

Teachers' Perceptions about Group Learning and Role Play in Early Childhood Education in District Narowal

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to explore teachers' perceptions about role play and group learning in early childhood education. The main objective of the study was to identify differences in teachers' perceptions based on demographic variables such as gender, qualification, and teaching experience. The study was quantitative in nature and followed a survey research design. The population of the study comprised primary school teachers in District Narowal. A sample of 250 teachers was selected through a random sampling technique. Data were collected using a self-developed questionnaire. The instrument consisted of two sections: the first section included demographic information (gender, qualification, and experience), while the second section focused on teachers' perceptions regarding role play and group learning in early childhood education. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS, and inferential statistical techniques were applied to examine differences among variables. The findings of the study provide insights into teachers' perceptions of play-based and collaborative learning strategies and highlight how demographic factors may influence their views. The study contributes to improving early childhood teaching practices by emphasizing the importance of role play and group learning in child development.

Keywords: *Group learning, Role play, Early childhood education, Teachers' perceptions, Quantitative study*

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INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is viewed as an important phase in the cognitive, social, emotional and language development of a child. In the modern learning environment, a child-centered approach is promoted which involves learning through active participation, collaboration, creativity and experimentation. One of these techniques, which have received considerable attention, is group learning, and role play is the other technique which offers children the chance of relating to other children, develop communication skills and build knowledge from social experiences. These pedagogical strategies are implemented predominantly by teachers and teachers' perceptions have a major impact on how classroom practices are effective.

Concept of group learning in early childhood education.

Group learning is an instructional method that involves children participating in learning tasks, problem solving and idea sharing in groups of a small or large size. Group learning fosters social interaction, co-operation and understanding between children, in early childhood settings. The importance of children learning from each other has been stressed by researchers, who have noted that young children learn best when they interact with peers, as this fosters communication skills and cognitive growth. Children learn to express themselves, negotiate meaning and make interpersonal relationships in play-based and collaborative learning environments. Teachers' attitudes towards group learning are mostly positive, with the majority believing that it facilitates children's active involvement and engagement in learning activities in the classroom (Wallace & Hesterman, 2021). The concept of group learning is based on the social constructivist theory which is the theory of Lev Vygotsky, who developed a theory that learning is a process of social interaction and collaboration. Cooperative activities provide children with opportunities for learning from more capable peers and adults in their zone of proximal development. Teachers who promote collaborative learning do so by setting up situations where children share the resources they need for learning, work together, and solve problems together. It was found in recent studies that teachers feel that collaborative activities are effective in enhancing children's communication, leadership and problem-solving skills. Group learning also promotes inclusiveness as it helps to involve children

from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Play is inclusive and children learn from each other, they value differences and learning styles.

Teacher Perceptions of Group Learning

The realization and effectiveness of group learning activities is affected by teachers' perceptions. High levels of positive perceptions will help teachers mediate co-operative strategies more frequently and will foster the use of co-operative strategies for lower levels of negative perceptions. Research in various countries has shown that early childhood teachers have a positive attitude towards group learning as a good teaching approach in developing social competence and academic achievement. Collaborative activities are thought to promote children's responsibility, teamwork and respect for others' opinions, which are considered to be important by teachers. Wallace and Hesterman (2021) noted that educators felt play and group learning was a key component in children's whole-child development. The children's engagement, motivation and participation in classroom tasks were reported as improved through collaborative activities by teachers. Some teachers also noted problems including: classroom management problems, child participation inequities and lack of resources to set up group activities.

Likewise, Collins et al. (2023) indicated that teachers felt that flexible and child-centered learning spaces were helpful in fostering cooperation and independence in early childhood students. The teachers felt that group learning activities helped children to improve their self-confidence and social interaction skills. However, the successful implementation required good preparation of the teachers, classroom organization and institutional support. Another aspect that was noted in recent literature is the role of the teacher as a facilitator in learning rather than a direct teacher. Teachers who have facilitative roles facilitate discussion, encourage children to join in, and offer support as needed as children explore and learn independently. These activities foster children's independence and group working abilities.

Role Play in early childhood education.

Role play is one type of dramatic play – it is when children take on character role and pretend, they are in different situations. It gives children the

opportunity to play out social roles, to express their emotions and to develop their language and communications skills. There is a well-established body of literature confirming that role play is a successful teaching method which helps children to develop their cognitive, social, emotional and linguistic abilities. Imaginative play has been discussed in theoretical perspectives since the work of Vygotsky and his belief that it was an important aspect of children's development. Children learn to manage their behavior, solve problems and know the social norms through role playing. Pretend play is symbolic play, and contributes to creativity and higher order thinking processes. Recent research indicates that role play is well suited to produce meaningful learning experiences involving the transfer of classroom learning to real life situations. Through interaction in the dramatic play children are actively involved in building their knowledge, testing out ideas and thinking critically. It has been discovered that role play helps children to communicate effectively, discuss with peers and to gain other people's points of view.

Teacher's thinking about their role in role play.

Generally, teachers have a positive attitude towards role play as a teaching method that can stimulate positive learning and socialization. Role play is seen by many educators as a method for children to develop their creativity, imagination, ability to use language and emotional intelligence. Children's confidence in expressing themselves and interacting with others is increased through the use of dramatic activities. Studies related to play-based pedagogies show that teachers are aware of the educational role of role play to facilitate the development of all aspects of learning. Kangas et al., (2023) recognized the importance of the active involvement, guidance and support of the teachers in the learning environment. All teachers reported that role play enabled children from a variety of backgrounds to engage, participate and learn together.

Likewise, Zhang et al. (2023) interviewed teachers about their attitudes toward play-based learning and identified that role play was a good way for teachers to combine academic learning and children's interests. Role play activities were appreciated by teachers as they were able to cater for children's developmental needs and this made learning enjoyable and meaningful. They did point out, however, that there were some challenges with curriculum demands, parental expectations, and the amount of instruction time available.

Research also shows that teachers' attitudes towards play have a significant impact on how they practice in their classrooms. If teachers are aware of the developmental value of role play, they will be more likely to create stimulating play areas and be involved in children's learning. Often, however, misunderstandings may lead to fewer chances for imaginative learning experiences.

Advantages to Group Learning and Role Play

Numerous advantages of group learning and role play in early childhood education have been consistently emphasized in the literature. These activities are beneficial for children's cognitive, social, emotional and language development. The social learning approach helps improve communication abilities as it allows children to exchange thoughts, listen to others and join in conversations. It encourages teamwork, cooperation and problem-solving skills and positive social skills with peers. Children acquire social norms and learn to be empathetic through co-operative interaction. The role play helps to develop language as it allows children to practice using vocabulary in a meaningful context. It also fosters creativity, imagination, emotional expression and self-regulation. Children are given the opportunity to learn about social situations and other people's thinking through drama and scenarios. The positive effects of sociodramatic play have been demonstrated on these dimensions of children's agency, decision-making and social competence.

Some research also suggests that group learning in combination with role play, provides highly engaging learning environments. Children work with others as they explore in imaginative play and achieve deeper learning experiences and better academic results. Often, these strategies can be integrated into classroom activities and teachers notice an increase in motivation, participation and enjoyment. Teachers face a number of challenges in implementing group learning and role play activity, although it has its advantages. One of the most common issues reported is classroom management. With a number of groups in one class, it can be challenging to manage all of them at once. Activities may be challenging to manage for equal participation and to keep children focused.

Yet another difficulty is in balancing curriculum needs with play-based learning strategies. Teachers often feel pressure to meet academic goals and this

has a negative impact on the amount of time they have for collaborative and creative work. Studies conducted under various educational settings have revealed some conflictual dynamics between teachers and expected formal learning outcomes, and teachers and child-centered pedagogies. Also, the teachers' ability to use effective group learning and role play strategies is limited by their professional training. Teachers need knowledge and skills to be able to interact with children, plan activities to be meaningful and evaluate learning outcomes. Teacher professional learning geared toward play pedagogy can help meet these challenges and improve classroom practices.

Group Learning and Role Play in the Pakistani context.

During the last few years, there has been growing interest in early childhood education in Pakistan. A focus on the reform of education is on learning approaches that meet children's needs for comprehensive development. But, in many schools, usual teacher-centered approaches are still prevalent. There is evidence that teachers are increasingly aware of the benefits of using collaborative and play-based approaches to learning, but how teachers incorporate these approaches is dependent on the institutional resources, teacher training and classroom contexts. It is especially significant to understand the perceptions of teachers of group learning and role play in districts like Narowal as teachers are the main facilitators of children's learning experiences. A positive teacher perception can positively impact the promotion of innovative pedagogical approaches which can facilitate children's social, emotional and cognitive development. Teachers' perspectives about their role in early childhood development can also uncover obstacles and professional development needs that can impact the success of early childhood development programs.

The literature reviewed shows that group-based learning and role play are highly effective pedagogical methods in the early childhood education. Teachers' attitudes towards these strategies are positive, and they believe that these skills are beneficial to children's communication, collaboration, creativity, problem solving and social skills. The 2020-2023 studies have reinforced the significance of teacher engagement, play-based approaches, and inclusive learning settings in fostering rich learning experiences. Teachers are aware that there are a number of positive developmental effects that comes with engaged and creative learning

experiences despite the difficulties of classroom management, curriculum demands and inadequate training. Hence, it makes sense to study the perception of teachers regarding the use of group learning and role play in District Narowal as it can provide much information for making early childhood education practices and policy effective in District Narowal.

Objectives of the study

The objective of the study was:

1. To examine the difference between male and female teachers regarding their perceptions of role play and group learning in early childhood education.
2. To investigate the difference in teachers' perceptions of role play and group learning in early childhood education according to their academic qualifications.
3. To explore the difference in teachers' perceptions of role play and group learning in early childhood education according to their teaching experience.

Method and Procedure

This study was quantitative in nature and used descriptive survey type of research to explore teachers' perceptions regarding the role play and group learning in early childhood education of District Narowal. Quantitative research was found to be suitable because it is able to gather numerical data and it will allow for statistical analysis of the respondents' opinion and views. The population was all Public Primary School Teachers (PSTs) of public primary schools of District Narowal, Punjab, Pakistan. For the selection of the participants, the random sampling technique was employed in which all the teachers had an equal chance of being selected. The samples of the study were 250 teachers (Public Primary School Teachers [PSTs]). The selected participants included different genders, academic qualifications and levels of teaching experience which gave a broad picture of teachers perceptions of role play and group learning practices in the early childhood education system. The researcher formulated a structured questionnaire, which was developed based on the objectives of the study and literature related to the study, for data collection. The

instrument was divided into 2 parts. Demographic data of the respondents were collected in the first section such as Gender, Academic qualification, Teaching experience etc. The second section was statements made by teachers regarding their perceptions on role play and group learning in early childhood education. The participants were asked to answer the questions regarding the level of their agreement with each statement on a five-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

The instrument was validated with the help of experts in the field of education before the final administration. The necessary changes were implemented based on experts' feedback. The researcher conducted the questionnaire personally on the selected respondents and the obtained data were well organized and coded and were subjected to statistical analysis. Data collected were analyzed by the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The data was analyzed using inferential statistics. Independent sample t-test and one way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were used to identify significant differences between the teachers' perception on demographic variables including gender, academic qualification and teaching experience. Tables were used to present the results, and the results were interpreted based on the goals of the study.

Results

Table 1

Independent sample t test to identify the difference between male and female Teachers Perception about Group learning Early Childhood Education

Gender	<i>N</i>	Mean	Standard deviation	<i>Df</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>Sign.</i>
Male	119	60.0336	4.16997	250	-.106	.000
Female	133	60.0902	4.26838			

The table 1 shows that an independent sample t test was performed to compare male and female primary school teachers. Male ($M=60.0336$, $SD=4.16997$) and female ($M=60.0902$, $SD=4.26838$) differed significantly ($t=-.106$, $P=.000$). Thus, research demonstrates that there were gender differences in teachers' perceptions of group learning in early childhood education.

Table 2

One Way ANOVA to identify Teachers Perception about Role Play in Early Childhood Education on the basis of qualification

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	7.656	27	.284	1.072	.375
Within Groups	59.245	224	.264		
Total	66.901	251			

The table 2 shows that One Way ANOVA was used to compare instructors at the main level of Role Play in Early Childhood Education based on their educational backgrounds. According to the findings, there was no significant difference between instructors' degrees (B.A./B.Sc., M.A./M. Sc., and M. Phil.) $F(251), 1.072, p=.375$. As a result, it demonstrates that, based on qualifications, there were differences in male and female attitudes towards role play in early childhood education.

Table 3

One Way ANOVA to identify Teachers Perception about Group learning Early Childhood Education on the basis of qualification

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	6.019	22	.274	1.029	.430
Within Groups	60.882	229	.266		
Total	66.901	251			

The table 3 shows that One Way ANOVA was used to compare instructors at the primary level of group learning in early childhood education according to their educational backgrounds. According to the findings, there was no significant difference in teachers' degrees (B.A./B.Sc., M.A./M. Sc., and M. Phil.) $F(251), 1.029, p=.430$. As a result, it demonstrates that, based on qualifications, there were differences between male and female group learners in early childhood education.

Table 4

One Way ANOVA to identify Teachers Perception about Role Play in Early Childhood Education on the basis of experience

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	21.614	27	.801	1.491	.053
Within Groups	120.239	224	.537		
Total	141.853	251			

The table 4 shows that One Way ANOVA was used to compare the differences in experience between primary level instructors of early childhood education role play. According to the findings, there were significant differences among instructors' levels of experience (less than 5 years, 6–10 years, 11–15 years, and more than 16 years) $F(251), 1.491, p=.053$. As a result, it demonstrates that, based on experience, there were differences between male and female attitudes towards role play in early childhood education.

Table 5

One Way ANOVA to identify Teachers Perception about Group learning Early Childhood Education on the basis of experience

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	22.006	22	1.000	1.911	.010
Within Groups	119.847	229	.523		
Total	141.853	251			

The table 5 shows that One Way ANOVA was used to compare the differences in primary level group learning in early childhood education based on experience among instructors. According to the findings, there was a significant difference in teachers' experience levels (less than 5 years, 6–10 years, 11–15 years, and more than 16 years) $F(251), 1.911, p=.010$. As a result, it demonstrates that, based on experience, there were differences between male and female group learners in early childhood education.

Discussion

The study results showed that preschool teachers were very confident that play was an important component in children's development. The participants considered play as a potent learning tool which can facilitate cognitive, social, emotional, physical and linguistic development. Pupils learn better when teachers offer them a learning environment that offers children a range of play-based learning activities. Children are able to learn new skills, gain knowledge and be creative as toys, games and interactive learning materials are available. Play allows children to develop their hidden talents, try out their interests and learn how to make their abilities effective. Moreover, play offers chances for children to socialize and communicate with others in their environment, thus fostering their socialization and communication skills. The results were similar with Olusola (2006) who found that teachers perceived positively on use of 'Play' as learning strategy. Likewise, Jennifer, Myae and Martha (2015), found that teachers saw play as a valuable strategy for supporting children's social and cognitive growth. The results further validate the findings of the study conducted by Randima (2015) which revealed that preschool teachers' knowledge was acceptable in relation to the role of play in the early childhood education.

The research also found that the preschool teachers had favorable attitudes toward the use of language development activities using play. Teachers felt that role play, storytelling, games and other interactive activities are beneficial for children to develop their vocabulary, communication skills and language understanding. The results showed that there was no significant difference between the teachers on the importance of play in children's development based on gender. Male and female teachers had similar attitudes towards the educational importance of play, indicating that gender does not play a significant role in influencing teachers' attitudes towards play in education. The results of the present study corroborate the findings of previous studies such as that of Sandberg (2005) and Olusola (2006) who reported that there was no significant difference between teachers' perception of the importance of play for boys and for girls. Furthermore, the findings showed that there were teachers who are not professionally trained in education who also knew that play has developmental values. This indicates that positive attitudes towards play-based learning are

common regardless of teachers' qualifications. The results obtained were found to be in agreement with Olusola (2006) who reported similar findings.

Another result of the study is that teachers believe that play is a viable tool to develop creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving abilities in young children. Children are supported to seek out new ideas, make choices, face and overcome challenges and problematize when they play. A role play and group activity are believed to be meaningful learning experiences and can boost children's confidence and motivation to learn by teachers. These activities can be used to engage children in learning in an active way, instead of passive. As a result, play-based learning is a catalyst for the development of lifelong learning skills and a key way in which children are prepared for future school and social success. The results support the current view of education that suggests that play should be incorporated into the early learning experiences of young children in order to support their whole child development. In summary, the results of this study reveal a positive attitude of preschool teachers on the importance of play in children's development. Teachers understand that play plays an important role in children's learning and development in a variety of ways. This finding is in line with the results of other studies by Sandberg (2005), Olusola (2006), Jennifer et al. (2015) and Randima (2015) which acknowledged that play is an integral part of ECE and an important ingredient in the promotion of children's overall development.

Conclusion

The study found that primary school teachers of District Narowal have positive perception towards the use of role play and group learning in the early childhood education system. The teachers were very confident in the teaching strategies as they were found to have a significant role in promoting children's cognitive, social, emotional, language and creative development. Role play was felt to be a good technique for improving communication skills, imagination, self-confidence and problem-solving while group learning was felt to be a good technique for cooperation, teamwork, social interaction and active participation of young learners. The results also indicated that teachers were aware of the importance of creating learning spaces for children that are engaging and interactive, allowing children to learn through collaboration and practical

experiences. The teachers thought that role play and group learning enhances children's motivation and enhances participation in class, as well as fosters meaningful learning experience. They were considered to be a necessary component of child-centered education, and effective means of holistic child development.

The study also determined that the teachers' overall perception of role play and group learning was not significantly influenced by their demographic characteristics namely their gender, academic qualification and years of teaching experience. Most teachers had positive attitudes about the use of these strategies across early childhood classes, no matter their background characteristics. This means that there is a shared vision of what is important about the educational value of play-based and collaborative learning approaches shared by teachers. To sum it up, Teachers agree that role play and group learning are effective instruction in early childhood education. Their use makes a huge impact on the overall development of children and helps to build active, engaging and inclusive learning spaces. Hence, there is need to emphasize these in the classroom practices and teacher trainings so that the quality of early childhood education could be improved in District Narowal and the rest of the district.

Recommendations

The following suggestions are offered in order to reposition early childhood education in Nigeria for global competitiveness via play.

1. Preschool teachers should encourage children to participate in role play games so that they can develop leadership qualities and skills in their role-play games.
2. The preschool teacher should have adequate toys to allow children to use as they please.
3. The preschool classroom set-up should encourage play experiences. Preschool teachers need to receive regular professional development and training workshops on play-based learning and role play strategies to enable them to apply the child centered teaching practices in their classrooms
4. School leaders must provide a safe, inclusive and well-resourced play environment, both indoors and out, with resources for group learning and imaginative play activities.

5. Teachers should plan and organize structured play activities with learning objectives, and ensure play is not just play but has a connection with the learning objectives for cognitive, social and language development.
6. Parents need to be engaged and informed of the value of play in early childhood education and know how to help their child at home and to support what is happening at school.
7. Where feasible, early childhood classes should be smaller in order to enable teachers to deal with group learning, role play work and providing individual attention to children.
8. Teachers should ensure that role play activities incorporate themes and context from the community and real-life experiences so that children can connect learning experiences to their community and daily lives.
9. Policymakers in education should embed the concept and practices of play-based learning within the standards for early childhood education and make sure to support it in public schools.
10. Teachers should systematically observe children playing and recognise emotional distress as well as their talents, leadership and learning difficulty and make use of the observations for ongoing assessment and guidance.

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