

Exploring Teachers' Perceptions and Practices on Teaching-Learning Strategies and Learning Materials Used in ECE Classrooms in Gilgit

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Abstract

Teachers' perceptions have been shown to influence their teaching practices. Hence, it is imperative to explore how ECE teachers' perceptions affect the way they teach and perceive their students' learning skills. This qualitative case study is intended to explore Teachers' Perceptions and Practices on Teaching-Learning Strategies and Learning Materials used in ECE classrooms in Gilgit. Ten early childhood education teachers of private schools were selected through purposive sampling. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. The findings of the study revealed inconsistencies between ECE teachers' perceptions and practices. ECE teachers claimed that they implement play way as teaching learning strategy and use learning materials as children actively involved in play. However, mainly teacher-directed approach was observed to practice by the participant teachers in their classrooms. Analysis revealed that these discrepancies are due to; lack of practical skills to implement theoretical knowledge, inadequate learning materials, time and space limitations, and pressure from key stake holders. It is therefore recommended that ECE teachers be trained and supported by providing opportunities to improvise their teaching strategies so that they can implement ECE policy with its full essence.

Key words: *Early childhood Education, teaching-learning strategies, learning materials, Perceptions and Practices*

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Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) aims to enhance children's social cognitive, emotional, physical health and well-being (Justice & Vukelich, 2008). A meta-analysis of 125 early childhood education research in the U.S. discovered that early childhood schooling was associated with important cognitive and socio-emotional impacts (Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, & Barnett, 2010). According to United Nations, “the period from birth to eight years’ old which is considered as early childhood is regarded as a time of incredible brain growth as these years lay the base for succeeding learning and development” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2011. p. 12). Though ECE has an everlasting and strong influence on shaping the brains and effecting the path of continuous development of young children (Grindal, Hinton, & Shonkoff, 2012). These advantages are, however, immediately linked to quality of ECE (Taguma, Litjens, & Makowietzki, 2012). Shofoyeke (2015) mentions that provision of quality ECE means employing appropriate teaching strategies and use of learning materials in early childhood classes as research studies have proved that suitable teaching methods and materials enhance learning achievement to a large extent at all education levels especially early childhood classes that lay the foundation of learning and development (Shofoyeke, 2015). ECE is receiving more attention and evolving globally (Ahmad, 2011). ECE has become important for teachers, parents and policy makers as scholars have emphasized on the importance of quality early educational experiences.

Nonetheless, if we look at the status of ECE in Pakistan, it starts from Pakistan’s commitment to the United Nations (UN) convention (1989). According to this convention, it is basic right of children to learn and develop their abilities without any biasness based on gender, age, race, origin and social background. Another convention for early childhood education and development (ECED) is Dakar framework aiming at provision of quality ECE for all. In addition, Pakistan is also one of the signatories of this convention (UNESCO, 2000). Current education policy (2017) also recognizes ECE from *katchi* to 8 years as part of formal education. Despite all these efforts, it seems that insignificant initiations have been taken to ensure the implementation of effective teaching practices and competent use of learning resources in ECE. Even, basic facilities, like toilets and trained teachers are not available in both private and public sector early childhood schools (Ahmad, Singer & Rehman, 2015). Moreover, ECE programmes are not planned, implemented and

monitored by the provinces and communities and other relevant authorities (Ahmad, 2011) that result in low-quality early childhood education programs which may have a negative effect on children.

In Gilgit-Baltistan, NGO's and entrepreneurs are contributing in providing quality early childhood education to the children in their schools (Benz, 2013). However, ECE teachers in these schools have adopted different teaching-learning strategies and use variety of learning materials to facilitate children. In Gilgit-Baltistan, the curriculum, learning materials and examinations are strongly content-based, with a narrow range of teaching methodologies mainly based on rote learning. The curriculum is federally administered, though local contexts may be used and teaching-learning materials developed locally for primary classes. The curriculum is not even gender sensitive (GB Education Strategy 2015-30, 2014). In such a scenario, it is of utmost importance to explore current practices and perception of early childhood teachers regarding teaching-learning strategies and use of learning materials as teachers' perceptions are most probably affect the way they teach and perceive their students' learning skills (Yeung, Craven, & Kaur, 2014). In this regard, research studies such as Ashiabi (2007) insists to explore ECE teachers' perceptions and practices about teaching-learning strategies and usage of learning materials in ECE classrooms. If we understand teachers' beliefs/perceptions better, we can significantly contribute to the improvement of teaching methods and potential accomplishment of reforms (Sang, Valcke, Van Braak, & Tondeur, 2009).

In addition, ECE teachers' perceptions influence their decisions regarding the teaching-learning strategy and learning materials they use in their classrooms. Exploring ECE teachers' perceptions regarding teaching-learning strategies and use of learning materials is one manner to understand deeper about the approaches that are currently regarded as beneficial in ECE and additionally, whether or not these perceptions are practiced in the classroom. Although numerous studies in Pakistan (Akber & Akhter, 2013; Khan & Saeed, 2009; & Thomas, 2013) as cited in Angaiz, Kanwal, and Jan (2021) were conducted on the pedagogical beliefs and practices of teachers, however, no any single research study was found in this topic in the available literature in the context of Gilgit-Baltistan. Thus, this case study attempts to explore Teachers' Perceptions and Practices on Teaching-Learning Strategies and Learning Materials used in ECE classrooms in Gilgit. Furthermore, the objective of this study is not to examine the best practices of ECE teachers, rather the idea is to observe what is happening and what ECE teachers think is happening

regarding currently practiced teaching-learning strategies and use of learning materials.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because of the following reasons: firstly, it will be a new addition in indigenous knowledge in the domain of exploring perceptions and practices of ECE teachers regarding the teaching-learning strategies and learning materials in Gilgit, Pakistan. Secondly, this study has the potential to facilitate the researcher and early childhood practitioners particularly early childhood teachers in enhancing the fidelity of teaching strategies and use of learning materials for children's better learning outcomes. Recognizing the perceptions of early childhood educators regarding current teaching strategies, and then taking necessary measures to endorse effective teaching strategies, will also aid in promoting conducive learning environment in early childhood classrooms. Thirdly, by participating in this study, the participant teachers were given an opportunity to reflect on the teaching-learning strategies and learning materials that they use in their classrooms. Finally, the analysis of the explored perceptions and practices of these ECE teachers, and concerned stakeholders like policymaker, administrators, teachers and parents' etc. will be informed about how various teaching-learning strategies and learning materials are employed.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions of early childhood teachers regarding teaching-learning strategies and learning materials used in their classrooms?
2. What are the current teaching-learning strategies and learning materials used by early childhood teachers in their classes?
3. How different are the perceptions and practices of early childhood teachers regarding teaching-learning strategies and use of learning materials in the early childhood classrooms?

Research Objectives

1. To examine early childhood teachers' perceptions regarding teaching-learning strategies and learning material used in their classrooms.

2. To study current teaching-learning strategies and learning materials employed by the early childhood teachers in their classrooms.
3. To explore the difference in perceptions and practices of early childhood teachers regarding teaching-learning strategies and use of learning materials in the early childhood classrooms.

Literature Review

Understanding teachers' pedagogical beliefs and perceptions can give valuable findings into how these beliefs and perceptions influence and change their classroom teaching (Fang, 1996). According to Donaghue (2003), beliefs and perceptions on teaching learning process and the teachers' role in classrooms tend to affect and assist teachers in their teaching. Bowman (1989) draws attention to the fact that teachers' ideas regarding classroom practices are presented through their own perceptions and ideas. Their existing ideas alter when new ideas and experiences are faced by them, eventually altering their knowledge-bank to adjust with their new requirements (Bowman, 1989). Likewise, Spodek (1988) stresses on the intricacy of the connection between teachers' perceptions and actual classroom practices. He claims that teachers' activities and classroom choices are influenced by their perceptions, understanding and beliefs.

Researchers have identified different teaching strategies employed by early childhood teachers. ECE teachers employ developmentally appropriate or inappropriate, student-centered or teacher-centered, academic or play-based teaching-learning strategies in their classes. These types emerged with the differentiation of teaching approaches and practices provided by EC teachers (Stipek, 2011). Play way method, supervised activity method, activity method, demonstration method, games method, excursion method, storytelling method, pictorial method and assignment method are few teaching-learning methods that can be employed at ECE level (Shofoyeke, 2015). Research claims that teachers' teaching beliefs and perceptions are often based on two opposite approaches to classroom practices: the child-centered approach and the teacher-centered approach. Child-centered settings provide number of interesting learning materials and opportunities where children learn through self-started activities and explorative opportunities (Ginsburg, Lee, & Boyd, 2008; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009). Whereas, Conventional teaching is a teacher centered teaching method or traditional method. It is the most commonly used method in which

students are passive and the teacher dominates the teaching-learning activities. Interestingly, many educators are still debating whether teacher-centered teaching or child-centered teaching practices should be employed in early years (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997; Lubeck, 1998). Proponents of teacher-directed approach claim that teacher-directed teaching contributes meaningfully and significantly in children's learning. Whereas, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, and Singer (2009) express their concerns about teacher centered approach as it ignores children's abilities. Critics of this approach considers as developmentally inappropriate practice as it does not consider the developmental stages of the children in the process of their learning. Nonetheless, each method has seemed to prove positive impact on child learning.

Literature on examining how children learn has been growing rapidly (Peng, 2011). Findings of the various studies emphasized on presenting opportunities to children where they interact and learn, investigate and solve problems and take the responsibility of their own learning by meeting their emotional and imaginative requirements (Branscombe, Castle, Dorsey, Surbeck & Taylor, 2003; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk & Singer 2009; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978). In this regard, play has been recognized as supporting cognitive, social, emotional and physical development (Brewer, 2004; Degotardi, 2005; Wood, 2007). According to Elkind (2008), children now-a-days play eight hours less per week than the children twenty years ago. Due to increasing pressure to meet academic criteria, in pre-primary and primary schools play is exchanged by exam preparations, and parents who intend to provide their children support are made to believe that flashcards and educational "toys" are the key to success (Cheng, 2012). However, children's mental, socio-emotional, and physical skills are also developed through play. It also enhances proper brain development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). A comparative survey was performed to identify similarities and differences in early-year teachers' perceptions of play in Japan, America, and Sweden. The study disclosed that teachers' perceptions of play are obviously connected with their cultures in Japan and America. Japanese students were inclined to play informally while American educators consider playing to be a way of focusing on learning and growth. Japanese educators saw play as a significant technique of social and emotional growth rather than academic teaching. Swedish teachers seemed to have flexible and creative, child-centered perceptions of play, stating that 'everything is possible in play for instance a chair can be a boat in an open sea' (Izumi-Taylor, Samuelsson & Rogers, 2010).

According to Kamen (2005), while playing with learning materials young children increase social development which includes social skills, behaviour patterns, self-control, discipline, independence, awareness of self in relation to other positive relationship by understanding requirements and rights of others. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2005), age appropriate teaching and learning materials help learners to participate effectively in their learning environment. Learning materials are the resources that are not only used to deliver the learning content but provide rich learning experiences to young children (Joyce, Calhoun, & Hopkins, 2008). However, it is important to evaluate the learning materials on some criteria to make sure that the learning materials is usable in a particular learning environment and is effective. One of the criteria mentioned by Wambui (2013) is that the learning material should have the quality to draw attention, improve interest, stimulate the learning climate, and help in acceptance of an idea in students. If the quality of interactions between children and toys are not supervised, the children can be made passive by these materials (Yilmaz, 2015). Besides, low quality interactions also affect social development of children as they involve with the peers to understand the activity while using the learning materials.

The number of research studies such as (Coelho, Barros, Burchinal, Cadima, Pessanha, Pinto, Peixoto & Bryant ,2019; Owen, Klausli, Mata-Otero, & Caughy 2008; Pirchio, Taeschner and Volpe, 2011) have emphasized on the strong partnerships between parents and ECEC staff . The relationships between ECEC centres, teachers and parents are found to promote children's social and cognitive development and seem to ensure all children and families social support and thus expand the access to high-quality early care and education. Layland and Smith (2015) also emphasis on the quality of the relationships that teachers develop with children as it is co-dependent of the relationships teachers and parents develop.

Research Method

Within qualitative research paradigm, case study approach was used to collect data from research participants. Case studies involves, in-depth examination of a topic or phenomenon using multiple types of data, including data collected from interviews, observations, and documents (Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2012). In addition, Case studies also allow the researcher to have a connection to the community being studied (Merriam,

2002). Case study can be single or multiple (Yin, 2012). The researcher used a multiple case study (i.e., ten schools, ten cases) as a method of inquiry to explore Teachers' Perceptions and Practices on Teaching-Learning Strategies and Learning Materials used in ECE classrooms in Gilgit. The nature of this inquiry highly demands to look at multiple cases rather than relying on a single case. The rationale for using multiple cases was to build a basis for trustworthiness and credibility of the results coming out of these different cases under this single study in the sampled schools. Baxter and Jack (2008) reported that the results carried out through multiple case studies are supposed to be very strong and reliable as compared to simple case study. In a general case study, researchers used to study only one unit deeply whereas in multiple case studies, researchers get an opportunity to look at different cases in a particular socio-cultural context and socio-pedagogical context in a purposeful manner (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, the rationale behind selecting multiple cases for this study is to explore in what ways Teachers perceive teaching learning strategies and learning materials used in ECE classrooms.

Bluman (2013) endorses drawing a sample from the population when the feasibility to use entire population is limited. Therefore, 10 early childhood teachers from the schools, were purposefully selected. Patton (1990) claims that "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information rich cases for study in depth" (p.169). Therefore, to select ECE teachers purposeful sampling was done (Patton, 2002). The goals of the study were to develop an in depth understanding of a group of ECE teachers about their current teaching-learning practices and learning materials used and to explore difference in their practices and perceptions if there exist any. Therefore, it was important to choose trained and experienced ECE teachers who would provide rich data about their perceptions and teaching-learning practices. Trained and experienced early childhood teachers can understand the phenomenon being studied well. Multiple sources of information were needed in case study approach for data collection.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the perceptions of early childhood education teachers on the topic under study. To check the practices of ECE teachers, classroom observations and teachers' documents: lesson plans, teachers' scheme of work were analyzed. In addition, the participant ECE teachers were again interviewed after observing their classrooms to further discuss and elaborate their decisions regarding the use of teaching-learning strategies and learning materials. All these

sources did not only provide a rich contextual description of the teaching-learning strategies and use of learning materials but also helped in triangulation of the data (Morrow, 2005) which contributes to the rigor of the study. Data analysis strategies include detailed description of each case through field notes, anecdotal records, transcribing the interviews, exploring and analyzing themes and patterns.

Sampling

The aim of the study was to explore Teachers' Perceptions and Practices on Teaching-Learning Strategies and Learning Materials used in ECE classrooms in Gilgit. The goals of the study were to develop an in depth understanding of ten ECE teachers about their current teaching-learning practices and learning materials used and to explore difference in their practices and perceptions if there exist any. Therefore, it was important to choose trained and experienced ECE teachers who would provide rich data about their perceptions and teaching-learning practices. Trained and experienced early childhood teachers can understand the phenomenon being studied well. Ten early childhood teachers of ten private schools were sampled through purposive sampling strategy based on the following criteria:

1. Teachers who are currently teaching to early childhood classes.
2. Teachers who have 6 months' diploma certificate in ECE and have at least 2 years ECE teaching experience.

Findings and Analysis

ECE teachers were interviewed before and after classroom observations to explore their perceptions and to elaborate the differences identified between their practices and perceptions. The ECE teachers were asked two kinds of questions of perceptions. First, ECE teachers shared their professional beliefs and perceptions stemming from their educational background and professional development. Second, informal beliefs and perceptions that stem from their childhood, life and classroom experiences as ECE teacher with children (Wang et al., 2008). The following themes emerged from data analysis regarding ECE teachers' perceptions about teaching and learning strategies and use of learning materials in ECE classrooms:

- Children learn through play way method
- Children do not take interest in teacher centered teaching
- Learning materials as tools to teach concepts
- Learning materials makes the lesson more engaging and meaningful

The second research question required ECE teachers to respond regarding their current teaching-learning strategies and learning materials used by early childhood teachers in their classes. The following themes emerged from the data analysis:

- Teacher-centered approach
- Inadequate use of learning materials
- Use of low cost no cost learning materials
- Mismanagement of learning materials

The third research question explored differences in perceptions and practices of early childhood teachers regarding teaching-learning strategies and use of learning materials in the early childhood classrooms. Two major themes emerged as a result of data analysis. These included:

- Difference between practices and perceptions regarding teaching-learning strategies
- Difference between practices and perceptions regarding learning materials

Each of the themes emerged from three research questions are embedded in the following data analysis and findings:

Majority of the ECE teachers (eight) claimed that they teach through play way method as it is best teaching-learning strategy for children. One of the interviewee shared, *“I really find it difficult to keep children stay focused on paper pencil tasks. Therefore, I try to teach through play in group and pairs as children learn fast when they are happier and actively involved”*. Another interviewee shared that she feels satisfied when she allows children to play to teach a concept because children are more responsive and engaged while play. She further stated, *“I have also observed that when I let children play they interact more with other peers and if we do not give them enough opportunities to play through turn taking it might stunt their social development”*.

Five research participants shared that teacher centered teaching makes children less enthusiastic and more agitated in the classroom. Similarly, same number of the ECE teachers shared that teacher centered teaching cause chaos in the class. They lose interest and cannot focus on what is being taught. The participants shared that teacher centered

approach does not provide opportunities to children to communicate and negotiate with peers. Hence, does not contribute to children's problem solving and language skills. While sharing their own experiences, three ECE teachers shared that they have been taught through teacher centered approach throughout their student life, it did not facilitate their learning process. Teachers' role in play way method was also perceived important by many ECE participants. For instance, one of the ECE teacher asserted, *"When children play, I ask questions, I use prompts, I also challenge them. Their responses help me to explore their existing learning process which eventually guide me to design further learning activities"*. This statement reflects that the teacher is aware of her role and responsibilities when children are engaged in group work or any other learning activity.

In addition, participants acknowledged that their ECE training had a huge impact on developing their perceptions regarding play. One of the participants justified using play way method as it improves psycho-social, mental and emotional development of children. Seven out of ten of the research participants shared that their ECD diploma program, aware them about the importance of play way method and as teachers how they can be involved in facilitating learning through play. One of the participant shared, *"I have learnt that when we teach through play children become lifelong learners therefore, I provide ample playtime to the children in my classroom so they can improve their language and other skills"*.

However, two of the participants admitted the importance of play but one participant shared that, *"I prefer traditional teaching in my class though I am aware of importance of learning through play and use of learning materials however, for a large class it is a complete waste of time. The school does not provide enough learning materials to facilitate a class of 30 children. It creates chaos and confusion between children as they are not provided learning material of their choice and cognitive level"*. The reasons they shared for employing teacher centered approach includes; to teach more in limited time, lack of learning materials, pressure from parents and school administration. One of the ECE teachers justified her teacher-centered approach in post observation interview by stating, *"When I try to modify my teaching style by catering children's learning styles I don't find enough time to cover the syllabus sent from core office. Neither am I given any assistant to help me in classroom"*. The consequences of these limitations were observed by the researcher during classroom observations. For example, during a math concept time one of the children said to the teacher, *"Teacher, I am sleepy"*. The statement depicts the low interest of the child in the lesson. It was found that all the

researched schools follow daily routine of high scope that recommends learner centered teaching nonetheless the ECE teachers were observed teaching through direct instruction. These included worksheets, rote learning, and didactic instruction.

There seemed a weaker connection and in some cases absence of connection between participants' perceptions and their actual classroom practices. For instance, one of the lesson components in all the ECE classrooms was general knowledge time after greeting time. It was a common classroom practice in all observed ECE classrooms to make children memorize the answers of general knowledge questions through drilling method. For few minutes' children continued practicing the answers but after some time started losing interest and seemed distracted. The ECE teacher had to struggle in keeping interest of children. Despite the lack of interest of children in drilling exercise the ECE teachers asserted drilling method as one of the effective methods to make children memories the answers of questions. Similarly, while observing an English Phonics lesson it was noticed that the teacher did not design any specific activity for the children other than drilling. She kept on drilling the sound of letters which caused students to deviate from the drilling activity. They started talking to each other rather than showing interest in drilling activity. Regarding keeping record of children's learning it was observed that ECE teachers were employing more summative assessment strategies than any other.

Regarding use of learning materials, three of the ECE teachers referred learning materials as teaching tools to facilitate teaching learning process. One of the ECE teacher stated, "Learning materials help in teaching concepts. For example, I frequently use colorful beads to teach counting and name of colors as well". Another ECE teacher gave example of Lego blocks as learning tool to create letters of the alphabet, words, subtraction, addition. Accordingly, while playing with blocks children develop their fine and gross motor skills (by holding and moving blocks), reduce their slight sensory problems (by feeling and tolerating the texture of the blocks), and improve their social skills (by taking turns with peers during block play).

One benefits of using learning materials, three participants remarked that learning through materials is imprinted on children's mind and it is long lasting than traditional teaching methods. Children tend to learn fast when allowed to explore and manipulate learning materials. However, participants also emphasized on the provision and usage of appropriate learning materials. Majority of the participants talked about age

appropriate learning materials. They should not be very complex or easy for children otherwise children lose interest. A participant stated, *“Learning materials keep the interest of children as they provide reality of experience with fun, which develop self-activity in children”*. Therefore, ECE teachers claimed that they frequently design activities that provide hands on experience using learning materials in their lessons to make their lessons more engaging for children. The ECE teachers who had inadequate learning materials explained that they try to develop low cost material from discarded stuff so that children at least little exposure to manipulate. They argued that the learning materials from their environment help them in better understanding of the concept and acquiring language and mathematical skills.

Though all the observed schools were following daily routine of high scope approach however, few of the classrooms had 5 learning corners in their classrooms recommended by the high scope approach. *Even the classrooms that had learning corners where some stuff toys and blocks and flash cards were kept, children were not allowed to go to learning corners to play with learning materials.* For instance, during an observation the children went to the learning corners to play with materials corner. The teacher asked them to come back in a harsh tone. In some schools there were learning resource rooms instead of learning corners for children in each class. These learning resource centers had few age appropriate learning materials including Montessori material. ECE teachers had access to learning materials on need based. All participants advocated the idea of learning resource room for learning materials for proper management as all teachers can borrow required learning materials from the resource learning centers. However, at times inadequacy of learning materials turns to be an issue for the ECE teachers. The researcher observed that most of learning materials were of Montessori method however, the teachers were not confident to use the material despite being experienced and trained consequently, children were also not allowed to use and play with Montessori materials unless the teachers says so. However, other learning materials like, Lego blocks and color pencils, stuff toys and flash cards were frequently being used.

The findings of the ECE classroom observations revealed that delivery of content through teacher centered approach was more focused than teaching concepts through the use of learning materials. The lessons observed by the researcher revealed that ECE teachers use learning materials needed for the activities selected by the teacher herself. Children were not permitted to manipulate the learning materials of their choice.

While observing ECE lessons the researcher noticed that the ECE teachers strictly forbidden children from manipulating learning materials displayed in the corners. These materials were more appeared like objects of decoration. In one of the schools the learning materials kept in a big iron box. Three of the ECE teachers did not use any learning material for their lessons though there were few learning materials present she could have used. In addition, the children were not given ample time to play and spend time with the learning materials to explore and experiment. They were restricted in terms of what learning materials have to use, when to use learning materials and how long to use rather than involving with children in their play. The decision was solely taken by the concerned ECE teacher. This shows the teacher's misconception that play time has nothing to do with teacher except observing and controlling children's behaviors.

It was revealed during pre-observation interviews that majority of the ECE teachers perceive use of learning materials beneficial for making their ECE lessons more engaging and interactive for children. One of the teacher stated, *"Children are curious by nature so they tend to explore and manipulate learning materials provided to them. So I try my best to keep children busy with learning activities that requires use of learning materials. While doing so they interact with peers and ask questions"*. On observing her lesson, it was revealed that though she allots time to use learning materials however she did not tend to set any learning outcome for the use of learning materials. *However, observation of ECE classrooms revealed that these teachers seemed to have little practical knowledge and skills to use these learning materials effectively with the children.* It was observed that letting children manipulate with learning materials without setting any learning outcome set by the teacher was a common practice in majority of the observed ECE lessons. For instance, one of the ECE teachers stated in her interview, *"Our National Curriculum for ECE Pakistan (2007) recommends using learning materials. There is a list of learning materials to guide teachers"*. However, her lesson did not include any activity to manipulate learning materials. This shows that the ECE teacher might hold traditional teaching beliefs but as our curriculum recommends therefore, she supported the use of play based learning materials in her initial interview.

Regarding availability of learning materials, ECE teachers who had claimed earlier that they use learning materials to develop cognitive, emotional and fine motor skills were seemed to use few learning materials. For instance, six of the ECE teachers had claimed that they use adequate age appropriate learning materials however, only two teachers had well

managed age appropriate learning corners in their classrooms and they were using the learning materials for activity based teaching. Two ECE teachers had some of the commonly used learning materials but they were not easily accessible to children. The schools of these ECE teachers had separate resource rooms or locked boxes and cabinets to keep learning materials rather than displaying in their classrooms. Few ECE teachers had developed had low quality inadequate low cost books however; these books were not used by the teacher though it was relevant to the theme she was teaching.

In post observation interviews teachers were asked about these inconsistencies. Majority of the ECE teachers shared following reasons: characteristics of children, classroom constraints and challenges (large classes, mixed ability children, classroom culture, ECE curriculum, pressure from parents and school administration), management problems. However, regardless of the challenges, participant ECE teachers' perceived play based approach as the most effective method. The need for more manageable class numbers, adequate learning materials and refresher courses to integrate play based approach is suggested by the participant ECE teachers. One ECE teacher stated, "Honestly speaking, I do not know how to develop recycled art materials for ECE classes though I collect number of things". The statement shows the need of trainings or refresher courses for refining art skills of ECE teachers.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that ECE teachers' perceptions regarding current teaching-learning strategies and use of learning materials were different from their actual classroom practices. For example, the ECE teachers considered play way method more useful however, they were seen practicing traditional teaching strategies like chalk and talk method. Such discrepancies were observed in most cases. The findings of this study supports the findings of research studies that showed discrepancies between perceptions and practice (e.g. Ertmer, Gopalakrishnan, & Ross, 2001; Kane, Sandetto, & Heath, 2002; Hativa, Barak, & Simhi, 2001). Moreover, the study found teacher centered approach and play way method as the most prominent teaching-learning strategy in ECE classrooms. Though play way method and use of learning materials was advocated by the majority of ECE teachers however, in practice teacher centered approach was employed. The study explored that two of the ECE teachers were employing traditional teacher centered

approach as they considered it most effective and relevant to contextual challenges and constraints. Whereas, the majority of the ECE teachers (eight) claimed play way method as a developmentally appropriate practice to teach children, however, they seemed to be inconsistent in their perceptions and actual practice as they were practicing a teacher-centered approach in their classrooms. According to Bryant, Clifford and Peisner's (1991) study, only 20% of the kindergarten classes were following developmentally appropriate practices in their classrooms. They further argued that ECE teachers appeared to have knowledge about appropriate practices; however, they required guidance in putting it into practice (Bryant et al., 1991). These differences between the ECE teachers' perceptions and their real classroom practice revealed that the ECE teachers hold traditional beliefs but they tend to express their support to constructivist beliefs since the National Curriculum for ECE Pakistan (2007) is based on constructivist approach and recommends teaching through play way method and the use of learning materials. The finding aligns with the Hatch and Freeman (1988) study collected from thirty-six kindergarten teachers. The research indicated practices as common teaching-learning method in their classrooms. There appeared a discrepancy between their early childhood education philosophy (constructivist) and their real, more didactic and skill-oriented teaching methods (Hatch & Freeman, 1988).

Another interpretation might be that the teachers are in favor of play way method but since they do not have practical skills to implement it therefore, they practice teacher centered approach as teaching-learning strategy. In other words, while interviewing ECE teachers shared their theoretical knowledge rather than practical knowledge whereas, classroom teaching-learning strategy reflected their practical knowledge. Basturkmen, Loewen, and Ellis (2004) asserted that "over time teachers will be able to proceduralize their technical knowledge, thus making it more accessible. In such cases, the inconsistencies may disappear with experience" (p. 267). However, the findings of the research support both opinions that inconsistencies may vanish between perceived and real practice and that proceduralization hardly happens. The post observation semi-structured interviews revealed that few of the ECE teachers were not even aware of these differences which shows their lack of reflective practice which seemed to play a crucial role in teaching-learning process.

Another sub theme that arose was role of ECE teacher in play based approach and teacher centered approach. Teachers of both approaches asserted their role is crucial in teaching-learning process. They argued that

by listening and observing children they can improve their teaching strategies. Moreover, they claimed that by involving with children in their interactions teachers can further plan and modify the learning activities for children to manipulate with learning materials and surroundings to develop new thinking (Hope-Southcott, 2013; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). However, ECE teachers of both approaches did not seem to be consistent in their claim and practice. They were seen busy in checking copies and writing diaries while children were involved in traditional classroom activities.

These identified differences could also be the result of individual differences of the ECE teachers such as their teaching experience, their trainings, the way they were taught, qualifications, personality, etc. For instance, an ECE teacher who is taught through conventional teaching methods might favor teacher-centered teaching and will be reluctant to teach play way method. Similarly, all the ECE teachers were ECD diploma trained therefore, they stressed on play way method in their initial interviews however, lack of practical skills to employ play based approach in their teaching made them to use teacher centered teaching-learning strategy.

Another reason for the inconsistency of perceived teaching-learning practice and actual classroom practice is the result of contextual constraints and challenges. For instance, in the present study, contextual constraints such as overcrowded classes, diverse group of children, classroom culture, parental pressure, work culture and the curriculum impeded in putting ECE teachers perceived perceptions as actual classroom practice. These inconsistencies are challenges for teachers and would be considered as the hot-spots (Woods, 2007). Similarly, Kim (2004) explored preschool teachers' philosophical orientations regarding child-centered pedagogy and actual classroom practices. Though the teachers firmly advocated child-centered learning, however, their style of teaching was quiet opposite. The study revealed several external factors that restrict the teachers and preventing their perceptions into actual classroom practice. This supports the research findings that reveal that external factors such as parents stress on academic performance of their children in ECE (Howard, 2010; Tobin & Kurban, 2010) hampers teachers from using innovative methods in ECE. Similarly, the pressure on teachers from parents and school officials to follow structured and formal instructions resulted allocating less time for play related activities in early childhood programs (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). ECE teachers also face classroom management challenges while teaching through teacher

centered strategy or play way method. This statement confirms research that states teacher beliefs and perceptions governs what occurs in the classroom (Abu-Jabar, Al-Shwareb, & Gheith, 2010). Consequently, the ECE teachers appeared to be less empowered and possibly have low self-efficacy in teaching children.

Implications of study

The findings of this study provide insights into the nature of ECE teachers' perceptions and actual classroom practices regarding teaching-learning strategies and use of learning materials in the schools in Gilgit, Pakistan. The findings of this study contribute to our understanding about differences in ECE teachers' perceptions and practices regarding teaching-learning strategies and use of learning materials in ECE classrooms. It showed the importance of understanding teachers' perceptions and exploring their current teaching-learning practices and has the potential to help ECE teacher educators to develop an understanding of ECE teacher behaviors, classroom decisions and actions for the purpose of facilitating ECE classrooms with effective teaching-learning strategies and use of learning materials.

The study has also supported in our understanding of how different is the perceptions and practices of ECE teachers in Gilgit, Pakistan. However, the findings of the study cannot be generalized for all the ECE teachers of Gilgit city, but to a certain extent it helped the researcher to draw a picture of ECE teaching in the primary schools and explore and understand at least some of the reasons for the discrepancy between their perceptions and practices regarding teaching learning strategies and use of learning materials. The discrepancy between the perceptions and practices was linked to contextual constraints by majority of the ECE teachers in this study. Therefore, there is a dire need to further investigate the underlying reasons of any discrepancies between perceptions and practice of ECE teachers. Further research is required to examine how ECE teachers can develop their practical skills to incorporate their beliefs and perceptions in their current teaching context. As the study was conducted with relatively small number of ECE teachers therefore, the findings of the study must be interpreted with caution. A study with a larger number of ECE teachers could better represent the diversity of ECE teachers' perceptions and practices.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to explore Teachers' Perceptions and Practices on Teaching-Learning Strategies and Learning Materials used in ECE classrooms in Gilgit. Moreover, it was also intended to explore any difference found in ECE teacher perceptions and practices. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and analysis of ECE teachers' lesson plans and scheme of work. Play way method and teacher centered teaching were found to be the most discussed and used teaching-learning strategy during semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The findings revealed that majority (eight) of the ECE teachers perceive play way method as an effective teaching-learning method for holistic development of the children. They also consider the use of learning materials beneficial to keep children involved and engaged in classroom activities. However, teacher centered approach was observed as the frequently used teaching-learning strategy with rare use of learning materials in ECE classroom by the participant ECE teachers.

This difference between ECE teachers' perception and current practices regarding use of teaching-learning strategies and learning materials could be the result of contextual challenges and constraints or lack of practical knowledge to implement play way method and use of learning materials. Another possible reason could be; ECE teacher's personal experiences or beliefs that supports traditional teaching methods however, as our national curriculum is based on constructivist approach therefore, ECE teachers advocated play way method with the use of learning materials.

Recommendations

The findings of this research study provide following recommendations:

1. The study found that teacher-centered approach was employed by majority of the ECE teachers. Hence, it is recommended to the ECE teachers to employ student centered approach. Principals are also recommended to focus student centered approach as part of their policy for ECE classrooms.
2. The ECE teachers were observed teaching through conventional methods e.g. use of lecture method and copy work. As majority of the ECE teachers perceive play way method as the most appropriate method for ECE, hence, it is recommended to ECE teachers to teach

children using play way method and ensure children learn through play.

3. The study revealed that teacher-centered teaching was commonly practiced as the ECE teachers were selecting commanding and controlling children and their activities. Hence, it is recommended that children be given opportunity for free play, so that they will learn not only through exploring the use of learning materials, but will learn from each other too.
4. One of the finding was that not enough opportunities were provided to children to be actively involved in classroom activities. It is recommended that teacher must facilitate classroom activities and let the children to roam around freely without any interference, as free play give opportunity of freedom and learning should not be bound.
5. The study also found that only few of the ECE teachers allowed children to use learning materials. It is recommended to schools that children be given a schedule where they will learn freely with the objects/learning materials in the classroom. This will build self-confidence as well as children be engaged in active play.
6. The study findings revealed discrepancy regarding ECE teachers' perceptions and practices. Teachers need to be given refresher courses to reflect on their own perceptions and practices, and how to align their perceptions with their practices through constant reflection.
7. ECE teachers claimed parental pressure and inadequate support from school administration are the main causes of these differences. Hence, it is recommended to ECE teachers to give awareness about the importance of teaching and learning materials and their role in children's learning. Moreover, it is recommended to ECE teachers to frequently invite both the parents and school administration in ECE related programs, so that awareness will be spread through ECE programs to gain support from these two key stake holders.
8. The study also revealed that as all the research participants were ECD diploma trained. Therefore, they favored progressive teaching-learning strategy in their initial interviews however, they lacked practical skills to implement it in their ECE classrooms. It is recommended to school heads to arrange presentations from ECE teachers in presence of any ECE expert or reflective sessions so that ECE teachers should share their best practices. Such sessions would provide opportunities to learn from each other.

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