

IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN TEACHING CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

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ABSTRACT: *This paper is about the importance of play in teaching children with learning difficulties. It focuses on using teamwork vs. Individual work and includes activities that focus on fun in the classroom. The emphasis is to create a fun environment in the classroom so as to help children with learning difficulties particularly Dyslexia in dealing with learning new skills.*

KEYWORDS: Learning Difficulties, Play, Young Learners, Language Classroom, Dyslexia

INTRODUCTION

Identifying and assisting children with learning difficulties is among the fundamental roles of elementary school teachers. Elementary school teachers are tasked with the responsibility of supporting the educational and emotional development of children in the classroom setting. These teachers are better placed than any other professionals to identify learning difficulties in children since they interact with the learners from an early age.

In the contemporary society, learning difficulties are often mistaken with learning problems. A significant percentage of people do not understand the difference between a child with learning difficulties and one with learning problems. According to Chan, learning difficulties are neurologically-based processing problem that interferes with the ability of a child to acquire knowledge and skills to the expected standard for individuals at a certain age (128). Therefore, learning difficulties are influenced by neurological differences in brain structure and function

On the other hand, learning problems are usually influenced by external factors such as visual or hearing impairment. Moreover, learning problems can be instigated by emotional disturbance, poorly organised learning environment, culture or motor retardation. For instance, the inability of English second language learners to perform better than native English speakers in English tests is a learning problem, not a difficulty. Such poor performance by second language learners is attributed to their cultural background, not their cognitive or mental abilities. As stated by Chan, most teachers perceive learning difficulties as deficits inherent in the child rather than generated from external factors (125). Therefore, it is wrong to assume that children with learning difficulties are lazy or have low motivation for education.

In practice, children with learning difficulties illustrate average or above average intelligence levels. However, their mental alignment affects how they decipher new information or skills and how they apply them in practice. Teachers play a pivotal role in assisting children with learning difficulties. In the education sector, the two most powerful forces that define the learning process are the school curriculum and instructional tactics employed by the teachers. Education experts insist that teaching methods and materials must be selected carefully to suit specific lessons and the diverse learning attributes of the students.

Play has been suggested by experts as one of the influential strategies for teaching children with learning difficulties. In keeping with Westwood, the mastery orientation exhibited by children in the preschool years suggest that they enjoy informal learning since they gain satisfaction by completing tasks they have set themselves (2). While playing, children do not give up even when they are faced with difficulties. Instead, they persist and enjoy handling new challenges. Play enables learners to explore the strength and address their weakness without close supervisions.

The growing importance of learning in the modern education sector has seen most education experts advocate for the comprehensive implementation of experiential learning and learning by doing. The primary intention of implementing these two strategies is engage the learners in their learning process. Consequently, the present study examines the importance of play in teaching children with learning difficulties. As earlier stated, learning difficulties are connected to the functioning of the brain of the learners.

Therefore, such children see, hear, or perceive things differently resulting in complications with learning new skills or information. The present study postulates that play positively influences the learning process of children with learning difficulties by giving them the freedom to think, do what they love, and relate play activities with the materials they learn in the classroom environment. In particular, it enables children with learning difficulties to make precise connections between play activities and their classroom environment.

Statistics indicate that the member of individuals with learning difficulties is on the rise globally. In the United States, for instance, about 6.2 million children have received Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) diagnosis at one stage of their life (Cortiella and Horowitz 5). This figure is worrying considering that it is estimated that one-third of people with learning difficulties have ADHD. This trend indicates that teachers are handling high number of students with learning disabilities at present. It is predicted that about 10 to 20 % of students have learning disabilities. As a result, it is vital to devise ways of effectively teaching these students.

The present study will establish the importance of play as a strategy for teaching children with learning difficulties. The findings of this study will assist the teachers in developing and implementing effective play strategies that will foster positive intellectual development in these students. It is crucial to point out that a learning difficulty is an incurable condition. However, with effective and early assistance, students can suppress the adverse implications of this condition. As follows, the findings of this study will not only contribute to the growth of scholarly literature on the topic, but it will also aid in improving the learning experience of students with learning difficulties.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The ability of students to overcome the adverse effects of learning disabilities is dependent on the early detection of the disorder. Nonetheless, the condition is very challenging to detect since children with learning difficulties do not illustrate signs that are easily detectable by non-professionals. In this way, there are high chances of a parent having a child with learning difficulties without noticing it. Therefore, this undetectable nature of the condition makes

elementary school teachers the key instruments for facilitating early detection of the condition.

The close relationship that these teachers have with their students both at the educational and emotional level enables them to detect any abnormalities in a child's learning process (Skalická, Belsky and Stenseng 1158). Detecting learning difficulties in learners require teachers to have a close and friendly relationship with each student. This requirement confirms why education experts advise that teachers must work on fostering a collaborative relationship with their students, particularly at the elementary learning level.

However, it is instrumental to point out that not all teachers or students can develop emotional and close teacher-student relationships. In their analysis, Zee and Koomen point out that the ability or create a cooperative teacher-student relationship depends on the attributes of the learners and the teachers in question (44). Nonetheless, teachers are mandated with the responsibility of ensuring that they create a conducive learning environment for their students. This environment should be characterised by interactions aimed at identifying any learning complications in the students.

One of the key approaches to strengthening the teacher-student bond is learning by doing or what is commonly termed as active learning. In this type of learning, teachers or instructors play the passive role of being facilitators while the students execute the significant percentage of the practical tasks. Learning by doing presents learners with numerous benefits such as improving the teamwork skills, enhancing their ability to apply knowledge to daily life activities, and improving their critical thinking skills and motor performance (Lewthwaite and Wulf 38). The cognitive benefits of learning by doing has encouraged scholars to opine that play can be an effective strategy for teaching children with learning difficulties.

In practice, play illustrates considerable similarities with learning by doing. For instance, both teaching tactic insists on the learners playing an active role in the learning process. Moreover, they advocate for the independence of learners during the learning process. As a result, play incites the thinking and interpretation abilities of the learners. According to Lindon, education theorists and experts propose that children learn through play (140). Play enables children to perfect their existing skills as well as enabling them to acquire new ones.

Several scholars have explored the application and effect of play in school environments and how it improves the cognitive abilities of students with learning difficulties. In their analysis of the importance of play in the cognitive development of children, Terpstra, Higgins, and Pierce suggest that play enables children to develop many aspects of language including nonverbal cues (120). Citing the works of Mundy, Sigman, Ungerers, and Sherman, Terpstra, Higgins, and Pierce maintain that several studies have found a positive relationship between receptive and expressive language and children's functional and symbolic play (120). In this manner, utilising play as teaching strategy results in positive improvements in a child's communication attributes.

Play also improves the socialisation abilities of children. This phenomenon has been comprehensively tested in students with autism. In a meta-analytic review of child-centred play therapy approaches and their efficacy, Lin and Bratton concluded that play improves the ability of children to work in teams. In extreme cases, learning difficulties can lower the socialisation abilities of learners. In such cases, designing play organised in teams or groups such as dramatisation empowers students to work with each other.

The use of group play activities to facilitate learning process closely aligns with the advice offered by Bandura's social theory. This Social learning theory outlines that learning occurs in a social context through observation, imitation, and modelling (Kalkstein, Kleiman and Wakslak 2). As earlier stated, children with learning difficulties make wrong interpretations of occurrences or make poor connections between an act and its meaning. In this respect, group play enables these children to play with their colleagues without learning difficulties. This integrated interaction allows for students with learning difficulties to acquire new knowledge through imitation or observation. Children with learning difficulties fail to illustrate skill levels expected for persons of their age. Accordingly, team play with students without learning difficulties enables them to observe and imitate competencies that they ought to possess.

Importantly, play creates a conducive environment for children to share ideologies and use their imagination to create things or expresses ideas their ideas and likes (Macintyre 1). Play gives young learners the freedom to explore the things that they love. It eradicates the numerous regulations that characterise most learning environments. Thus, it gives the learners the liberty to make and correct their mistakes independently. Furthermore, play enhances the motivation of children to learn since they are allowed to do the things that they love.

Children with learning difficulties struggle to utilise their skills in the wide array of problems in the society. This inability is attributed to the poor conceptualisation or misunderstanding of scenarios. Play provides children with a forum to devise a variety of ways to solve a single problem. In their analysis, Lee, Feng, Xu, and Jin admit that symbolic play enhances the object-substitution ability of learners. Through play, learners can brainstorm alternative tools to replace a specific object during play time. This improvement in objects-substitution ability is an indication of the advancements in the critical thinking abilities of the learners.

The reviewed literature indicates that play is an instrumental tool that teachers can utilise to facilitate intellectual development in children. Although some critics contend that play can make children unfocused in the learning environment, these opponents seem to misunderstand the difference between play and entertainment. Thus, it is crucial to examine if the same level of efficacy and benefits illustrated by play in the reviewed literature also applies to students with learning difficulties.

METHODOLOGY

The present study utilised a qualitative research approach with interviewing and observation as the essential data collection tools. The aim of using these two tools was to assess the teachers' attitudes toward the use of play in teaching children with learning difficulties. Additionally, these tools were selected to provide a precise assessment of the students' development during and after the application of play as a teaching methodology.

The study population for this study were four elementary school teachers from two elementary schools. This population also comprised thirty-five grade three learners who illustrated learning difficulties particularly reading problems, as many students in Kuwait are not diagnosed with dyslexia, it is up to the researcher along with the teachers to decide which students to include in the study. Students with dyslexia frequently lack an innate "word

sense” (Hannell 6). In a classroom scenario, students with dyslexia cannot tell at a glance the letter symbols and how to match them with sounds. Instead, they may always need help with reading and word recognition, sometimes also some numbers are confused to them.

After selecting the study population and sample, structured interviews were conducted with the teachers to ascertain their familiarity with play as a teaching technique and how they apply it in their classrooms. Moreover, these interviews assessed how the teachers identified students with learning disabilities in their classrooms, and how they used adaptations in their classrooms either as modifications or accommodations or both. Subsequently, two activities involving cartoon-like symbols were designed. In these play activities students, grouped in teams of four were required to pick symbols and put them in a bucket corresponding to their meaning. For instance, a student or group of students would choose a cartoon-like picture symbol and drop it a bucket with the picture and word written on it.

This activity was preceded by the same teams of students identifying the various signs and symbols on the writing board. These two activities were carried out by students at an individual and team level and the observations recorded. The intention of carrying out the activities at an individual and team level was to ascertain if team play was more effective than individual play in assisting children with learning difficulties.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All the four interviewed teachers admitted that they were conversant with play as a teaching methodology for elementary school children. However, they pointed out that they have rarely applied it as an approach to enhancing the reading comprehension skills of their students with dyslexia. Importantly, the teachers elaborated that they utilise the teacher-student relationship as the primary way of identifying children with any learning difficulties in their classrooms. These observations align with the recommendations of Vervoort et al. and van Aalderen et al. who insist that friendly teacher-student relationships enable the instructors to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their pupils. The teachers used in this study affirmed that building a warm relationship with the students is the major step towards academic success.

Moreover, it was observed that the students struggled in matching the word symbols assigned to them when working individually irrespective of whether the signs were matched on the writing board or using the cartoon-like signs. However, it is vital to note that the students struggled more while matching the symbols on the board than using the cartoon-like symbols. Out of the thirty-five students, only three were able to match the signs on the board individually compared to ten when using the cartoon-like symbols.

The students were able to identify and match the signs easily when in groups and using the cartoon-like symbols. This symbol recognition approach using teams and cartoon-like symbols enabled the children to consult with each other minimising the chances for errors. Only one team was unable to match their assigned symbol correctly. The team activity was designed to resemble a normal playing activity, and the students were free to make any correction they wanted. This improvement in performance and cooperation confirmed the findings of other researchers that found that play enhances teamwork and critical thinking abilities of learners. The attractive, interactive, and collaborative nature of the play exercise enabled the student to match the symbols correctly.

CONCLUSIONS

In keeping with this study's observations, play improves team-play and critical thinking skills of learners with learning difficulties. In addition, it established that most teachers are aware of the effectiveness of play in improving the academic competencies of their learners, but does not employ it in supporting the progress of students with learning difficulties. The utilisation of a small study sample serves as the key limitation of this study. Therefore, future studies should focus on exploring the effectiveness of play in improving the academic performance of students with other learning disabilities such as Auditory Processing Disorder and Dysgraphia at a large scale.

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