children are those who can recognize letters, understand words, and interpret signs and symbols (Hossain et al., 2022). To prepare for primary school and future education, children in pre-primary education (PPE) must develop these pre-literacy skills (Alam, 2022). Hence, pre-literacy skills are crucial for a child's readiness for primary school. Play-

based education has a significantly positive impact on the reading skills of pre-primary children (Ndijuye et al., 2020). Through play, children learn to negotiate relationships, solve social issues, and build resilience to overcome challenges (Allee et al., 2022). This approach enhances not only their pre-literacy skills but also their intra- and inter-personal relationships (James, 2023). Therefore, fostering a child's pre-literacy skills should be a primary concern, as it prepares them to read, write, and count before entering primary school, while also

nurturing their creativity. When children play with their peers, they learn from their surroundings, form connections, and immerse themselves in imaginative worlds.

Children's play provides excellent learning opportunities across various domains of development, including language, social, emotional, cognitive, and physical skills (Anderson & Thomas, 2021). Through play, children learn to connect with others, share, negotiate, resolve conflicts, and advocate for themselves. Preschoolers with low reading levels risk not meeting primary school and other educational standards in the future (Chen et al., 2023). Since reading skills cannot be enhanced without play-based pedagogy, playful activities should be prioritized as effective teaching strategies to foster children's learning. Young children often attend school with the expectation of playing with friends; thus, play helps secure attendance by attracting children to school and making it a lively environment filled with physical activity (Chepkonga, 2021).

Research shows that children who attend early childhood education perform better academically and transition more smoothly to primary school compared to those who do not, leading to increased school retention and lower dropout rates (Cheung et al., 2022). Consequently, early childhood play activities are highly beneficial for instructors in helping children enhance their reading abilities. Pre-literacy issues are prevalent among preschoolers in countries like Bangladesh, Finland, and the Eastern Caribbean. In the Eastern Caribbean, reading and writing pose challenges for preschoolers, especially those in grade 5 (Burns, 2018). Additionally, children aged three to five in Bangladesh struggle with reading and writing (Mostafa, 2023). Finnish preschoolers aged four to five also face difficulties in these areas. Interestingly, it has been noted that fifth-grade students in underdeveloped countries like Zambia, Uganda, and Kenya are able to read and write (Uwezo, 2014). This trend highlights the significant challenges many children face in developing pre-literacy skills.

Up to 2023, the Tanzanian government has been implementing the 2014 Education and Training Policy (ETP). According to this policy, pre-primary education for children aged three to five is free and mandatory for two years. The Tanzanian educational system follows the 2-7-4-2-3+ structure, which stands for two years of pre-primary education, seven years of primary education, four years of ordinary-level secondary

education, two years of advanced-level secondary education, and three or more years of tertiary/higher education.

The policy has prioritized increasing enrollment numbers over the provision of quality pre-primary education. As a result, pre-primary classrooms have often relied on primary school facilities, which have large desks, inadequate restroom facilities, and limited outdoor space. Despite government initiatives, a coordinated strategy for pre-primary education seems to remain elusive. Currently, there is a proposed draft of the 2014 ETP, known as the 2023 ETP edition, which aims to transform and replace the earlier policy and its curricular directives. The 2023 ETP states that children who are five years old can enroll in pre-primary school if they demonstrate signs of school readiness. The curriculum is designed to facilitate holistic development by fostering key competencies, with a focus on the foundational skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic (referred to as the 3Rs). Furthermore, the new pre-primary education curriculum emphasizes the need for children to acquire skills that will prepare them for elementary school. The curriculum specifies that instruction will be provided in both English and Kiswahili. Both the 2014 ETP and the 2023 ETP set quality standards for public and private pre-primary programs, including teacher qualifications and maintaining their physical and mental health.

Additionally, pre-primary teachers are required to complete a two-year diploma training course in pre-primary education to meet the necessary qualifications for teaching young children. Teachers' knowledge and understanding of how play-based pedagogy supports children's educational development significantly influence their opinions on its implementation (Das et al. 2021). Many teachers believe that using play-based methods to educate preschoolers is more effective. Positive engagement and sustained learning cannot occur without suitable play activities in pre-primary education (Das & Akter, 2021).

Furthermore, the pre-primary education (PPE) curriculum is designed to meet the needs and comprehension levels of children by employing age-appropriate teaching methods and teacher support. The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST) provides essential teaching materials, including textbooks, teaching manuals, syllabuses, and ICT tools—that are crucial for effective implementation (MoEST, 2023). As a result, pre-primary education not only equips children with the foundational skills of

reading, writing, and arithmetic (the 3Rs) but also fosters skills necessary for lifelong learning and future success. This article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how play can serve as a catalyst for helping preschoolers develop pre-literacy skills, thereby addressing their difficulties in mastering the 3Rs.

Emphasizing play in education can help reduce repetition and dropout rates among young children, as play can motivate them to attend school consistently. For instance, some children prefer to continue playing even after school hours. The enjoyable atmosphere in the classroom can make them reluctant to leave, as they want to engage in play for longer (Early, 2020). This article also explores the essential components of play experiences, how children acquire important skills while playing, and how play is a vital teaching and learning strategy for preschoolers. Additionally, it examines the challenges of integrating play into pre-primary education. In light of this context, the study aims to address the existing knowledge gap regarding public pre-primary teachers' knowledge of play-based pedagogy and its role in developing pre-literacy skills in Tanzania

All children attending pre-primary schools are required to develop essential pre-literacy skills. Pre-primary education is crucial for young children as it helps them build foundational abilities in reading, writing, and basic arithmetic. However, many children in public pre-primary schools in Ukerewe struggle to meet these requirements. Similarly, Tanzanian children attending public schools that instruct in Kiswahili find it difficult to read, write, or count in the language (James, 2023). This challenge stems from their lack of a solid understanding of pre-literacy skills by the time they finish pre-primary school. To foster the development of pre-literacy skills, a creative and sustainable teaching and learning environment is essential, along with well-trained and motivated teachers. However, the poor performance in arithmetic, reading, and writing suggests that pre-primary education (PPE) instructors may not be adequately prepared to provide effective instruction.

Over a four-year period from 2017 to 2020, Ukerewe had the highest rates of Standard One repetition. For instance, approximately 3,397 children repeated Standard One in 2017, 3,683 in 2018, and 3,256 in 2020 (MoEST, 2017). The lack of pre-literacy skills contributed to the high dropout rates and grade repetitions observed in the Ukerewe area between 2017 and 2020 (Shukia & Marobo, 2022). This study

aims to address this knowledge gap by examining public pre-primary teachers' understanding of play-based pedagogy and its role in enhancing pre-literacy skills in Tanzania. The study will be guided by three (3) objectives namely: (i) To examine the teachers' perceptions about the use of play-based pedagogy in improving pre-literacy skills in pre-primary children; (ii) To explore teachers' practices of play-based pedagogy in improving pre-literacy skills for pre-primary children, and (iii) To examine challenges facing pre-primary teachers in using play-based as a teaching pedagogy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

This study is based on Vygotsky's Social-Cultural Theory (1978), which is recognized for establishing the play-based education method for young children. The social aspect of language acquisition and the influence of a play environment on children's development support the notion that play promotes physical, social, emotional, and cognitive growth. Research and social-cultural theory indicate that play enhances various skills in children, including counting, reading, and writing (Mostafa, 2023). It is essential for pre-primary teachers to assist children in learning pre-literacy skills for a brighter future. Therefore, investigating teachers' understanding and perceptions of play-based teaching methods is crucial.

According to Vygotsky, play plays a significant role in a child's development as it allows them to acquire skills, explore, communicate, socialize, and solve problems (Shukia & Marobo, 2022). Play is a vital strategy for fostering a child's healthy and optimal growth in both speech and creative action. For children, play is an instinctive, self-initiated, spontaneous, and enjoyable activity (Vygotsky, 1978). Moreover, play acts as a child's means of communication and nurtures their imagination and creative abilities (Fedewa et al., 2023).

Empirical Literature Review

There are various definitions of play, but academics and theorists generally agree on what constitutes a playful experience. Play is a natural tool that children use to build resilience and coping skills as they learn to navigate relationships. It allows children to explore and understand the world, fostering their imagination and creativity (Hossain et al., 2022). Wambi et al. (2023) suggest that play is a crucial aspect of children's agency and their control over experiences. For effective play and exploration, areas and materials, such as toys, must be accessible for social interaction, particularly

through games with peers. Play is one of the most important ways for children to acquire the foundational knowledge and skills that will support their growth (Islam, 2024).

Play opportunities and environments that encourage exploration and hands-on learning are essential components of effective pre-primary school programs. Play enables children to connect past knowledge with their current experiences, helping them to understand their surroundings (Taylor & Boyer, 2024). Through play, children communicate and expand their understanding of various events. Regardless of their culture, socioeconomic status, or community affiliations, most individuals have engaged in play and learned from those experiences since early childhood (Majumdar, 2020).

According to Karaoglu (2022), children acquire social, emotional, cognitive, physical, linguistic, and creative skills through play and exploration in early childhood education. He notes that children who participate in constructive play tend to form stronger social connections. Constructive play teaches children how to collaborate, solve problems, and use their imagination and creativity to learn. In well-organized pre-primary schools, children's play experiences are enhanced when they are given sufficient time and space to engage freely with their environment (Mabagala & Shukia, 2019). Play can be viewed as a child's "work," as it promotes their ability to learn new concepts and develop skills for interacting with others and themselves. Teachers have the responsibility to support, encourage, and facilitate play-based learning in the classroom. This role requires careful planning and spontaneous interactions that tap into children's natural interests and passions, including engaging in role-playing with them (Siregar, 2020).

Providing children with enjoyable, interactive activities helps to nurture and enhance their learning. By incorporating real-world experiences into their play, children learn to understand reality and navigate life (Islam, 2021). Furthermore, they develop communication skills as they express themselves through play or art, which is crucial for their emotional, cognitive, and social development (Rao et al., 2021). This type of play not only provides an outlet for expression but also helps in forming meaningful relationships. In an educational context, children learn to express themselves and communicate in a safe and supportive environment, which contributes to their lifelong communication and self-expression skills.

Early dramatic play is essential for helping children develop literacy, teamwork, language, and communication skills crucial for success in school (Mgonja & Kambuga, 2023). Observing children during various social plays can enhance skills evaluation (Obenywa et al., 2023). Play-based pedagogy serves as a method through which children transition from social interaction to teamwork, establishing a connection between cooperation and growth potential. Furthermore, Nkirete and Thinguri (2020) emphasize that play aids teachers in fostering developmentally appropriate behaviors through observation, reflection, and child engagement. Children acquire knowledge through play (Narzulloevna, 2020), which offers fantastic opportunities for learning across all developmental domains.

Play promotes the development of skills in various areas, including motor, cognitive, social, emotional, and affective domains, despite the complexity and holistic nature of learning and development (Mardell et al., 2023). During play, children can employ a range of skills simultaneously. This often occurs during "center time" or "corner play" in early learning or pre-primary programs. Corner play, in particular, significantly improves learning capacities when conducted effectively (Wohlwend, 2023). Through play, children practice new social skills, such as sharing toys and cooperating to use resources. They also engage in cognitively challenging activities, such as building with small blocks when larger ones are available. Unfortunately, as Mgonja and Kambuga (2023) noted, many children in Tanzania do not have access to play spaces. This lack of access jeopardizes their ability to socialize and hinders optimal brain development later in life.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

When investigating a group of people's circumstances, perceptions, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, and values, a qualitative approach is employed (Descombe, 2010). This study utilized qualitative research and a case study design, incorporating various methods to gather data from participants in their natural environments. The rationale for using the case study method is that it allows researchers to analyze subjects thoroughly, providing in-depth knowledge about a specific topic (Cresswell, 2012). A purposeful non-probability sampling technique was employed to select respondents for this investigation. Specifically, purposive sampling was used to choose seventeen

participants, selected based on the study's objectives to ensure that all pertinent data were obtained.

This technique enabled the gathering of specific and detailed information for an in-depth investigation. The data collected was used to interview eight public pre-primary school teachers who could provide valuable insights into the benefits of play-based pedagogy for teaching and learning literacy skills in the public pre-primary schools. To enhance data quality and research conclusions, the study employed semi-structured interviews and observations as its primary instruments for data collection. The collected materials were categorized by themes, grouping related topics together to generate overarching themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Teachers Perceptions of Play-Based Pedagogy for Improving Pre-Literacy Skills

Participants perceived play-based pedagogy as a method of instruction and learning through supervised play, allowing children to learn while having fun and using playthings. While Pre-Primary Education (PPE) teachers expressed a generally positive view of play-based pedagogy, it seemed their understanding of play and its integration into their teaching practices lacked flexibility. One interview respondent remarked:

“This type of instruction is delightful to children. Joyful learning and learning through play make kids feel content and at ease. Play-based pedagogy is a good teaching method.” (Interview, 2024).

This quotation suggests that pre-primary education effectively prepares children for formal learning. According to the study, play-based pedagogy supports the development of foundational skills in reading, speaking, and recognizing letters, numbers, symbols, pictures, and images, positively impacting pre-literacy skill growth. These findings align with those of Rashid and Jahan (2021), who noted that children's short attention spans render traditional teaching methods ineffective. They advocate for using joyful play as a fundamental aspect of education, creating a stress-free and engaging learning environment that fosters reading skills, as children's overall development occurs during play. However, one respondent disagreed with the majority, stating:

“Children should be pushed to acquire more academic subjects instead of merely engaging in play. I believe play should be reserved for after-school activities as an extension of their

limited learning time.” (Interview, 2024).

This response indicates that children have limited learning opportunities, as they attend school from 7:30 am until 11:00 am. If the allotted time for play follows strict standards, the question arises: when will children develop essential pre-literacy academic skills? The study also found that curriculum pressures, parental expectations, and underqualified teachers hinder pre-primary students from developing these skills through play-based pedagogies, rendering play an ineffective teaching strategy. Additionally, the results indicated that teachers experience stress due to increased governmental paperwork, which includes requirements for children to read, write, and count. This pressure influences teachers' perceptions and practices, leading them to prioritize academic education over play-based pedagogy.

Some teachers expressed conflicting views about including play in pre-primary classrooms, even though they acknowledged play as a fundamental right that supports children's development and is essential to learning. This perspective echoes Mgonja's (2014) claim that play-based learning wastes valuable classroom time. The researcher concluded that some instructors' reluctance to embrace play as a teaching method stems from a lack of experience with progressive pedagogical approaches and an inadequate understanding of play's role in a child's development. Conversely, research indicates that play should be enjoyable, allowing children the freedom to choose the materials and activities they engage in. This highlights the need for intensive and ongoing professional development for pre-primary teachers, equipping them with the skills and knowledge necessary to implement play-based pedagogy and promote its lifelong benefits for learners.

Practices of Play-based Pedagogy for Improving Pre-Literacy Skills

This study aimed to gather information about the use of a play-based strategy for developing early reading skills in young children. A key question was how much time teachers allocate daily to help children improve their writing and reading abilities. Responses indicated that the curriculum and daily schedule included 20 minutes dedicated to pre-reading and 20 minutes for pre-writing. Most respondents affirmed that this allocated time was sufficient for teaching the specified lessons. However, two respondents noted that the 20-minute sessions for pre-writing and pre-reading, listening, and speaking was often inadequate. They occasionally needed to

spend 60 minutes or more because many children struggled to hold pencils correctly. One respondent remarked:

"It is not always possible to complete the pre-reading and pre-writing tasks in 20 minutes. Many children ignore the reading lesson because they are too busy playing, or they struggle to hold a pencil correctly. Parents must provide extra time and hands-on support to help their children with reading." (Interview, 2024).

To assist students, pre-primary teachers should show children how to hold a pencil properly and trace letters. Teachers often find it challenging to adhere to the pre-reading and pre-writing activity plan. These findings contrast with those of Parker et al. (2022), who observed that teachers frequently limit children's learning potential and fail to engage them effectively. Consequently, children do not actively participate in lessons; instead, they receive instruction without sufficient motivation.

Use of Play Materials to Teach Children Pre-Literacy Skills

All PPE teachers agreed on the importance of using various items as teaching aids in the classroom. They incorporated materials such as cook sheets, swings, slippers, dolls, cooking utensils, sticks, and wall pictures of animals and flowers. One participant noted:

"They make learning numbers using blocks, boats, buttons, seeds, etc. Additionally, they use boats, horses, swings, and other items for unstructured play. Different play materials in the class enhance reading, writing, and numeracy skills" (Interview, 2024).

This suggests that to ensure active learning among students, PPE teachers should integrate play materials into their classroom activities. This approach stimulates children's brains, encourages collaboration, and fosters the exchange of ideas and experiences, ultimately leading to improved performance in reading, writing, and arithmetic. This finding aligns with the study by Akter & Chowdhury (2020), which highlighted that utilizing play materials in teaching and learning significantly contributes to children's holistic development and reduces dropout rates.

Opinions on Children's Reactions

When They Were Not Given Playthings. Most of the participants interviewed observed that when children lacked toys, they tended to become sad and depressed. Kids might quarrel when they don't receive the toys they

want, and they often cannot wait for the teacher to start the play session. One participant noted:

"They display a frustrating attitude and feel uneasy, lonely, unhappy, and despairing when toys are unavailable. Sometimes, kids argue because they can't wait for their instructors to start playing with them." (Interview, 2024).

This suggests that children can become dissatisfied and depressed if they don't have access to toys. They may even engage in fights when they don't have the playthings they desire, exhibiting grumpiness. These findings contrast with Mostafa's 2023 study, which indicated that when teachers provided play materials, children enjoyed the class. With the opportunity to play, they displayed a highly positive attitude toward the lesson and were eager to participate in subsequent activities. Reported behaviors included children taking off the teacher's clothing to play, pestering the teacher for attention, and even telling the PPE teacher not to attend school the following day. One commenter pointed out a downside of play:

"Some kids are too focused on playing to pay attention to the lesson, which increases the risk of accidents due to crowded areas and shoving." (Interview, 2024).

Conversely, it was found that when teachers employed play materials, children enjoyed the lessons. After being allowed to play, kids exhibited a very favorable attitude toward their classes and were happy to engage in any activity. While playing, children might interact with anything in their familiar surroundings that draws their attention. They can use their knowledge and critical thinking skills to perceive, compare, evaluate, and learn. This play-based learning method may alter children's perceptions of teaching and learning. These results contradict those of Islam (2024), who found that if instructors utilized playthings while allowing kids to play freely, the children enjoyed the lesson. Therefore, when youngsters are involved in activities after playing, they may demonstrate a positive attitude toward instruction and show happiness.

Challenges Facing Pre-Primary Teachers in Using Play-Based Pedagogy

Teachers have varying perspectives on the difficulties they encounter when using play as a teaching pedagogy to enhance preschool children's abilities.

Inadequate Play Materials

The study revealed that providing age-appropriate play materials significantly influences children's learning and brain development within the classroom. However, both

headteachers and pre-primary education (PPE) teachers reported a lack of play resources, which makes it challenging to implement play-based teaching strategies in preschools. Additionally, it was noted that older primary students often share the playgrounds, further exacerbating the issue. One educator expressed:

“We lack the necessary resources for play-based learning to be effective. Because of this scarcity, educators can only incorporate play-based strategies into a limited number of subjects” (Interview, 2024).

Furthermore, a preschool instructor highlighted the need for more play items to facilitate children's ongoing education and vocabulary development. Preschool teachers concur that having play materials available encourages young children to attend school willingly and fosters a love for learning. Research indicates that enjoyable pedagogies, in contrast to the traditional methods typically employed in primary school classrooms, may be more effective in promoting the social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and creative skills of children (Tandika, 2023).

Shortage and Lack of Qualifications of Pre-Primary Teachers

According to the report, most teachers working with young children require specialized training in early childhood education. Many were hired from the local community as volunteers, while others were selected from higher-grade levels due to their extensive in-service teaching experience. It was observed that most preschool teachers need further training for their roles, especially in employing play-based learning as a pedagogical method at this educational level. One responder noted:

"I prefer to play a song that is relevant to the subject before I begin my class of 150 kids. They become more relaxed and attentive during the lecture when they sing. I informed them that if they disrupted my class, there wouldn't be any more songs" (Interview, 2024).

This study suggests that public primary school teachers still need to be educated on using play-based pedagogy. A lack of knowledge in this area is a barrier to developing children's literacy skills. Furthermore, implementing play-based learning in pre-primary classrooms is often hindered by overcrowding. Most preschool teachers also lack the necessary training to effectively teach at this level and are not proficient in applying play-based learning as a teaching strategy.

This finding aligns with research conducted by Ndlovu et al. (2023), which highlighted that preschool teachers may struggle to implement play-based learning, particularly with students who have difficulty recognizing appropriate play behaviors and contexts due to a lack of prior experience. Therefore, focusing on training teachers in play-based pedagogy related to literacy skills development is essential. Teachers play a crucial role in implementing this approach, which requires careful selection and appropriate use of resources and play materials. They must strive to create a motivating, engaging, and enjoyable classroom environment for both play and learning.

Overcrowded Classrooms

Teachers in pre-primary education struggle to implement interactive teaching methods in large classes. Many pre-primary education (PPE) teachers reported that their classes had too many children to effectively use these methods. One teacher expressed this challenge, stating:

“With 160 children, I find it very challenging to implement participatory approaches in a classroom setting. In smaller classes, participatory methods work much better” (Interview, 2024).

Observations of classrooms across various participating schools revealed that PPE teachers typically start their lessons with the teacher positioned at the front of the room and children seated in rows facing her, adhering to a traditional didactic teaching style. One interviewee remarked:

“There aren't enough classrooms, so I teach PPE to 183 children in one room while I speak. The kids in the front sit and listen, while those in the back play, and I cannot engage with all of them due to their large numbers” (Interview, 2024).

Overcrowded classrooms can negatively impact children's learning in pre-primary schools, as teachers struggle to provide quality early childhood education in such congested environments. With so many children, teachers often find it difficult to interact one-on-one with children who require special assistance. Additionally, some teachers cannot devote enough time to those who need individualized attention due to the high number of learners in the classroom. Consequently, the large class sizes and limited teaching time hinder the implementation of play-based pedagogy necessary for developing literacy skills in selected pre-primary schools. As a result, overcrowded classrooms pose

significant challenges for pre-primary school teachers in keeping all children actively engaged while delivering early childhood education across the four participating schools. These findings align with those of Amosun and Kolawole (2015), who noted that instructors find it difficult to demonstrate the pedagogical skills required for effectively educating children.

Overcrowded classrooms can negatively impact children's ability to learn in pre-primary schools, as teachers struggle to provide quality early childhood education in such congested environments. With a high number of children, teachers may find it challenging to interact one-on-one with children who need special assistance. Some teachers cannot dedicate enough time to learners requiring extra attention due to the large class sizes. Consequently, both the high number of children and the limited teaching time hinder the implementation of play-based pedagogy, which is essential for developing literacy skills in selected pre-primary schools. As a result, overcrowded classrooms pose challenges for pre-primary school teachers in keeping all children engaged while delivering early childhood education across the four pre-primary schools examined. These findings align with those of Amosun and Kolawole (2015), who noted that instructors face difficulties demonstrating the pedagogical skills necessary for effectively educating young children.

Influence of Mother Tongue

The information gathered highlights how mother tongues can hinder children's proficiency in language mastering. The results indicate that everyday family communication often occurs in vernacular languages. Teachers have pointed out that the mismatch between the language of instruction in the classroom and the language used at home negatively impacts the quality of education. Most villages are predominantly inhabited by native speakers of Kerewe, Kara, and Jita, which means that children learn in Kiswahili at school but revert to their mother tongues when they return home. This switch creates a disconnect that affects their literacy skills. One respondent remarked:

"Children's mother tongue makes it challenging to develop literacy skills effectively. For instance, in pre-primary school, these kids still learn to communicate using their vernacular, so they become more fluent in that language than in Kiswahili when they return home." (Interview, 2024).

The findings suggest that learning a language is particularly challenging for children growing up in multilingual societies. Research revealed that many children spoke primarily in their vernacular during class, which hindered their development of literacy skills. Similar observations were made by Nkwiga and Brock-Utine (2022) in Tanzania, where they studied the role of language in providing quality pre-primary education. They found that teachers struggled to instruct children in the ethnic language of their community. Many children had difficulty communicating in Kiswahili, which posed challenges for teachers in managing their time and adhering to the curriculum. The lack of use of children's mother tongues interfered with their ability to communicate and understand language, creating barriers to effective literacy development and quality pre-primary education. This was a significant challenge faced by teachers in pre-primary education when teaching language to their children.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Pre-primary teachers at public primary schools have expressed positive views on using play-based pedagogy to teach and support the development of pre-literacy skills in young children. However, several challenges hinder the effective teaching and learning of these skills in actual pre-primary settings. For play-based pedagogy to be successful in teaching pre-literacy skills in public pre-primary schools, adequate instructional resources and qualified teachers are essential. Play is crucial for helping early-grade children develop their reading skills (Rashid, 2021). The study highlights teachers' understanding of play-based pedagogy and its role in literacy development for early-grade children, revealing important insights that can assist in implementing this approach. Nevertheless, there is a continuing need for formal training in play-based teaching methods and techniques. Additionally, there are significant challenges, including a lack of adequate classroom space, high children-to-teacher ratios, insufficient classroom support, and a shortage of play materials. Based on the study's findings, several recommendations have been proposed to address these challenges.

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