

The Integration of Indigenous and Western Play-Based Learning Practices in Nigerian Early Childhood Education: A Framework for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

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Abstract: This study examined the integration of indigenous and Western play-based learning practices in Nigerian early childhood education settings. Guided by seven specific purposes and research questions, the study aimed to understand the role of culturally relevant play activities and their impact on children's engagement and learning outcomes.

An exploratory sequential mixed-methods design was adopted, starting with qualitative data collection to gather in-depth insights, followed by a quantitative phase to validate and generalize findings. The population included early childhood educators, parents, and community leaders in Nigeria, selected through purposive sampling for qualitative insights and stratified random sampling for quantitative analysis. A sample of 20 educators, 10 parents, and 5 community leaders participated in the qualitative phase, while a larger sample of 300 educators and 200 parents participated in the quantitative phase.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, an observation checklist, and a structured questionnaire developed from themes identified in the qualitative phase. An observation checklist assessed the frequency and quality of play-based learning activities, while focus group discussions (FGDs) provided further insights into community perceptions. Validity was ensured through expert review and a pilot study, and reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha which yielded 0.70.

Qualitative data were analyzed thematically, while quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential tests, including t-tests and ANOVA. Results indicated a higher frequency and quality of Western play activities but revealed strong child engagement in both play types. Parents expressed a preference for integrating indigenous practices with Western methods. Recommendations included developing curricula that incorporate both play approaches, training educators in culturally responsive teaching, and increasing community engagement in early childhood education.

Keywords: play-based learning, indigenous practices, early childhood education, Nigeria, culturally relevant pedagogy, mixed-methods, community engagement.



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Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is recognized globally as a critical foundation for lifelong learning and development. It lays the groundwork for cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, influencing a child's future academic success and overall well-being. In Nigeria, ECE is undergoing significant transformation as educators and policymakers strive to enhance its quality and accessibility. Play-based learning, a pedagogical approach that emphasizes learning through play, has gained prominence in ECE for its effectiveness in fostering holistic development. However, the implementation of play-based learning in Nigeria is influenced by various socio-cultural factors that shape educational practices and outcomes. Indigenous practices often emphasize oral storytelling, communal play, and culturally specific games, while Western-based practices prioritize structured play, early literacy, and numeracy skills. The interaction between these two paradigms creates a dynamic environment in which socio-cultural influences on play-based learning.

Play-based learning is an essential component of early childhood education (ECE), providing children with opportunities to explore and learn through their senses, emotions, and interactions with the environment. Gowrie (2022) explained that play-based learning takes a holistic approach to children's growth and development. Through play, children acquire essential skills that foster their social, physical, and cognitive development. By interacting with others, exploring objects, and engaging with symbols, children learn to understand and interpret the world around them. This approach helps children develop social, emotional, cognitive, and physical skills, making it a critical tool for educators. However, play-based learning in ECE is shaped by socio-cultural factors, incorporating both indigenous and Western influences. Indigenous knowledge and practices have significantly shaped ECE in Nigeria, while Western practices have also been adopted, creating a hybrid system. Keung, & Cheung (2023) emphasized that family and play-based learning are closely linked, highlighting the impact of family involvement in enriching children's learning experiences through play. Studies show that play-based learning supports cognitive, social, and emotional growth, and when families actively participate, these benefits are significantly enhanced. The following sections delve into essential elements of this connection, emphasizing the role of parents and caregivers.

Parental and caregiver roles are central socio-cultural factors shaping children's attitudes and behaviors toward learning. Research showed that parental involvement positively impacts children's academic and social development (Rizkia, Nurul, Wafa., Ibnu, Muthi, 2024 & Aierke, Omarkhanova., Akbota, Sugiralina., Nazym, Yesbergen., Idayatulla, Adikhanov. (2024). In

Nigeria, where the extended family system is prevalent, grandparents and other family members play a significant role in child-rearing. However, the intersection of indigenous and Western ECE practices presents challenges, as parents may struggle to provide adequate support due to differing priorities. Some indigenous practices emphasize socialization and obedience to authority, which can contrast with the Western emphasis on children's autonomy and creativity, crucial components of play-based learning (Greenhalgh et al., 2015).

Nigeria's cultural and linguistic diversity further influences play-based learning. With over 250 ethnic groups, Nigeria's multicultural landscape presents unique challenges for creating inclusive ECE practices that address diverse needs and backgrounds (Anyanwu, 2016). For instance, indigenous practices may sometimes conflict with Western ECE methods, causing a disconnect between children's home and school experiences (Mohammadnezhad et al., 2015). Language barriers may hinder effective communication between teachers and parents, affecting children's learning and development. Socio-economic status is another determinant, impacting children's access to quality ECE. Children from low-income families often lack access to resources and support needed for optimal learning (Balakrishnan & Low, 2016). Additionally, schools in economically disadvantaged areas may lack resources, facilities, and well-trained teachers, which affects the quality of ECE.

Cultural beliefs and values significantly influence how play is conceptualized and implemented. Indigenous practices emphasize communal learning and storytelling, serving both as entertainment and as a means of transmitting social norms and cultural values. Traditional games, for instance, are effective tools for promoting respect, cooperation, and a sense of belonging. A study found that 85% of participants reported increased values when traditional games were incorporated into curricula (Calixto et al., 2024). Indigenous games foster community engagement, strengthen home-school connections, and allow children to embody roles that reinforce responsibility and belonging, aligning with the philosophy of "ubuntu" which emphasizes communal values (Hadebe-Ndlovu, 2022). This integration of indigenous knowledge systems, including oral traditions and games, is vital for teaching children about cultural heritage and identity (Huaman, 2018).

Despite the benefits of integrating indigenous practices, challenges persist in standardizing these methods within formal curricula, necessitating further research and advocacy for their inclusion. Indigenous play often involves local folklore, promoting cognitive engagement and moral understanding (Gusril et al., 2024). Activities like traditional games support social skills and align with Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, which emphasizes social interaction's role in cognitive development (Matafwali & Mofu, 2023). Research shows that traditional games positively impact children's social development, enhancing self-regulation and socialization (Farahani & Mirsafi, 2024). While Western contexts may emphasize skill acquisition and individual success through designed toys, this emphasis on competition can sometimes limit collaborative learning, which is prevalent in indigenous play (Issahaku et al., 2024). Indigenous play activities nurture cognitive and social development by integrating folklore and community values, creating distinct play experiences compared to Western practices.

Family dynamics also play a crucial role in shaping children's play experiences. In many indigenous communities, extended family involvement fosters social and emotional development. Research indicates that children in environments with extended family support develop stronger social competencies and emotional intelligence due to diverse interactions and storytelling (Grasmeijer et al., 2024). Studies show that positive family dynamics correlate with improved social and emotional outcomes (Wang, 2023). While Western child-rearing emphasizes structured play and educational resources, this individualized approach may lack the communal support of indigenous family structures, which are critical for emotional well-being (Hall & Eckert, 2024).

Although Western approaches provide structured learning benefits, balancing these perspectives may enhance child development strategies overall.

Economic factors significantly impact the adoption of play-based learning in ECE. Resource limitations often require educators to rely on indigenous practices using local materials, fostering creativity and resourcefulness. For example, a study by Owolabi and Agbaje (2020) shows that schools in low-income areas innovate by utilizing local resources, reducing costs while promoting children's cultural heritage. Indigenous practices, including traditional games using natural materials like stones or sticks, are more sustainable and adaptable to the local context, allowing children to engage in meaningful play that resonates with their environment (Ogunyemi, 2021). In contrast, reliance on imported materials in Western-style ECE can exacerbate educational disparities in resource-limited settings. The blending of indigenous and Western approaches could therefore enhance educational practices by creating more culturally relevant and accessible play-based learning environments.

The integration of indigenous practices into ECE curricula enriches play-based learning by promoting social skills, cultural values, and community engagement. Research indicates that children involved in traditional games demonstrate improved social skills, empathy, and cooperation, which are essential for community-oriented values (Farahani & Mirsafi, 2024; Ospankulov et al., 2023). However, Western ECE often focuses on cognitive development and individual skill mastery, which can overlook the social dimensions present in indigenous practices (Purwanto, 2023). Balancing indigenous methods, which nurture social skills and cultural awareness, with Western approaches that enhance cognitive development, could improve overall child development outcomes.

Cultural resistance and economic constraints can hinder the implementation of blended curricula in Oyo State. Many educators and parents may perceive Western practices as a threat to local traditions, leading to reluctance in adopting new methodologies. This resistance is compounded by limited funding and resources, which restrict educators' ability to create curricula that integrate both indigenous and Western practices. Many teachers lack professional development opportunities to effectively merge these pedagogies (Ajadi, 2024; Sianturi et al., 2023). Studies highlight that successful integration requires collaboration with indigenous communities to ensure that knowledge is represented authentically, moving beyond tokenism (Tarisayi, 2024; Slikkerveer & Gellaerts, 2024). Educators often lack the necessary heritage knowledge to incorporate indigenous perspectives effectively, underscoring the need for professional development and community engagement (O'Donoghue et al., 2024). Integrating indigenous knowledge systems with Western educational practices fosters a richer learning environment, enhancing children's engagement and achievement (Li et al., 2024).

Statement of the Problem

Play-based learning, a vital approach in early childhood education, emphasizes structured and unstructured play as a way to foster essential cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Through play, young children acquire foundational skills critical to their future learning and personal growth. Globally, countries such as Finland, Canada, and the United Kingdom have embraced this approach within national curricula, recognizing its proven benefits in enhancing children's social abilities, creativity, problem-solving skills, and academic readiness. Research and international organizations like UNICEF and UNESCO advocate for play as both a fundamental right of every child and a key element of quality education.

In Nigeria, however, the adoption and implementation of play-based learning remain limited. Although the Nigerian National Policy on Education acknowledges play as part of early childhood education, the country's education system often prioritizes structured, teacher-centered learning methods over play. This focus on academic achievements and standardized testing can undermine

the potential of play in early childhood settings. Existing studies within Nigeria have highlighted how play can promote resilience, social integration, creativity, and academic readiness. They also show that indigenous play practices, with their rich cultural and developmental value, can enhance children's language skills and cultural identity while fostering a sense of belonging. Despite this understanding, most educational practices remain formal, and indigenous play remains underutilized, resulting in a disconnect between traditional knowledge and modern educational practices in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the current literature presents notable gaps that hinder the holistic integration of play-based learning in Nigerian early childhood education. First, there is limited research on effectively blending indigenous play practices with Western approaches in a way that is culturally respectful and meets formal educational standards. Studies often overlook Nigeria's unique socio-cultural diversity, failing to explore how factors like ethnicity, language, and local traditions impact children's engagement in play and teachers' abilities to implement culturally sensitive practices. Although economic factors are sometimes acknowledged, existing research does not adequately address how economic disparities affect play-based learning in under-resourced areas where materials for play are scarce.

Parental and community perceptions of play-based learning, particularly those concerning indigenous elements, are also understudied. Understanding these views is crucial for gaining community support and successfully implementing play-based learning in Nigerian schools. Additionally, little research examines the professional development needs of Nigerian educators for effectively implementing a hybrid play approach that respects cultural diversity. The existing literature also lacks longitudinal studies on the sustained effects of play-based learning, specifically indigenous play, on children's social, emotional, and academic outcomes over time.

Finally, as digitalization becomes increasingly relevant, the interaction between technology and indigenous play is relatively unexplored in Nigeria. Understanding how traditional and digital play can be balanced may present unique educational opportunities that respect cultural practices while embracing technological advancements. This study aims to bridge these gaps by investigating how an integrated play-based learning approach—incorporating both indigenous and Western practices—can be effectively implemented in Nigerian early childhood education. Specifically, this research will develop a framework for blending these practices in a way that aligns with cultural relevance and developmental goals. It will explore how Nigeria's socio-cultural diversity impacts play-based learning and propose inclusive strategies for culturally diverse settings. The study will also examine the role of economic disparities on the resources available for play-based learning, particularly in low-resource environments. Additionally, it will assess parental and community perceptions of play-based learning, focusing on indigenous elements, to inform community engagement strategies. Moreover, this study will identify professional development strategies to equip educators with the necessary skills for implementing culturally diverse play-based learning. Beyond addressing these gaps, this study will investigate the long-term effects of indigenous play on children's social and emotional development and evaluate the potential of integrating digital tools with traditional play. The research is titled "The Integration of Indigenous and Western Play-Based Learning Practices in Nigerian Early Childhood Education: A Framework for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy", and it aims to provide valuable insights into the complex interactions between culture, resources, and educational practices, contributing to a more inclusive and effective educational experience for young learners in Nigeria.

Main Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to develop a framework for integrating indigenous and Western play-based learning practices in Nigerian early childhood education. This framework aims to enhance culturally relevant pedagogy, promoting holistic child development through play.

Specific Purposes of the Study

1. To explore how indigenous and Western play-based learning practices can be effectively combined to align with the cultural, developmental, and educational goals of Nigerian early childhood education.
2. To examine how Nigeria's socio-cultural diversity (e.g., ethnicity, language, and local traditions) influences play-based learning practices in early childhood education.
3. To investigate the impact of economic disparities on the availability and quality of play-based learning resources, particularly in low-resource Nigerian settings.
4. To assess parental and community perceptions of play-based learning, with a focus on indigenous elements, and identify factors that facilitate or hinder community engagement.
5. To determine the professional development needs of Nigerian educators to implement a hybrid play-based approach that respects cultural diversity.
6. To evaluate the long-term effects of indigenous play-based learning practices on children's social, emotional, and academic development.
7. To explore the potential for integrating digital tools with indigenous play-based learning in Nigerian early childhood education.

Research Questions

1. How can indigenous and Western play-based learning practices be effectively integrated into Nigerian early childhood education to meet cultural, developmental, and educational goals?
2. How does Nigeria's socio-cultural diversity (including ethnicity, language, and traditions) affect the implementation and effectiveness of play-based learning in early childhood education?
3. What impact do economic disparities have on access to and quality of resources for play-based learning in low-resource Nigerian communities?
4. What are the perceptions of parents and community members regarding play-based learning, especially with regard to the inclusion of indigenous elements?
5. What professional development opportunities are needed to equip Nigerian educators with skills to implement a culturally relevant, hybrid play-based learning approach?
6. What are the long-term effects of indigenous play-based learning practices on children's social, emotional, and academic outcomes in Nigerian early childhood education?
7. How can digital tools be incorporated into indigenous play-based learning practices in a way that complements traditional forms of play in Nigerian early childhood education?

Research Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of the integration of indigenous and Western play-based learning practices in Nigerian early childhood education settings.

Research Design

The study utilized an exploratory sequential design, beginning with qualitative data collection to gather in-depth insights, followed by a quantitative phase to validate and generalize the findings.

This design was suitable for developing frameworks or models by allowing the exploration of initial concepts before broader application.

Population of the Study

The target population included early childhood educators across Nigeria, specifically those with experience in both urban and rural settings, as well as parents and guardians of children in early childhood programs and community leaders or cultural experts knowledgeable about traditional play practices within Nigerian cultural contexts.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

Purposive sampling was employed in the qualitative phase to select participants directly involved with early childhood education and those culturally knowledgeable. The qualitative sample comprised approximately 20 early childhood educators from various Nigerian regions, 10 parents or guardians representing diverse socio-economic backgrounds, and 5 community leaders or cultural experts. For the quantitative phase, stratified random sampling was used to ensure representation across geographic and socio-economic strata, with a sample size of 300 educators and 200 parents, providing statistical reliability.

Research Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were conducted during the qualitative phase with educators, parents, and cultural experts to explore perspectives on indigenous and Western play practices, as well as perceived benefits and challenges in integrating these practices. In the quantitative phase, a structured questionnaire was developed based on the themes identified in the qualitative phase, using Likert-scale items to assess attitudes, perceptions, and the extent of play-based learning practices currently in use. An observation checklist was used to evaluate the frequency and quality of indigenous and Western play-based activities in early childhood centers. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with groups of parents to gain nuanced perspectives on community expectations regarding play-based learning.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure content validity, the research instruments were reviewed by experts in early childhood education, Nigerian cultural studies, and educational psychology. A pilot study was also conducted with a small sample to refine questions and improve clarity. Reliability for the questionnaire was measured using Cronbach's alpha, achieving a target reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data from interview transcripts and FGDs, identifying key themes related to cultural practices, perceptions, and challenges of integration. For quantitative data, descriptive statistics summarized demographic data and survey responses, and inferential statistics, including t-tests and ANOVA, examined relationships between variables such as perceptions of play-based learning and socio-economic background.

Quantitative Results

The quantitative results collected through questionnaires are summarized below. Data was analyzed to show differences in perceptions and practices based on demographic factors.

Table 1: Educators' Perceptions of Play-Based Learning Practices (N=300)

Play-Based Learning Practice	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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Play-based learning enhances creativity	150 (50%)	90 (30%)	30 (10%)	20 (7%)	10 (3%)
Indigenous play is relevant in education	120 (40%)	100 (33%)	40 (13%)	25 (8%)	15 (5%)
Western play-based methods are preferred	80 (27%)	110 (37%)	40 (13%)	40 (13%)	30 (10%)
Play-based learning is essential for early childhood development	170 (57%)	85 (28%)	25 (8%)	15 (5%)	5 (2%)

Interpretation:

The results show that a majority of educators (80%) agree or strongly agree that play-based learning enhances creativity in children. Similarly, most educators (85%) see play-based learning as essential for early childhood development. However, there is a slight preference for Western play-based methods (64% agree or strongly agree), though indigenous practices are also considered relevant (73% agree or strongly agree), indicating a blend of both practices may be well-received in educational settings.

Table 2: Parents' Perspectives on the Integration of Indigenous and Western Play (N=200)

Integration Aspect	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Not Important	Not at All Important
Cultural preservation through indigenous play	140 (70%)	40 (20%)	10 (5%)	6 (3%)	4 (2%)
Use of Western play methods for academics	90 (45%)	60 (30%)	25 (12%)	15 (8%)	10 (5%)
Blending indigenous and Western play practices	120 (60%)	50 (25%)	20 (10%)	5 (3%)	5 (3%)

Interpretation:

Parents prioritize cultural preservation, with 90% rating it as very important or important, showing strong support for indigenous play-based learning. At the same time, 75% of parents support Western play-based methods for academics. A majority (85%) also believe in blending indigenous and Western methods, suggesting openness to an integrative approach in early education.

Qualitative Results (Semi-Structured Interviews)

The semi-structured interviews with educators, parents, and cultural experts provided rich insights into the perceptions and challenges related to integrating indigenous and Western play practices. Below is an explanatory summary of the key themes identified from these interviews.

Theme 1: Benefits of Indigenous Play-Based Learning

Educators and cultural experts emphasized the value of indigenous play in teaching children cultural values, language, and traditional practices. One educator noted, "Indigenous games teach children patience, respect, and community values—things that Western games often overlook." Parents also highlighted how traditional play reinforces their children's cultural identity, particularly in a modernizing world where such values are at risk of being lost.

Interpretation:

This theme suggests a strong support for indigenous play, as it is seen as not only educational but also vital in cultural preservation. This aligns with quantitative data, where parents rated cultural preservation highly.

Theme 2: Perceived Superiority of Western Play Practices for Academic Skills

Several educators expressed that Western play methods, such as puzzles and counting games, are more directly aligned with academic skills like literacy and numeracy. A participant mentioned, "Western play activities are structured for academic goals, so we find them useful for preparing children for primary education." However, some educators noted that indigenous games could be adapted to fulfill similar academic roles.

Interpretation:

This theme reflects an observed inclination toward Western play for academic preparedness, aligning with the quantitative results where Western play-based methods were preferred for academic goals.

Theme 3: Challenges of Integrating Indigenous Play in Formal Education

Educators reported challenges in implementing indigenous play due to a lack of resources and formal recognition in the curriculum. One participant explained, "Indigenous games aren't seen as educational by policymakers, so they are rarely included in our programs." Parents echoed concerns about the lack of support for traditional practices in schools, making integration difficult.

Interpretation:

The lack of institutional support highlights a structural gap that limits indigenous play's inclusion, pointing to potential policy changes needed to integrate both methods effectively.

Qualitative Results from Observation Checklist and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

The results from the observation checklist and focus group discussions (FGDs) provide a deeper understanding of the actual implementation and community perceptions of play-based learning activities in early childhood education centers.

Results from Observation Checklist

An observation checklist was used to evaluate the frequency and quality of play-based learning activities in selected early childhood education centers. Observations were conducted over a three-week period in 10 centers, focusing on the following categories: indigenous play activities, Western play activities, and the overall engagement of children.

Table 3: Frequency and Quality of Play-Based Learning Activities

Activity Type	Frequency (days observed)	Quality Rating (1-5)	Average Engagement Level (%)
Indigenous Play Activities	15	4.2	75%
Western Play Activities	20	4.5	80%
Combined Play Activities	10	4.0	70%

Interpretation:

Indigenous play activities were observed on 15 days with a quality rating of 4.2, indicating that these activities were implemented effectively, fostering considerable engagement among children (75%). Western play activities were observed more frequently (20 days) and received a slightly higher quality rating of 4.5, along with a higher average engagement level (80%). Combined play activities, which integrate both indigenous and Western methods, were less frequent (10 days) and rated slightly lower in quality (4.0) and engagement (70%). This suggests that while both types of play are present, Western play is more commonly implemented and perceived as engaging by educators.

Results from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Focus group discussions were conducted with 5 groups of parents, each comprising 6-8 participants. The discussions aimed to gather insights into community perceptions and expectations regarding play-based learning. Key themes emerged from these discussions.

Table 4: Key Themes from FGDs on Play-Based Learning

Theme	Description
Cultural Significance of Indigenous Play	Parents emphasized the importance of indigenous play for cultural identity and community values.
Academic Preparation through Western Play	Many parents expressed a belief that Western play methods better prepare children for academic success.
Desire for Integration	There was a strong desire among parents for schools to integrate both indigenous and Western play practices.
Concerns about Curriculum	Parents raised concerns about the lack of focus on indigenous practices in the current early childhood curriculum.

Interpretation

The FGDs revealed that parents value the cultural significance of indigenous play, associating it with their children's identity and values. However, they also recognize the importance of Western play methods for academic preparation, indicating a nuanced perspective on play-based learning. The desire for integration suggests that parents are looking for a more balanced approach that honors cultural heritage while equipping children with necessary academic skills. Concerns about the curriculum highlight a gap between parental expectations and the current educational practices, indicating potential areas for improvement in policy and program design.

Summary of Combined Results

The combined results from the observation checklist and FGDs indicate that while both indigenous and Western play-based activities are present in early childhood education settings, there is a tendency towards a greater emphasis on Western play. Parents express a strong desire for integrating both methods, underscoring the need for educational reforms that incorporate cultural perspectives alongside academic goals. The findings suggest that addressing these gaps could enhance the effectiveness of play-based learning in fostering well-rounded development in young children.

Discussion of Findings

Indigenous vs. Western Play Activities

The observation results indicated that indigenous play activities were observed on 15 days with a quality rating of 4.2, while Western play activities were noted on 20 days with a higher quality rating of 4.5. This suggests that Western play-based methods are more frequently implemented and perceived as engaging by educators. This finding aligns with existing literature that emphasizes the prevalence of Western educational frameworks in many early childhood settings,

which often prioritize structured play and academic readiness over culturally specific practices (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2010). Moreover, a study by Pyle and Danniels (2017) found that early childhood programs heavily focused on academic skills often marginalize indigenous and culturally relevant practices. However, this study's result also reflects the increasing recognition of the importance of integrating indigenous practices into early childhood education, as highlighted by Mehta (2024) who argued that culturally responsive pedagogy can enhance children's engagement and learning outcomes.

Engagement Levels in Play Activities

The average engagement levels for indigenous play activities (75%) and Western play activities (80%) indicate a positive response from children towards both types of play. While the engagement level for indigenous play is slightly lower, it remains significant, suggesting that when these activities are implemented effectively, they can capture children's interest. Existing literature supports this finding; for instance, Nicolopoulou (2010) emphasizes that play is a critical avenue for learning, regardless of its cultural context. Research by Martins et al, 2024 & Cecilia et al, 2023)). indicates that children's engagement in play contributes to their cognitive and social development. However, the higher engagement in Western play may suggest a need for further development and support for indigenous play practices to maximize their potential in engaging children.

Parental Perspectives on Play-Based Learning

The FGDs revealed that parents value the cultural significance of indigenous play while also acknowledging the role of Western play methods in academic preparation. This dual perspective highlights a desire for an integrated approach to play-based learning that encompasses both indigenous and Western practices. This finding resonates with the work of Ramesh, & Sharma, 2024, Dr. Bushra, &, Naqvi, 2023) who discusses the importance of community and parental involvement in shaping educational practices. Parents' concerns about the lack of indigenous play in the curriculum echo the findings of Yoon (2024), who noted Children possess valuable cultural knowledge from their homes, which can enhance their learning experiences when recognized in schools. Ethnographic studies also show that acknowledging children's home practices fosters meaningful curricular inquiries, bridging the gap between home and school

Concerns about Curriculum

Parents expressed concerns regarding the current curriculum's insufficient focus on indigenous play practices. This finding highlights a gap between parental expectations and educational practices, indicating potential areas for improvement in policy and program design. Literature on early childhood education often points out the need for curricula to reflect the cultural contexts of children (Sakti, Endraswara, & Rohman, 2024)). Research by Dave et al (2022) suggests that curricula that ignore cultural significance can lead to a lack of engagement and relevance for children from diverse backgrounds. This concern underscores the need for educational reforms that prioritize culturally responsive curricula, which aligns with the recommendations of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009), advocating for inclusive practices that recognize and celebrate diversity in educational settings.

Summary

This study explored the impact of play-based learning activities, particularly focusing on the comparison between indigenous and Western practices in early childhood education centers in Oyo Town. Through an observational checklist and focus group discussions with parents, the research revealed that while Western play activities were more frequently observed and rated higher in quality, indigenous play activities also demonstrated significant engagement levels among children. Parents expressed a strong desire for the integration of both indigenous and

Western play methods in the curriculum, highlighting concerns about the current emphasis on Western practices and the neglect of culturally significant indigenous play. The findings underscore the need for educational reforms that embrace a balanced approach to play-based learning, recognizing the cultural contexts of the children being served.

Conclusion

The findings of this study contribute to the understanding of play-based learning in early childhood education by highlighting the necessity of integrating indigenous practices alongside Western methods. While both types of play activities engage children effectively, the predominance of Western practices in educational settings raises concerns about cultural relevance and inclusivity. The study indicates that parents and community members value culturally responsive pedagogy, suggesting a gap between current educational practices and community expectations. As early childhood education continues to evolve, it is crucial to address these gaps to foster a more inclusive and effective learning environment for all children.

Recommendations

Educational authorities should revise early childhood education curricula to incorporate indigenous play practices alongside Western methodologies, ensuring that both cultural contexts are represented and valued.

Training programmes for educators should focus on culturally responsive teaching strategies that equip them to effectively implement indigenous play activities in their classrooms.

Schools should actively involve parents and community members in the development of curricula and play-based activities, fostering a sense of ownership and relevance in educational practices.

Further studies should be conducted to explore the long-term impacts of integrating indigenous play into early childhood education on children's developmental outcomes, providing empirical evidence to support curriculum reforms.

Educators and researchers should advocate for policies that recognize and support the inclusion of indigenous knowledge and practices in early childhood education to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all children.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to the existing body of literature on early childhood education by providing empirical evidence regarding the current state of play-based learning in Nigeria, specifically in Oyo Town. It highlights the critical need for integrating indigenous cultural practices into early childhood curricula, an area that has been underexplored in the context of Nigerian education. Furthermore, the study reinforces the importance of community perspectives in shaping educational practices and policies, offering a framework for understanding how cultural contexts can be woven into play-based learning. By addressing the gaps identified in this research, it lays the groundwork for future studies and initiatives aimed at enhancing the quality and relevance of early childhood education in diverse cultural settings.

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