

## Teacher's Perception on the Contribution of Pretend Play on Children's Self-Regulation in Tanzanian Pre-primary Schools

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions on the contribution of pretend play on self-regulation behavior among young children in pre-primary schools in a Tanzanian context. Four groups prepared hypothetical pretend play; these addressed aggressive, isolation, hyperactive and prosocial behaviours, and were purposively included in the study to explore their contribution on children's self-regulation. This was a case study design, whereas, in-depth interview was used to collect data. Twenty participants participated in this study. The findings revealed that some teachers are aware about the contribution of pretend play they prepared on children's self-regulation behavior in pre-primary school; while some argued that pretend play contributes solely on learning numeracy, arithmetic and fun. The study recommends that pre-primary teachers should be trained on the contribution of pretend play in a wider perspective, including behavior self-regulation which forms a foundation of learning adjustment and other social skills.*

**Key words;** *self-regulation, self regulation behavior, play, pretend play, teacher perception*

## **BACKGROUND**

Early childhood is a period of rapid brain development that leads into development and growth including self-regulation behavior in children. Self-regulation processes across individuals emerge during infancy and are continuously contributing significantly to subsequent adjustment or maladjustment in children (Perry, Dollar, Calkins & Shanahan, 2018). Children are expected to behave according to the expectations of the society. During their growing and development, children display different behaviours such as prosocial, aggressive, anxious, noncompliance, tantrums, hyperactive (Keenan & Wakschlag, 2000). However, all the behaviours are regarded as normal and part of child development (Wakschlag et al. 2007). For example, actions of beating or pushing among children are regarded as part of their development because children tend to experiment things around them and sometimes regard them as fun. Behaviours that are displayed at younghood may either help or inhibit a child to get along with peers, to establish positive relationship with parents at home and teachers and comply with school rules. Self-regulation behavior is strong and produces significant results during early childhood stage. Since self-regulation starts from early childhood stage, it is suggested that children should be taught to regulate their behaviours at their younghood.

### **Self-regulation in Young Children**

Self-regulation has been defined differently by different authors. Dan (2016) defines self-regulation as the ability to express thoughts, feelings and behaviours in a socially appropriate way. According to Dan (2016), learning to negotiate, to calm down when in conflict and persisting in difficult situation are examples of self-regulation behaviour. Self-regulation is also defined as the ability to adjust arousal and behaviour so as to cope with environmental demands (Perry et al., 2018). Furthermore, Elias and Berk (2002) define self-regulation as a broad set of process that is the building block of self-development in different aspects. In the context of this study, self-regulation refers to the act of managing thoughts, feelings and behavior to enable a child to cope and get along with others and live successfully in the pre-primary school context. Rossam and Murray (2017) state that self-regulation has a foundational role in promoting a well being across the life span of an individual. According to Bayindir (2019), better self-regulation in a child predicts better performance in school, better social relations, and fewer behavioural difficulties as well as helping a child to successfully negotiate challenges. Bredekamp (2004) argues that self-regulation behavior can be observed when a child waits for his/her turn and learns to cooperate during play. When a child is able to regulate his/her thoughts, feelings and actions s/he can

also successfully negotiate challenges facing him/her. Bonson (2000) comments that self-regulation assists children in monitoring their thoughts, behaviours and emotions using their internal control. A self-regulated child tends to behave appropriately, tends to have positive interactions with others and comply with parents and teachers' instructions (Boson, 2000; Elias & Berk, 2002). Since the child interacts with different people in school who are new to him/her, the child needs to learn to regulate his/her behavior so as to fit in the school context. Learning self-regulation is an ongoing process during child development and growth. Furthermore, children learn self-control through interactions with other children and appropriate guidance from teachers, parents and older siblings. Hoffman and Russ (2012) argue that children are required to develop skills of behavioural self-regulation to control their behaviours and emotions. Furthermore, early childhood is a period of laying foundations of self-regulation that include emotional control, self-guidance and developing responsible behavior (Berk, 2018). Self-regulation process emerges during infancy and further contributes to either subsequent adjustment outcome according to society or maladjustment against the society expectations (Perry et al., 2018).

Self-regulation can be emotional, behavioural; or cognitive, which are common to young children. Studies report that children regulate their behavior through different ways such as inhibition, aggression and/or prosocial (Perry et al., 2018). Self-regulation has a foundational role in promoting wellbeing across one's life span including physical, emotional, social, moral and educational achievement. Rosanbalm and Murray (2017) argue that supporting self-regulation development in early childhood is an investment for later success in almost all domains. They further argue that stronger self-regulation behavior predicts better performance in schools, better relationship with others and fewer behavior difficulties. Evidence indicates that self-regulation behavior lays a foundation of adjustment for pre-school children and can be taught through different ways including pretend play. When young children join pre-primary school for the first time, they are in transition from home to pre-primary school. During transition, children's behaviours differ due to individual temperaments and the kind of orientations they received at their homes (Shavega, van Tuijl & Brugman, 2015). Dan (2016) argues that a child develops internal self-regulatory behavior within the context of environment and biology and that self-regulation behavior increases through pedagogical measures. Since children have different background orientations before they join pre-primary school, they bring their behavior in the school context. Children learn self-regulation of their behaviours through different ways. The most common ways are such as imitation of their adults such as parents, older

siblings, teachers and friends. Rosanbalm and Murray (2017) argue that the most common sources of self-regulation are such as active instructions and supportive practices. Furthermore, different strategies have been reported to benefit children in regulating their behaviours. For example, Dan (2016) insists that self-regulation should be taught through modelling, instruction and scaffolding. However, supporting children in behaviour self-regulation can be rewarding and/or challenging as pointed out by Cole and Cole (1993) that children may learn acceptable or unacceptable behaviours in the society. To enhance a rewarding self-regulation behavior in children, teachers should plan strategies that are of interest of children such as play and pretend play. Based on the findings from literature, we found worth exploring the perception of teachers on the contribution of pretend play on children's behavioural self-regulation in Tanzanian pre-primary schools.

### **Pretend Play**

Pretend play is the act of pretence such as symbolic play, imaginary play, fantasy and/or dramatic play (Whitebread & O'Sullivan, 2012). Pretend play occurs when one object stands for another; for example, a puppet can act as a baby but in reality, a puppet is not a baby. According to Weisberg (2015), pretend play refers to subtype of play that involves forms of representation or acting as if such that behavior or action that take place in pretend play do not reflect reality. Curries and Ravenscroft (2002) view pretend play in children as primarily connected to shaping behavior of the child. Pretend play has been pointed out as the significant mode of social interactions that enhances the ability of development of socio-emotional regulation in children (Bek, 2018; Galyer & Evans, 2006; Pellagrin, 2009; Savina, 2014; Whitebread & O'Sullivan, 2012). In this study, we adapted a definition from Weisberg (2015) that pretend play refers to play or an action that involve representation or action that take place in the pretend play which reflect what happens in the real context.

### **Pretend Play and Self-regulation Behavior**

Studies have pointed out the contribution of pretend play on the self-regulation behaviour among children. For example, Whitbread and Piano Pasternma (2010) did a study among the pre-primary school children and found evidence of the contribution of pretend play on self-regulation behaviour among the children. Studies report that since young children in pre-primary school are at different age, the use of more developmentally appropriate pretend play capture young children to engage in a more comprehensive self-regulatory behavior (Whitebread & O'Sullivan, 2012). Whitebread (2010) further suggests that teaching pretend

play is important in supporting self-regulation behaviour in children. Pretend play has been perceived as an appropriate strategy to be used to manage behavior in young children (Whitebread & Pino Pastemak, 2010). Lindsey (2014) argues that children who are taught through pretend play are expected to form positive peer relationship during the transition from pre-schools. He further insists that pretend play promotes intentional learning in early years.

According to Rentzou (2013), play including pretend play gains special interest in the profile of early childhood because it significantly contributes to children's social development. Furthermore, Play including pretend play has been reported to help children develop social understanding and emotional regulation which are central to behavioural self-regulation in children (Ashiab, 2007; Hoffman & Russ 2012; Laster & Russel, 2010; Lindsley, 2014; Newton & Jenvey, 2011). In addition, play has been reported to reduce aggression, anxiety, and disruptive behaviour and helps in the formation and development of friendship, self-expression and self-regulation (Choo, Xu & Haron, 2012; Lester & Russel, 2010; Miller & Almon, 2009). Significant contribution of play to social interactions including behavioural regulation in children aged 2 to 6 years, has been widely addressed (Whitebread & O'Sullivan, 2012). However, the role of pretend play on children's self-regulation behavior in a Tanzanian pre-primary school context is not well known. Although teachers are good in preparing play including pretend play, it is not clear whether they are aware of the role of play they prepare in young children.

### **Teachers' Perception on the Contribution of Pretend Play on Behavioural Self-Regulation in Children**

Teachers have been using play including pretend play to help young children get along with others through social interaction including behavioural regulation. Researches have explored the perception of teachers on the contribution of play on children's self-regulation. Teachers argue that pretend play contributes to children's holistic development such as social, emotional, cognitive and linguistic (Bubikova, Hjetland & Wollschend, 2019; Hunter & Walsh, 2014). They further specifically report that play including pretend play enhance conflict resolution and facilitates social relationship and cognitive development in children (Haney & Bissonnette, 2011). Furthermore, according to teachers, play lays a foundation for later learning in children (Hunter & Walsh, 2014). These argument focus on the multiple roles of pretend play, whereas it is not clear whether Tanzanian teachers teaching in pre-primary schools are aware on this. To the best of my knowledge so far, there is no study that addresses the contribution of pretend play on children's self-regulation in a Tanzanian context. This study therefore aimed to

delineate the contribution of pretend play on children's self-regulation focusing on the teachers' perspectives.

### **The Present Study**

The present study aimed at exploring the contribution of pretend play on children's self-regulation behaviour among the pre-primary children in Tanzania from the teachers' perspectives. Pre-primary teachers participated in the training on the role of play on learning. All teachers were Tanzanians teaching in public pre-primary schools; mainly from rural context. During the training, after theoretical presentation, teachers were assigned with activities of preparing pretend play that can be used to teach young children. Since teachers who teach young children need to be creative, especially in designing learning materials including pretend play, this was part of developing skills and enhancing creativity in the teachers. Teachers prepared pretend play out of their creativity and imagination and so from that a researcher assessed teachers' ideas about the connection between children's pretend play and self-regulation. Only four pretend play which addressed the connection between pretend play and self-regulation or social emotional development were selected. Our main assumption based on evidence from literature, that skills on self-regulation are foundation of harmonious relationship among children and their teachers and peers and that a child can benefit on academic as well (See also Whitebread & O'Sullivan, 2012). Since there is no study of this nature in a Tanzanian context, this study therefore, aimed at exploring the contribution of pretend play on children's self-regulation on the perspective of the teachers. Specifically, this study aimed:

1. At exploring motivation behind preparing pretend play they prepared,
2. At exploring the usefulness of pretend play and,
3. At exploring the contribution of pretend play on children's behavioural regulation.

### **Methods**

#### **Design, Sample and Sampling Procedures**

This was a case study design, which involved 20 participants who prepared four pretend play, which addressed self-regulation behaviour in children. The participants were selected purposively from the workshop on learning through play which trained teachers from public pre-primary.

#### **Procedures**

The teachers were trained for one week on teaching and learning through play and were thereafter asked to design pretend play and explain their roles in

children's learning. Teachers formed nine (9) groups; each group had five (5) participants; therefore, the teachers prepared nine (9) pretend plays. Participants prepared different puppets out of their creativity and imagination, these were given different roles in the play. They used local materials such as plastics, piece of clothes, ropes, and fake hair to prepare puppets. The participants were assigned actions of puppets through demonstration. A researcher selected four (4) pretend play out of nine (9) that addressed self-regulation behavior in children and assessed teachers' ideas regarding the connection between pretend play and self-regulation. Thereafter, we interviewed teachers who prepared the selected pretend play to explore whether they understood the contribution of the pretend play on self-regulation of behaviour among pre-primary children.

### **Teacher Interview and Data Analysis**

Open unstructured interview were used to explore teacher's perception on the contribution of pretend play on children's self-regulations; this was an individual interview, which lasted for 15 to 20 minutes per person. The interview was recorded using a smartphone under the participant's verbal consent; it was thereafter transcribed and the related themes were merged. Thematic analysis was adopted in this study. After the interview, themes were identified, presented and discussed.

### **Pretend Play**

In this study we selected and presented four pretend play out of nine, which were directly related to self-regulation behaviour in children. In each group, some or all participants were given special characters that distinguished them from other participants. The participants; in this case teachers, acted as children in almost all aspects. Every member in the play acted as a child through accent, actions, roles and behaviours.

### **The four pretend play were designed as follows:**

*This play used puppets as participants, which stood in place of four children; whereas one of the children used to beat, bully and pinch the other three children. Other children isolated him and nobody liked to join him because of his aggressive behavior. Puppets were also used in place of teachers; these thereafter summarized the story to all children. Participants pretended as children who were not in the play.*

The first pretend-play addressed the relationship of an aggressive child with other children in the class. Indicators of aggressive behavior were such as beating, bullying and pinching other children.

*This play consisted a group of six puppets that represented five pre-primary children and one pre-primary schoolteacher. One puppet represented a girl who was seen to isolate herself, as she did not join the other children during playtime. The teacher was observed to try to be close to the child with the aim of helping her join other children.*

This pretend play highlighted about the anxious child. Behavioural symptoms of anxiety involved avoidance such as fear and excessive shyness.

*This play consisted of five puppets that represented a boy aged five years, mother, father, teacher, and a sibling (brother). The boy behaved hyperactively, he didn't listen to his parents and didn't adhere to parents' guidance/instructions. The parents explained to the teacher about the behavior of their child. The teacher was able to manage the child's behaviour as he intervened the child's behavior and after few days the child showed indicators of behavioural change. The parents were very happy and in turn congratulated the teacher for correcting the behaviour of the child.*

This pretend play highlighted a hyperactive child and his/her relationship with siblings and parents, which was disharmonious. The play indicates also the role of the teachers in helping a child who shows indicators of difficult behaviours.

*This play consisted four puppets representing four prosocial girls. The children were walking together at school. One child fell down; her friends then lifted her up and sympathized to her. Another child shared with her friends a piece of boiled cassava; another child also had snacks of which she then shared with her friends*

The fourth pretend play highlighted prosocial behavior in children; prosocial behaviours in children are such helping, sharing, empathy and sympathy.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The general aim of this study was to explore the perception of teachers on the contribution of pretend play on children's self-regulation among pre-primary school children in a Tanzanian context. To have a clear picture about teachers' perception, we used the pretend play which were prepared by the teachers. The



plays were used as reference during interview with the teachers. The participants were teachers who prepared the pretend play. First, we explored the motivation behind preparing the pretend play they prepared. Almost all teachers responded that it was part of the training and creativity and that the behaviours are commonly displayed by the children in schools, so they were familiar with behaviours. Examples of few quotations below support this argument:

*We were asked to prepare any pretend play and it happened that we prepared a pretend play of this nature but there was no reason, this was just our creativity (teacher)*

*It was part of the training exercise, anybody can prepare any pretend play depending on her/his creativity and experience with children; but for our case our play based on the behaviour of young children in pre-primary school, these are the behaviours we experience daily in our school (Teacher)*

Based on teachers' responses the motive behind preparing the play was to fulfil the objectives of the training as they were supposed to prepare pretend play. Some of the teachers reported to be motivated by the behaviour of children displayed in their schools. The findings are consistency with the findings of Manyara and Murangi (2018) that daily interpersonal relationship between teachers and children in schools, motivate teachers to prepare pre-tend play which are appropriate to the children's age. Furthermore, almost all teachers responded that they prepared the pretend play to fulfil the theme of the workshop, which was "learning by play". Since they prepared play which portrays different messages, it indicates that teachers have intrinsic and diverse motivation and creativity in preparing play which lay foundation in child development of all aspects.

Second, we explored the perception of teachers on the usefulness of pretend play prepared to the children in the classes they teach. Majority responded that pretend play are useful because they help children to get prepared for primary education. However, few responded that pretend play help children in emotional and social adaptations which self-regulation is part. Examples of responses are as presented in the quotations below.

*Pretend play is useful because it helps children to learn subjects such as literacy and numeracy that will help them to join primary education, if play cannot help a child to read, write and numbers we cannot say pretend play is useful (Teacher)*

*Pretend plays help to bring children together, as they participate in the play, they get along to each other, help to teach children many things, like physical which make children more active. In general, pretend play help children to get prepared to learn (Teacher)*

*Because our main roles are to prepare children for primary schools pretend play should focus on helping children to read, write and count and not otherwise. I suggest that pretend play should focus on preparing children to learn (Teacher).*

This was a general question regarding the impact of pretend play to young children. Teachers reported the usefulness of pretend play in different views. For example, some teachers perceived that pretend play are useful for cognitive development in children mainly focusing on literacy and numeracy and not beyond this; which implies that play. Some teachers view that pretend play enhances socio-emotional development in children through playing together, thus, fostering children to get along with others. The later view is in line with the findings from other studies which report that pretend play is responsible in enhancing of social emotions development and fostering social interactions and adjustment in children (Bek, 2018; whitebread, 2010; whitebread & O'Sullivan, 2010).

Furthermore, we explored whether teachers were aware of the contribution of pretend play on behavioural regulations in children with regard to the pretend play they prepared. Examples of responses were as follows:

*Our pretend play have contributed on preparing children to learn and not behavior. Our play was in line with the theme of the workshop, which was about pretend play for learning and not for behaviour (Teacher)*

*Pretend play focused on children's behavioural regulation, this was featured in our play where an isolated child was able to join other children; in addition, prosocial behavior help a child to get along with others (Teacher)*

*We didn't intend to address behavioural regulation in children; our play focused more on providing fun so contributed happiness in our children; because if children are happy are ready to learn to write, read and count numbers (Teacher)*

Regarding the perception on the contribution of pretend play on children's behavioural self-regulation, teachers responded based on their pretend play, which they prepared out of their imagination and creativity during the training. Teachers had different views on this: On one hand, teachers responded that the

prepared pretend play contribute to children's learning especially on literacy and numeracy and not on behavioural self-regulation. However, this perception is contrary to the pretend play prepared in this study because the play did not focus on literacy but rather addressing behavioural issues. The findings are contrary to the findings of Pellegrin (2009) that most studies on pretend play have focused on children's abilities on issues related to literacy and learning, which was not the case in this study. On the other hand, result indicated that teachers perceive that the prepared pretend play have a contribution on behavioural regulation in children. For example, they pointed pretend play number one, two and three that they were directly related to behavioural self-regulation in children. This implies that aggressive, anxious and hyperactive, as examples of unfriendly behaviours require a child to regulate himself or herself for successful adjustment in school. The findings are in line with the findings by Choo, Xu and Haron (2012) and Kapor (2005) who report that pretend play reduce aggression, anxiety and disruptive behaviours through self-regulation; and significantly affect the development of self-regulation in children (Kapor, 2005).

In line with findings in this study, play enhances the ability of the development of socio-emotional regulation in children (Galyer & Evane, 2006, Savina, 2014). For example, an anxious child (as described in the play) who is characterized by reticent behaviour which is reflected in shyness, social fear, internalizing difficulties, low self perception is more likely to be perceived as an unattractive playmate (Choo et al, 2012), but pretend play as designed in this study may reduce anxious behaviour in a child and the child is more likely to attract peers during play which is a result of self-regulation. Pretend play is very significant in self-regulation in a child and that it powerfully enhances learning in many aspects (Kapor. 2005), which has great contribution for a child to get along with other children in schools. This implies that children who are taught through pretend play are more likely to have high self-regulation skills and are less disruptive during peer interaction (See also Diamond, Barnet, Thomas & Muro, 2007; Fung & Cheng, 2017). The findings therefore indicate that each pretend play has specific contribution on child development which is in line with that of Rentzou (2013) that play including pretend play, contribute to overall development, however, not all pretend plays have the same effects. However, some pretend plays have multiple contributions on behavioural self-regulation including emotional and social.

### **Strengths, Limitations and Direction for Future Research**

The study has strengths and weaknesses. This is the first study to address the contribution of pretend play on children's behavioural self-regulation in a

Tanzania context, which forms the strength of this study. The study adds on the literature on issues related to play and pretend play and self-regulations. The study has limitations. This study used puppets, which are rather hypothetical; we suggest that the next study should involve children in the pretend play and the researcher should observe the role of the play in the natural settings. This will give a clear picture whether teachers really use pretend-play in teaching children's self-regulation and whether teachers can design pretend play for the purpose of helping children to develop self-regulation skills. In addition, children should be involved to state the benefit of pretend play. We recommend the followings; pre-primary teachers should be trained on the role of pretend play on children self-regulation. In addition, since children are in transition from home to school, pretend play should be part of the pedagogy in the curriculum of pre-primary education. Furthermore, although problem behaviours in young children are part of development, teachers are responsible to design intervention measures to help children develop self-regulation skills at early years, which will help children to adjust successfully in many aspects including socially, academically, emotionally, and morally.

### **Conclusion**

The present study explored the contribution of pretend play on children's self-regulation behaviour among the pre-primary children in Tanzania from the teachers' perspective. It was found that almost all teachers reported that pretend plays are useful but with different views. Different perception on the contribution of pretend play on self-regulation was revealed; on one hand teachers confirmed that pretend plays contribute on self-regulation among the pre-primary children while on the other hand some insists that pretend play contribute on literacy and numeracy. Although teachers prepared pretend play which were directly linked to children's self-regulation, the teachers were not aware of the linkage between the two. Focusing on children's self-regulation at early years is important because it forms the foundational skills for children's adjustment in pre-primary schools in all child development domains.

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