



Factors Influencing Children's Language Development in Preschools in Slum Areas: Case of Mathare Slum in Nairobi Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The concept of preschool is not a new phenomenon in Kenya. The purpose of the study was to examine factors influencing children's language development in preschools in Mathare Slum area in Nairobi. The study focused on four factors: learning facilities, teachers' level of education, children absenteeism and strategies used by teachers to enhance children's language development. Mixed method approach was used. Target population was 25 childhood preschools and 25 teachers. Systematic random and purposive sampling methods were used to select 8 preschools and 8 teachers. Data collection instruments were observation schedule and questionnaire. Data analysis was done through coding and categorizing to create themes; as well as frequencies and percentages. The findings showed that quality of preschools was inadequate in terms of learning facilities and teachers' level of education. In addition, the findings of the study showed that some parents brought their children to school when they were busy, meaning, they did not value education. In addition, the findings revealed among others that teachers employed a number of strategies to enhance children's language development although it was evident that teachers were limited in English proficiency. The study recommends that preschool teachers be given training in English proficiency for teaching children.

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1.1 Introduction

The term 'preschool' refers to an early childhood program in which children combine learning with play guided by professionally trained teachers (Barnett, Steven, and Jason Hustedt 2003). Aim of preschool is to promote a safe and nurturing environment for children to grow and thrive through activities that help them develop language, cognitive, social and physical skills (California Department of Education 2013). Preschool becomes a necessity due to different reasons. One of the reasons given is the rapid increase in maternal employment meaning that children require other care givers. Previous studies have found that children of employed mothers are usually taken for preschool outside their homes which present a drastic change in children's rearing styles (Bolghan-Abadi, Kimiaee & Amir 2011). In addition, lack of extended family support has also resulted in parents seeking alternative ways of caring for their children. In the African context, members of the family stepped in to fill the gap of parenthood, especially in cases where the parents were working. One of the contemporary emerging issues today is that society holds a nuclear model to be the preferred family structure for bringing up children. Thus, working mothers in cities rely on paid child care provided by preschools (Ahnert and Lamb 2011).

The concept of preschool is not a new phenomenon in Kenya. Evidence shows that existence of preschools in Kenya can be traced back in the 1940s during colonial era. This evidence includes establishment of preschools for children whose parents lived in areas surrounding tea, coffee and sugar plantations (World Bank 1997). The first preschools in rural areas in Kenya emerged in 1952 and 1957 to provide care and

security for children whose parents engaged in forced labour (MOEST 2005)

The study focused on settings in Mathare slum in Nairobi which houses people from diverse backgrounds including refugees, business men and job seekers (Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions 2008). It can therefore be assumed that children in preschools may not only have different linguistic backgrounds but are often from impoverished families. In addition, previous research has established that preschools in slums often operate in a climate of crisis due to inadequate learning resources and financial difficulties (Jim and Nancy 2008). It is not surprising therefore that such a situation may compromise children's language development in Mathare area.

The study focused on children's language development in preschools in Mathare slum in Nairobi. The researchers were interested in conducting the study on language development among preschool children due to various reasons. First, success of young children in preschools is determined by language which provides children with the ability to follow instructions, interact with other children and engage in learning activities (Child Friendly School Manual 2012). Second, research puts emphasis on the importance of early language stimulation for brain development and learning in young children (Carter 1997). Against this background, it is crucial to examine the influence of the following factors on children's language development: learning facilities, teachers' level of education, children absenteeism and strategies used by teachers to enhance language development. These factors are detailed in the following sections.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Learning Facilities

Learning facilities include the design of the building, learning space in relation to furniture and equipment and other early childhood learning materials such as play fields, toilets, kitchen, books, painting materials, wall charts, computers and televisions. These facilities according to previous research assist young children in language development because they stimulate children's curiosity and creativity as they interact freely with the environment (Kuuskorpi & Gonzalez 2011). Eshiwani (1983) and Hohmann & Weikart (1995) point out that learning facilities such as textbooks, libraries, and visual aids are very important in promoting language development among children. Research has also shown that children who participate in environments that have quality learning facilities have lasting effects on language development (Maggi, Irwin, Sidiqi, Poureslami, Hertzman & Hertzman 2005). However, the selection of learning facilities should be carefully done. For example, the facilities should be safe and secure to shield children from injuries such as falling from stairs, getting burned or getting infected by diseases (Government of South Australia 2004) among others.

Moreover, learning facilities such as books, crayons and pencils help children to have a consistent participation in routine learning activities which include pasting, painting and story-telling, which are critical foundation for language development (Temis-leMonda and Rodriques 2009). Facilities such as swings, jungle-gym and play fields expose children to activities which involve movement which may facilitate in learning of new content and improvement in oral language acquisition (National Childcare Accreditation Council 2009). Furthermore, the motor development activities according to previous research may reduce risk factors for diseases such as cancer, obesity and heart disease that may affect children's holistic development early in life (Lindon 2007). Research has also linked learning facilities with visual literacy development through images delivered across range of social media and wall charts which improve the child's imaginative learning (Tarr 2003). For example, television and computer are considered as tools that can be used to expand young children's access to new vocabularies which enhance their imagination (Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology 2008).

Nutrition is considered as an essential facility for children's language development. Children need balanced diet for rapid growth and reduction of the risk of infection (Michadsen 2003). Good nutrition helps children's brain to function well (Unicef 2001). Those children who grow up in an environment that does not provide them with balanced diet may suffer malnutrition which affects physical, cognitive development and the ability to acquire language (Marcus, Pereznieta, Collen, Carter 2012). The study thus sought to answer the question, what extent do learning facilities influence children language development?

1.2.2 Teachers' Level of Education

Teachers' role in enhancing language development in young children is of utmost importance. The dissemination of knowledge and good practice in and outside the classroom are key to how children acquire language. Early childhood teacher training programmes in Kenya offer a distinctive institutionalized and decentralized system of training. Previously, various actors trained pre-school teachers but the

proportion of trained teachers was low. In addition, the training was unregulated and uncoordinated and there was no accreditation system. This situation changed with the establishment of the National Centre for Early Childhood Education in 1984 as a national early childhood resource centre within the Kenya Institute of Education (Kenya Institute of Education 2006). Despite the significant gains in early childhood teacher training programmes, research has shown that access to training services is poor, particularly for the lowest-income groups such as Mathare slum and that the level of teacher wages is inadequate and irregular (World Bank 1996).

Formal training familiarizes practitioners with their roles so that they may dispense them effectively in terms of professional work ability and performance. Previous research has pointed out that formal training helps the teachers in using approaches that enrich language development among children. These approaches may include teaching and assessment techniques which help children develop positive attitude towards learning as well as building trust in adults (Elarousy & Al-jadaani 2013). It has been established that language development among children depends on the capabilities of the learning environment provided by the teacher (Granhholm and Olszewski 2013). Thus the need to find out how teachers' level of education influences children's language development

1.2.3 Absenteeism Children

Absenteeism has been used to mean children non-attendance to preschools (Balfanz & Byrness 2012). Research has shown that absenteeism in preschools may occur if children lack parents' support or if they come from a poor environment (Reid 2008). A study conducted by Bruner, Discher & Chang (2011) in California asserts that children who are regularly absent from school, perform poorly in communication proficiency and in reading competency regardless of their socio-economic background. There is need therefore to establish the validity of this argument thus prompting this study.

1.2.4 Strategies to Enhance Language Development

The quality of relationship between the teacher and the children plays a great role in language development (Granhholm & Olszewski 2013). Young children need an environment that gives them freedom and autonomy to explore and develop (Susan and Weidinger, 2004). According to Khan (2007), teachers may enhance children's learning environment through activities such as play, story-telling and singing which provide fundamental opportunities for language development.

Research has proven that appropriate assessment methods such as involving parents in their children's learning are very essential in promoting their language development. Assessment of young children should be designed to reflect a holistic view of children, discover what children know and understand, feel, say and do (Flottman, Stewart & Tayler 2011). Information obtained from assessment, may be useful to the teacher to draw valid conclusion about the child's language development and choose appropriate materials for their learning (Mulliga, Morris, Whalen & Elder 1998). Such information may also be useful in identifying children who may need services such as planning appropriate instructions for individual and groups of children as well as evaluating how well the program is meeting goals for language development (Epstein, Schweinhart, Parecki & Robin 2004). The study thus set out to establish strategies used by teachers

to enhance language development among children in Mathare slum area in Kenya.

1.3 Research Design and Methodology

The study used mixed method research paradigm for collecting and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative research in a single study (Creswell 2012). Furthermore, mixed methods approach in research minimizes biasness in the study (Brannen, 2005). The target population for the study was twenty five (25) preschools and twenty five (25) teachers. Gay's (1996) suggestion of 10 percent of larger populations and 20 percent of smaller population was considered in the selection of the study sample. Thirty two percent of the total population was selected using systematic random sampling method. The total number of preschools sampled to participate in the study was eight (8). Eight (8) teachers were purposively sampled from the sampled preschools to participate in the study.

Instruments for data collection were a questionnaire for teachers and an observation schedule for children. Qualitative data was captured through writing down field notes and coding procedures was analyzed based on the following themes: learning materials, space for play, classrooms size and nutrition; teachers' level of education: teaching approach, English proficiency; absenteeism: children punctuality issues and teachers' strategies: teaching themes of culture, use of code-mixing and code-switching, reinforcements.

The teachers' questionnaire was administered in the eight (8) sampled preschools. The questions in the questionnaire solicited information on learning facilities, teachers' level of education, children absenteeism and strategies used by teachers to enhance language development. Data obtained through questionnaire were inform of numerical information and were presented in frequencies and percentages.

1.4 Results and Discussion

Research findings revealed multifaceted factors influencing children's language development. Data were presented according to the themes identified during data analysis procedure which included learning facilities, teachers' level of education, children absenteeism and strategies used by teachers to enhance children's language development.

1.4.1 Facilities

One of the observations made regarding learning facilities indicated that the preschools had inadequate learning facilities for reading, writing, painting and drawing. Limited spaces for learning also emerged as key a finding in the study. For example, it was observed that most of the preschools did not have a playground and play equipment were housed in private premises meaning there was no space for free play. It was also observed that the classrooms were small and that children seemed cramped in one small room because the number of children in each class was large.

Food which is also a significant facility for children development was found inadequate in some of the preschools. For example, the data obtained showed that in some of the preschools, children were not sufficiently fed. In relation to this, it was also observed that in some cases children did not have breakfast or ten o'clock tea while lunch was served late in the afternoon and this meant that children were frustrated due to hunger. Some children were observed crying and throwing themselves on the floor when it reached noon time while other children were observed fighting amongst themselves an indication that they were dissatisfied with school environment.

Data obtained from the questionnaire concerning availability of learning facilities revealed that the preschools lacked play grounds as indicated by 5(62.5%) of the teachers while 3(37.5%) indicated lack of story books and 1(12.5%) showed lack of pencils in their preschools. The study sought information on the number of meals the children had per day and the findings were that, 3(37.5%) said that children had three meals per day, 2(25%) wrote that they had four meals per day, 2(12.5%) indicated that they had two meals per day while another 1(12.5%) said that children had one meal per day. This finding indicates that children from the preschools that provided fewer meals might have suffered from malnutrition as pointed out by (Marcus, Pereznieta, Collen and Carter (2012) who argue that children who grow up in an environment that does not provide them with balanced diet may suffer malnutrition which affects their ability to acquire language.

1.4.2 Teachers' Level of education

Data gathered through observation showed that the teachers lacked knowledge in dealing with small children. This can be explained from the teachers' pedagogical approaches which were teacher-centered and their limited English proficiency. For example, it was observed that most practitioners focused on the structured-educational activities which denied children opportunities to participate in their own initiated learning experiences. Furthermore, it was observed that the teachers as practitioners portrayed negative discipline styles such as shouting at children. This practice is likely to interfere with children's language development, particularly when they are hungry or frustrated.

Data gathered through teacher questionnaire revealed that 5(62.5%) of the teachers had secondary level of education, 2(25%) had primary level of education while 1(12.5%) had college level of education. This finding showed that the teachers were not adequately trained to handle preschool children in relation to language development. The finding supports Granholm and Olszewski (2013) view that language development among children depends on the capabilities of the learning environment provided by the teacher.

1.4.3 Children Absenteeism

Data gathered through this study raised issues on children absenteeism and punctuality. For example, it was observed that some parents brought their children to school in the afternoon. During the roll call made by the teachers in the morning, it was observed that each preschool had more than one child absent per day. When probed by the researchers on why children were brought to school late or were completely absent, the teachers responded that it was only when parents were occupied that they brought their children to school because nobody else was willing to take care of them. This is an indication that parents did not either value the education of their children or they were not aware of its importance due to ignorance.

Data gathered from 5(62.5%) of the participants indicated that some parents would only bring their children to school when they were on duty or working but when they had off days their children stayed at home. Concerning the enrolment of the children in preschools, 8(100%) of the participants indicated that enrolling of children in the preschools was a continuous process. For example, 7(87.5%), of the teachers said that some children had been in the class for only one month while others had been in the same class for eight months an indication that parents saw preschools as more of

day care centres than learning institutions. This finding is supported by Reid (2008) who says that absenteeism in preschools may occur if children lack parents' support. Therefore, the parents' attitude needs to be addressed

1.4.4 Strategies used by practitioners to enhance children's language development

It was observed that different themes of culture were taught to children and also observed that the teachers used code-mixing and code-switching when interacting with children. Interestingly some preschools programmed play time in a way that allowed children in all the classes to go for play at the same time. The grouping of children according to the language they could speak was evident during break time when all children went out to play in the playground for those who had a playground. Other strategies used included use of tangible (stickers and sweets) and non-tangible (praise) reinforcements. For example, some teachers promised children sweets if they paid attention in class. In other instances, children had stickers on the forehead. For example if a child made noise in class, the sticker would be removed. On the other hand if a child followed instructions the teacher would use words such as good boy or good girl. Teachers would also use negative terms such as stupid or silly if the child did not follow instructions.

Data obtained through the questionnaire showed that the teachers engaged children in social interaction through play. For example, 3(37.5%) of the practitioners said that they allowed children to play outside the classroom to interact socially. The most commonly used assessment method by the majority of the teachers showed that six (75%) of the teachers made notes on the performance of an individual child, five (62.5%) teachers indicated that they observed what children did inside and outside the classroom while 3(37.5%) said that they asked questions. Other methods used by the teachers to enhance children's language development showed that 4(50%) of the teachers punished the children and 4(50%) indicated that they encouraged children.

On the most preferred way to help children who were under performing in language development, it was revealed that seven (87.5%) of the teachers allowed children to play together. Calling parents to discuss about the child was the second preferred method of helping children who were underperforming in language development which was indicated by 5(62.5%) participants while 2(25%) said that they preferred punishing the child so as to be more attentive. Involving parents in children in their children's learning is in agreement with Flottman, Stewart & Tayler's (2011) view that parents are very essential in promoting their children's language development.

1.5 Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the study findings, teachers' level of education emerged as a major theme in this study. The findings of the study showed that the teachers had inadequate knowledge to enhance children's language development because the teachers were not well trained. It is therefore important for the government to improve preschool teacher skills in handling preschool children in relation to language development to help children in areas such pronunciation of words and sentence construction. In addition, teachers should have formal training to adapt to the learners curriculum and teaching practices so as to meet the needs of children from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

In this study, it was found out that children's creativity was negatively influenced by the pedagogical approaches used by teachers. The teachers used teacher-centered approach because most of the teachers focused on the structured-educational activities such as numbers, colours and shapes which did not provide opportunities for children to participate in their own initiated learning experiences. Teachers should therefore come up with teaching approaches that promote children's interests in learning so as to enhance language development.

The findings indicated that some children would report to school as late as afternoon while others missed the entire day. This was an element of "I don't care" business by both the teachers and the parent. It is therefore important that parents' attitude towards preschool education should be addressed to minimize children absenteeism.

The findings of the study revealed a number of strategies used by teachers to enhance children's language development. These strategies included teaching themes of culture, use of code-mixing and code-switching strategies. In addition, teachers used punishment for non-performing children. Use of positive strategies should be encouraged so as to motivate children and enhance their language development. This will regulate children's stimulation, motivation and behavior which promote language development.

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