The Effectiveness of the Thematic Approach for Teaching Young Children

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Abstract

This research documented and described the thematic approach for teaching young children in a Samoan preschool. Thematic teaching had been implemented in Samoa since the implementation of the first ECE Curriculum. There continued to be difficulties in its implementation due to staffing problems and resource acquisition. This qualitative case study was undertaken in one of the mission schools. Semi -structured interviews collected data on teachers' understanding and application of the thematic approach in the local context. The findings indicated teachers needed more professional support and practical application to enhance their understanding of thematic teaching.

Keywords: Thematic approach, classroom teaching and learning, effectiveness

Introduction

Although the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (MESC) has suggested thematic teaching as the best way to provide an integrated, holistic experience for students in the early years of schooling, there is little empirical evidence that this is being practiced in preschools. Anecdotal evidence suggests that while teachers may plan to teach in this way, few of them actually implement this approach. However, there are some preschools where the approach is being used more effectively (Seupule, U. personal communication, 05 October 2019). An investigation was conducted on the implementation of thematic teaching in a Samoan preschool that was known for best practice in the area.

The fundamental philosophy behind ECE developments in the country was to provide Samoan children with an education that gave them a better start in life. Samoa and other Pacific Island Countries (PICs) all have contributed immensely to ECE in their respective countries. Ministries of Education attempted to secure the best service to ensure all children at the pre-primary school age are exposed to enriched opportunities for teaching and learning. (MESC Statistical Digest, 2019).

International Context

The most powerful tool for efficacious teaching and learning is the ability to make it interesting and relevant for students (Bubikova-Moan, Næss Hjetland & Wollscheid , 2019; Johannessen, 2000; Viliamu & Esera, 2019). International studies indicated that thematic teaching enhanced students' learning. A study conducted in a middle school in Australia to explore and investigate Science as a discipline and its relationship with other subject areas identified that thematic teaching allowed children's interaction and engagement in school. Not only that, the authentic curriculum which catered for children's interests and needs allowed them to explore and experiment the world around them (Cheewaviriyanon, 2016; Venville et al. 2001). (Becker and Park 2011) in a study conducted in the United States of America investigated the effects of an integrative approach among science, technology, engineering, and mathematic (STEM) in primary and secondary schools. The four STEM subjects were integrated and the findings showed an increase in students' knowledge in Science and Math. This clearly indicated that students who took integrated science courses did well in statistics and students who attended integrated algebra course considered Math their favorite subject

Furthermore, other researchers argued that thematic teaching enhanced teachers' choice of logical and pertinent experiences to assist and facilitate student teaching (Ward 1996). In Samoa, schools have utilized the thematic approach (MESC and NCECES 2019) to effectively explore and extend the depth and breadth of topics of interest to encourage children's active involvement and thus expanding their understanding. While the assumption is that teachers in Early Childhood Education (ECE) are well versed in the integrated approaches there were preschools that faced difficulties with delivering the approach.

(Johannessen, 2000; Viliamu & Esera, 2019) conducted a study for English teachers in Illinois to examine whether thematic teaching helped to integrate literature, language and composition within the curriculum rather than teaching them separately. The findings revealed that teachers and students found thematic teaching more enthralling, engaging and absorbing when they interacted and engaged with more productive and rich activities that showed and promote thematic teaching skills.

Another study was conducted in Malaysia for students in lower secondary school (Form 1 to Form 3) to identify teachers' understanding and practice using thematic teaching to teach Integrated Living Skills.(ILS). Findings from Min et al., (2012) showed that ILS teachers' understandings of thematic teaching was high, however, years of experience in teaching did not affect their understanding of thematic teaching. The study convinced teachers to be creative, critical thinkers and innovative.

These findings supplemented the benefits of thematic teaching (Fogarty 1991; Mustafa 2011; Jay 1990; Loughran 2005; Jacobs 1989; Shoemaker 1989; Humphreys et al. 1981) that the approach provided teachers with the tools to bring areas of knowledge in a cohesive way that children find meaningful and understandable. The integrated approach enhanced student learning because they were involved in activities that were enjoyable. It also gave them the opportunity to wonder and become curious about the world they inhabited. Learning in this holistic manner is stimulating, engaging and fun.

Local Context

Although, there are many studies on thematic teaching at the international level, there are very few at the regional level. Viliamu and Esera (2019) conducted a study at a mission preschool in Samoa to investigate teachers 'knowledge and their use of thematic approach in teaching. The findings revealed that factors such as initial training and continued professional development affected teachers' knowledge of thematic teaching approach.

Another research conducted by staff of the FOE in 2020 on ECE developments and its effectiveness on the overall educational achievement of children in Primary, Secondary and Tertiary education indicated similar findings with professional development for teachers and upgrade of teacher qualification. Parental involvement was an issue that was contentious with most preschools opting for less parental involvement in the classroom unless it was for excursion or playground supervision. (Tuia, T.T., Esera, E., & Viliamu, L.K 2021).

Preschool Context

(Kingdon 2018) explored a new approach to early childhood that provided for the child's construction of the world they inhabited as agents that continued to be actively involved in their creation. In the past children were seen as passive entities, but changes became evident and a richer description of the child had come to light. Children are more active, interactive, and creative and with a heightened sense of curiosity about the environment they live in. The state of young children's experiences involving play and role play in preschools have demonstrated how play is translated into thinking of either being or becoming.

(Gerde et al.2013) conducted a research on science in preschool and provided suggestions on how to teach science to support children's development in the domains of child development. A number of factors were seen to affect the approach which included teachers' low self-efficacy for teaching science and lack of educational resources. It would seem many early childhood classrooms do not offer high-quality science experiences and exposure for young children. In light of these findings it is significant to note high-quality science education could support early foundation for children's knowledge and interest in science. Moreover, it would also ensure the consolidation of critical language as well as readiness in literacy and math. In addition, this used a systematic model for to involve children in observation, questioning, predicting, experimenting and sharing results.

French's (2004) article described an early childhood curriculum discussed and organized the science content into an integrated approach. The intention was to support important developmental performance of the preschool children in the areas of language development, children's acquisition of pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills and problem solving. Focus was also on children's social interaction, and how they managed attention and time. Young children found Science content engaging as they were interested to learn about the world they live in. In this environment they acquired rich knowledge that enhanced vocabulary development and the use of higher level cognitive skills where they observed, predicted and made inferences.

(Glazer and Burke 1994) wrote about a holistic approach to language learning that took into account children's developmental stages. This encompassed teaching strategies that were deemed appropriate for each stage of development. Emphasis on oral language, reading, and early writing with practical applications were identified.

It was evident from the preschool context that the use of the integrated approach in particular the use of science was seen as instrumental in the development of skills not only in science but in oral language, literacy and cognitive skills required for future learning.

Background of the Study

Education

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Article # 28 stated that all children have the right to education (UNICEF 1989). In order to accomplish this, children need "compulsory and free education" (UNICEF 1989: 8). As a signatory to the UN, the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture in Samoa have supported compulsory education for all primary students (MESC EFA 2016: 19). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Article #29 stated that the goals of education should be to "develop

each child's personality, talents and abilities to the fullest. It should encourage children to respect others' human rights and their own and other cultures. Significantly, this should also help them learn to live peacefully, protect the environment and respect other people" (UNICEF 1989: 9). Therefore, teachers play a vital role in a child's development in order to achieve these holistic goals. As such this prompted an investigation into the effectiveness of the thematic approach in preschools.

Education in Samoa

Samoa's education system is structured as Preschools (ages 3-4), Primary (ages 5-11), Secondary (ages 11-16) and Tertiary (ages 16 plus). Most children were taught in stand-alone preschools with the exception of a few.

The MESC vision articulated, "A quality holistic education system that recognizes and realizes the spiritual, cultural, intellectual and physical potential of all participants, enabling them to make fulfilling life choices" (MESC Website 2020). The vision underpinned the belief that the MESC's focus and priority is on all levels of education including ECE. MESC also supported the use of thematic teaching at the early childhood level.

From 1970 the government of Samoa started to invest in early childhood education "as a private undertaking and community initiative" (Education for All 2015: 19). Through a Cabinet approval in 1976 ECE was recognized as a body of Samoa's education system (MESC 2016: 19). ECE continued to expand and was coordinated and operated by private and mission organizations. The Education for All (2016), documented "ECE centers are the responsibility of the private sector under the management of various non-government bodies" (p. 19). Moreover, MESC Statistical Digest (2019) indicated that the National Council of Early Childhood Education in Samoa NCECES governs ECE operations in Samoa with the MESC assistance.

The Early Childhood Education curriculum thematic teaching was considered an effective and positive way to integrate knowledge, skills and values in the different subject areas. The emphasis focused on the selection of various themes and topics which were relevant to the Samoan context, catered for children's interest and most importantly link and connect all the subject areas into children's learning experience. Experienced preschool teachers use language enrichment opportunities and play activities which are essential requirements to motivating young children to engage in their own learning, be critical thinkers and be creative.

Methodology

The qualitative design examined teachers' knowledge and the use of thematic teaching in one mission school. It targeted participants' views, their meaning and subjective perspectives (Berg, 1989; Hatch, 2002). Participants had different experiences on thematic that influenced their teaching; "to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 4). The qualitative case study research (Njie & Asimiran, 2014) specifically focused on a particular case or bounded system to get rich and thick descriptions of the phenomena. Consequently, the natural setting helped the study to understand participant's behaviour, attitudes and their interactions.

Individual, face- to- face interviews were conducted with the participants in the staffroom where there was minimal disruption. These were audio taped and each participant was interviewed for 30 minutes. The interviews took one week to transcribe and another week to translate into English.

Interviews were the main instrument used to collect data. A semi-structured interview schedule was designed for preschool teachers and the principal. The same questions were asked of the participants with differences when there were areas the participants needed to elaborate or prompting and probing was necessary. The interview schedule for preschool teachers focused on how they gained knowledge, and how they planned and implemented thematic teaching in the classroom. The interview schedule for the principal was based on her role and responsibilities in the school and the programme conducted to improve teachers' knowledge.

Information gathered from participants was categorized as emerging themes, concepts and patterns (Creswell, 2007; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013). The transcriptions were read through a number of times to glean participants' experiences and make connections. Meaningful patterns or themes that Corbin and Strauss (2015) referred to as "integrating the concepts around a core category" (p. 81) revealed the extent in which participants used and applied thematic teaching in practice. This made it possible to surmise and infer from the data to respond to the research questions. Raw data is simply raw data until the researcher synthesized and integrated the themes into a holistic entity (Miles, et al.).

Once the participants' transcriptions were completed data analysis was utilized to make comparisons of participants' explanations, descriptions and interpretations. Moustakas (1994) posited, "Reflective interpretation of the text is needed to achieve a fuller, more meaningful understanding" (p. 10). Emerging patterns and themes were categorized for coding. Predefined codes and emerging ones were sorted and cross checked for common patterns and utilized in the thematic analysis.

The mission Preschool Board granted permission to conduct the study following g a meeting of the principal of the preschool and teachers. Oral consent was obtained from the participants before the written consent was signed. Participants' involvement were acknowledged. As Denzin and Lincoln, (2005) stated the "subjects agreed voluntarily to participate that is without physical or psychological coercion and their agreement was based on full and open information" (p. 144). Moreover, the researcher ensured that the participants were aware of both the nature and purpose of the research and protected the subject from harm or danger. In addition, participants were assured that the information gathered was confidential. They were also told that they were free to decline participation or withdraw from the research at any time. The researcher was aware to conduct herself in an ethical manner at all times but was also responsible to ensure the dignity and the welfare of all participants (APA Ethics Codes, 2002). As part of their involvement participants' would be given a copy of the report findings.

Findings

Parents and Community Involvement

Teachers emphasized the importance of parents and community involvement in young children's learning. They were invited to help with children's reading and as guest speakers on a theme. Parents also requested to participate in meetings and during parents' day and when they were invited to discuss their children's performance and achievement in class. It was also a prospect to share some of the issues that faced children's learning and ways to overcome and support them. Parents would also have the opportunity to look at some of children's display. Teachers had this to say:

Teachers need the support from parents too especially when children go home with their homework. Some children came to school the next day with books still in their school bags because the parents do not bother to check whether they have work or they do not help. During parents day, when they see their children's progress they say, my little girl has changed a lot and she can do this and that. She has improved a lot.

Parents complain about teachers that more should be done for the children. However, more parental involvement would ensure that teachers and parents have a better relationship to support children in preschool. Parents that become involved can see their child's progress and are nicely surprised at what they can do such as working and sharing with others, drawings pinned on the classroom walls, being actively involved in singing and dancing although some of them were shy to start off with.

Holistic Development

All teachers described the importance of child development in the teaching and learning process. Teachers' ensured that children develop physically, socially, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually as well as being motivated to learn. Physical activity play a critical role and which allows children to move from place to place during hands-on activities enabling body of and gross and fine motor skills. Interaction among teachers, peers and the environment encouraged social development. Emotional development involved children's feelings towards things that surround them using their senses. Intellectual development focused on children's thinking and intellect through experimenting, exploring and researching. Significantly, teachers reported that children at this stage of development offered the following:

I always encourage movements and play in my classroom to allow children to develop their body physically. Once the child is healthy and in a good mood, teaching and learning occurs. Holistic development of the child is very important especially at this stage of child development.

I find children enjoy practical, hands on activities where they engage and communicate with other children. The themes from the curriculum ensured they were engrossed in constructive, productive, fruitful and fun work that support their physical, social, intellectual and emotional development. Children's knowledge, skills and practice are internalized through communication with their peers I display and decorate the classroom with activities children worked on like drawings, paintings and worksheets. From time to time or during Parents' Day parents, principal and teachers come to view the topics and the work the children had covered which would include displays on integrated subject areas in the languages, social studies and science.

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Language Development

Teachers said they found the thematic teaching assisted children's language development. This happens when they collaborated and engaged in class activities. Young children develop language quickly and easily by communicating and interacting with others. One of the teachers mentioned that introverted children did not want to take part in class discussions especially when the teacher was present.

However, when they were asked to work among themselves in groups they dominated the whole discussion. Interaction among students allowed them to speak and voice their opinions and ideas. This is what teachers said about language development:

I always give them activities to play and share with others to develop their language. Some children are so shy to talk in group discussions but when they interact and engage in activities I see them conversing and sharing with others.

Play encourages children to develop their language. When they play they interact with other children by sharing, talking and laughing which indicates that they are learning a lot from each other. Children love to play at this stage of their development and I always use play as a technique to draw their attention to the use of language and the new words they share or experiment with during play. Sometimes in play I would call out a word and children would act or mime the word and they would take turn if one has a new word and others would act or mime.

Conclusion

The effectiveness of the thematic approach for teaching young children as deduced from the findings indicated the need for parental and community support. Parents that took an active interest in their child's performance would show an interest in what the child did; discuss what they had done at preschool in terms of interest and novel experiences. Moreover, nurturing the child in all aspects of development is an important component of the thematic approach. Children should be exposed to learning drawn from experiences of home, the environment and the cultural context as these would be interrelated in some form or another. The language issue was perceived to be a critical requirement as children's learning in the early years hinged on communication, exchanges and interchanges with other children or the significant other which are teachers and parents. Undoubtedly this study could inform future research on best practices for the implementation of thematic teaching. The study is a start and should provide baseline information on best practices to be modeled by other preschools in Samoa. Consolidation of best practice in preschool in the country should highlight the effective use of the thematic approach. Finally, the study should broaden and assist teachers of preschools to gain a better

understanding of the approach its potential and application to preschools in the cultural setting of Samoa

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