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*Article*

# Practices in the Use of Play Materials Across Different Preschool Settings in Bahir Dar City.

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**Abstract:** This study explores the practices in the use of play materials across different preschool settings in Bahir Dar City, Ethiopia. The research aims to investigate how various preschool institutions, including private and faith-based schools, integrate play materials into their educational frameworks. It examines the types of play materials used, their availability, and the approaches employed by educators to maximize their effectiveness in promoting early childhood development. Additionally, the study addresses the challenges preschool teachers face in utilizing these materials, such as limited resources, cultural considerations, and training gaps. Through a mixed-methods approach, data was collected from a sample of preschool teachers, school administrators, and parents via surveys, interviews, and observations. The findings reveal a significant variation in the quality and frequency of play material usage, with faith-based preschools often demonstrating resource constraints, while private preschools tend to provide more diverse and structured play opportunities. The study concludes with recommendations for improving play material accessibility and training for teachers to enhance early childhood learning experiences across different preschool settings in Bahir Dar City.

## I. Introduction

### *A. Background of the Study*

The role of play in early childhood development has long been recognized as a fundamental aspect of children's learning and growth. Play materials, which serve as tools for imaginative, sensory, and cognitive engagement, are integral to creating an environment where young children can explore, discover, and develop essential skills. In Bahir Dar City, a rapidly developing urban center in Ethiopia, preschools are becoming increasingly popular as early education options. However, the use of play materials in these settings remains an under-researched area. This study seeks to explore how different preschool settings in Bahir Dar City implement play materials to support early childhood development, with a focus on the practices observed in both private and faith-based preschools.

### *B. Problem Statement*

Despite the recognized importance of play materials in fostering developmental milestones, there is a lack of consistent practices and a disparity in the availability of resources across preschools in Bahir Dar City. Both private and faith-based preschools face unique challenges in incorporating play materials into their curricula, ranging from financial limitations to insufficient teacher training. The problem is compounded by the lack of systematic research on how these materials are utilized, raising concerns about the effectiveness of current practices in supporting children's developmental needs.

### *C. Objectives of the Study*

The primary objectives of this study are:

- To examine the types of play materials used in different preschool settings in Bahir Dar City.
- To investigate the practices of teachers in utilizing play materials for early childhood development.

- To assess the challenges faced by preschool teachers in incorporating play materials into their classrooms.
- To compare the practices in private preschools and faith-based preschools regarding play material usage.
- To propose recommendations for improving the accessibility and utilization of play materials in preschools.

#### *D. Research Questions*

The study aims to address the following research questions:

- What types of play materials are commonly used in preschools in Bahir Dar City?
- How do preschool teachers incorporate play materials into their teaching practices?
- What challenges do teachers face in using play materials effectively?
- How do the practices related to play material use differ between private and faith-based preschools?
- What strategies can be employed to enhance the use of play materials in preschool settings?

#### *E. Scope and Delimitations*

This study is focused on preschools located in Bahir Dar City, Ethiopia, and examines both private and faith-based preschools. It is limited to exploring the types of play materials used, the practices of teachers, and the challenges encountered in these two types of preschool settings. The study does not cover public preschools or other types of early childhood educational institutions outside of the specified city. Additionally, the research focuses primarily on the perspectives of preschool teachers, administrators, and parents, with less emphasis on the direct involvement of children in the study. The findings may be specific to Bahir Dar City and may not be applicable to other regions of Ethiopia or international contexts.

## **II. Literature Review**

### *A. Theoretical Framework on Play and Child Development*

Play is widely acknowledged as a crucial component of early childhood development, and various theoretical frameworks have been proposed to explain its role in shaping cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Piaget's theory of cognitive development emphasizes how play, particularly symbolic and imaginative play, supports the development of cognitive structures in young children. Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, on the other hand, highlights the importance of play as a means of social interaction and language development, particularly in the context of guided play. According to Vygotsky, play provides children with opportunities to engage in "scaffolding" through interactions with more knowledgeable peers or adults. Additionally, Erikson's psychosocial development theory posits that play allows children to work through social and emotional conflicts, fostering a sense of competence and autonomy. These theoretical perspectives underscore the significance of play as not only a fun activity but as a central component of healthy child development, with play materials serving as essential tools to facilitate this process.

### *B. Importance of Play Materials in Preschools*

Play materials are integral to creating an enriching learning environment that promotes various developmental domains. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the presence of appropriate, well-structured play materials in preschools fosters cognitive, physical, and emotional development by stimulating curiosity, creativity, and problem-solving skills. For example, open-ended materials such as blocks, art supplies, and natural objects encourage children to engage in imaginative play and exploration, helping to develop fine motor skills, spatial awareness, and social competence. Play materials also support language development through

pretend play and role-playing activities, where children practice new vocabulary and communication skills. Furthermore, research has shown that quality play materials can contribute to children's emotional well-being by offering opportunities for self-expression, coping with challenges, and managing frustration. The availability and variety of these materials significantly influence the overall quality of early childhood education.

#### *C. Comparative Studies on Preschool Settings*

Comparative studies on preschool settings have revealed that there are differences in the use of play materials based on institutional types, including private, public, and faith-based schools. In many countries, private preschools tend to have greater access to resources, including play materials, due to higher tuition fees and external funding sources. These schools are often better equipped with a wider range of materials and structured curricula that emphasize play-based learning. On the other hand, faith-based preschools, particularly in developing countries, may face limitations in resource allocation, impacting their ability to provide diverse and age-appropriate play materials. Studies in other regions have shown that private institutions tend to offer more individualized learning experiences with the support of innovative play materials, while faith-based or community-based settings often rely on traditional or locally available materials. However, despite these differences, research suggests that both types of preschools recognize the importance of play in early childhood development, albeit in varying degrees of implementation.

#### *D. Challenges in the Use of Play Materials*

Several challenges hinder the effective use of play materials in preschools, particularly in resource-limited settings. One major challenge is the insufficient availability of diverse and quality materials. In many preschools, especially those in low-income areas, teachers are often forced to use makeshift or inadequate materials that do not support the full range of developmental needs. Another challenge is the lack of teacher training and professional development in play-based pedagogy. Many preschool teachers may not have received formal training on how to integrate play materials into their teaching practices effectively, which can limit the potential benefits of play. Cultural perceptions and traditional beliefs about the role of play in education also contribute to underutilization, especially in regions where academic learning is prioritized over play-based activities. Additionally, the lack of institutional support, including insufficient funding and space for play, exacerbates the challenge. Studies have shown that while play materials are widely recognized as essential for young children's learning, their effective use is often hindered by these structural and institutional limitations, necessitating systemic improvements to support better practices in preschools.

### **III. Methodology**

#### *A. Research Design*

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the practices in the use of play materials in preschools across Bahir Dar City. The qualitative aspect allows for an in-depth exploration of teachers' perspectives, experiences, and challenges related to play materials, while the quantitative aspect provides statistical insights into the frequency, types, and availability of play materials. This approach ensures that both the lived experiences of preschool teachers and the broader patterns of play material use can be captured, analyzed, and compared across different preschool settings (private and faith-based schools).

#### *B. Sample Selection*

The sample for this study consists of preschools in Bahir Dar City, with a focus on private and faith-based institutions. The sampling method will be purposive, selecting a diverse range of preschools to ensure variation in the types of institutions and resources available. A total of 10 preschools (5 private and 5 faith-based) will be selected for the study. Within each preschool, the sample will include preschool teachers (one per school), administrators, and a subset of parents. The teachers will be chosen based on their experience in early childhood education, with priority given to those with a minimum of two years of teaching experience. Administrators will be selected based on their role in overseeing curriculum and resource allocation. Additionally, parents will be selected through convenience sampling, with a focus on those who have children currently attending the preschools under investigation.

### *C. Data Collection Methods*

Data will be collected through multiple methods to ensure a rich and comprehensive set of insights:

- **Surveys:** A structured survey will be administered to preschool teachers and administrators to gather quantitative data on the types of play materials used, frequency of use, and challenges encountered. The survey will also assess teachers' training and attitudes toward play-based learning.
- **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with teachers, administrators, and parents. These interviews will explore deeper insights into the practices and challenges associated with play material usage, perceptions of play in early childhood education, and suggestions for improvement. Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.
- **Observations:** Classroom observations will be conducted to assess how play materials are used in practice. The researcher will observe teacher-student interactions during playtime, the organization of play materials, and the extent to which materials are integrated into the learning activities. Field notes will be taken during these observations.
- **Document Analysis:** Curriculum plans, resource inventories, and any relevant policy documents related to play material use will be reviewed to understand how preschools structure their play-based learning environments.

### *D. Data Analysis Techniques*

Data analysis will be conducted using both qualitative and quantitative techniques:

- **Quantitative Analysis:** The survey data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as frequency distributions and percentages, to provide an overview of the types of play materials used, their availability, and how frequently they are employed in teaching. Comparative analysis will be performed to identify any significant differences between private and faith-based preschools.
- **Qualitative Analysis:** The interview transcripts and observational field notes will be analyzed using thematic analysis. This approach will involve coding the data to identify key themes, patterns, and categories related to the use of play materials, teacher practices, and challenges. NVivo software will be used to assist with coding and theme extraction. Data triangulation will be applied to ensure the validity of the findings by cross-referencing data from surveys, interviews, and observations.
- **Document Analysis:** Documents related to play materials and curriculum will be analyzed to complement and enrich the findings from the surveys and interviews, offering insight into institutional policies and approaches.

The results from the qualitative and quantitative analyses will be integrated to form a comprehensive understanding of the current practices, challenges, and opportunities in the use of play materials across different preschool settings in Bahir Dar City.



## IV. Results and Discussion

### *A. Practices in Play Material Usage*

The study's findings reveal that play materials are used to varying degrees across preschools in Bahir Dar City. In both private and faith-based preschools, a variety of materials such as blocks, art supplies, puzzles, and sensory toys are available, though their quantity and diversity differ. In private preschools, play materials are more abundant, and teachers consistently integrate them into daily routines, using them to facilitate activities such as group play, problem-solving exercises, and role-playing. The materials are organized and rotated regularly to maintain children's engagement and promote cognitive development. In contrast, in faith-based preschools, while some play materials are available, they are often fewer in number and less varied. Teachers in these settings tend to use play materials more sporadically, mainly during free play or unstructured times, with less emphasis on guided play or educational integration.

Teachers across both types of preschools express awareness of the importance of play for child development. However, their usage practices reflect varying levels of knowledge and training in play-based pedagogy. Teachers in private preschools are more likely to employ structured play activities that align with specific developmental goals, whereas teachers in faith-based schools tend to use play materials in a more informal and less goal-directed manner.

### *B. Comparative Analysis of Preschool Settings*

The comparative analysis between private and faith-based preschools highlights significant differences in the use of play materials. Private preschools have greater access to resources and exhibit more organized approaches to play material usage. These schools have well-stocked classrooms, with diverse materials that support a range of developmental activities, from sensory play to language and cognitive skill-building. Teachers in private settings typically receive professional development training in play-based learning, allowing them to better utilize play materials in ways that are both structured and developmentally appropriate.

In contrast, faith-based preschools often face limitations in resource availability. The lack of funding and reliance on donations or community support results in fewer play materials, which may not fully meet the developmental needs of the children. While teachers in these settings are passionate about their work, their approach to play material use tends to be less systematic and more reliant on traditional, locally available items. In many instances, teachers struggle to balance the importance of play with the pressure to meet academic goals, leading to the underutilization of play materials in structured learning.

### *C. Challenges Identified in the Use of Play Materials*

The study identifies several challenges that hinder the effective use of play materials in preschools in Bahir Dar City. These challenges include:

- **Resource Constraints:** Both private and faith-based preschools face limitations in the availability of sufficient and diverse play materials. Faith-based schools, in particular, experience significant shortages due to budgetary constraints, often resulting in a reliance on makeshift or recycled materials.
- **Lack of Teacher Training:** Many teachers in both private and faith-based preschools have not received formal training in play-based pedagogy. This lack of training limits their ability to incorporate play materials in a purposeful way, reducing the potential educational benefits of play.
- **Cultural Beliefs and Attitudes:** In some communities, there is a prevailing belief that academic learning should take precedence over play, leading to the undervaluation of play materials in preschool settings. This mindset results in play being perceived as a supplementary activity rather than a central element of the curriculum.

- **Insufficient Institutional Support:** Both types of preschools lack adequate institutional support for maintaining play materials. This includes a lack of policies regarding play material usage, as well as inadequate maintenance of existing materials, leading to their rapid deterioration or disorganization.
- **Space Limitations:** Many preschools, especially in urban areas like Bahir Dar, struggle with limited physical space, which affects their ability to organize and store play materials effectively. Small classrooms and overcrowded conditions often result in restricted opportunities for children to engage in free play.

#### *D. Best Practices and Recommendations*

Based on the study's findings, the following best practices and recommendations are proposed to enhance the use of play materials in preschools:

- **Diversifying Play Materials:** Preschools, particularly faith-based institutions, should prioritize acquiring a wider range of play materials that cater to different developmental domains, including cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills. Utilizing locally available materials, such as natural objects, can provide cost-effective alternatives to expensive commercial toys.
- **Teacher Training and Professional Development:** It is essential for preschools to invest in ongoing training for teachers on the principles of play-based learning and the effective use of play materials. Professional development programs should emphasize the educational value of play and provide practical strategies for integrating play materials into lesson plans.
- **Encouraging Play as a Central Curriculum Component:** Schools should shift cultural perceptions about the role of play in early childhood education, recognizing it as an essential element for cognitive and social development. Integrating play-based learning into the formal curriculum can help reinforce its importance and ensure its regular inclusion in daily activities.
- **Institutional Support and Policy Development:** Preschools should work with local government and educational organizations to establish policies that support the acquisition and maintenance of play materials. This includes securing funding for purchasing and replenishing materials and developing clear guidelines for their effective use in the classroom.
- **Maximizing Space for Play:** Schools can optimize available space by creating designated play areas and organizing materials in ways that facilitate easy access and encourage independent exploration. Outdoor spaces should also be utilized for physical play, supporting children's gross motor development.
- **Community Engagement:** Preschools should engage with local communities, parents, and businesses to garner support for play material acquisition. Community-based initiatives such as material donations or volunteer efforts can help alleviate some of the resource challenges faced by preschools.

By addressing these recommendations, preschools in Bahir Dar City can improve their practices in utilizing play materials, ultimately enhancing the developmental outcomes for young children and creating more effective learning environments.

## **V. Conclusion**

### *A. Summary of Findings*

This study explored the practices and challenges in the use of play materials across different preschool settings in Bahir Dar City. The findings indicate that while both private and faith-based preschools recognize the importance of play in early childhood development, there are significant differences in the availability, variety, and systematic use of play materials. Private preschools tend to have more abundant and diverse play materials, integrated into structured, play-based learning activities. In contrast, faith-based preschools often face resource constraints, resulting in fewer and less varied play materials. Both types of preschools face challenges such as a lack of teacher training

in play-based pedagogy, cultural beliefs that prioritize academic learning over play, and institutional support deficits. Despite these challenges, teachers across all settings recognize the value of play for fostering cognitive, social, and emotional development in young children.

#### *B. Implications for Preschool Education in Bahir Dar City*

The findings have important implications for preschool education in Bahir Dar City. The variability in play material usage between private and faith-based schools suggests the need for a more equitable distribution of resources and support across all preschool settings. This study emphasizes the need for a shift in educational policies to prioritize play-based learning and ensure that all preschools, regardless of type, have access to appropriate play materials. The lack of teacher training highlights the importance of professional development programs to equip educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to integrate play materials effectively into the learning environment. Additionally, the study's results underscore the need for greater community involvement and support in resource acquisition to overcome financial and material constraints, particularly in faith-based preschools.

#### *C. Recommendations for Educators, Policymakers, and Researchers*

##### For Educators:

Teachers should be encouraged to integrate play materials into daily routines more systematically, ensuring that play is not only available during unstructured times but also used intentionally to support specific developmental goals.

- Ongoing professional development should be provided to educators, focusing on the educational value of play and the best practices for incorporating play materials into their teaching methods.

##### For Policymakers:

- Policymakers should establish funding programs that support the acquisition and maintenance of play materials in both private and faith-based preschools. These programs can be particularly beneficial for preschools in low-income areas.
- It is crucial to develop national or local policies that recognize play-based learning as an essential component of early childhood education and promote its inclusion in formal curriculum guidelines.
- Collaboration between local governments, communities, and private institutions should be encouraged to ensure the sustainability of resources and support for preschools.

##### For Researchers:

- Future research should focus on assessing the long-term impact of play-based learning on children's academic and social outcomes in Bahir Dar and similar regions. This will provide stronger evidence for the effectiveness of play as an educational tool.
- Studies could also explore the cultural beliefs surrounding play in different regions of Ethiopia and how these beliefs influence preschool practices and policies.

#### *D. Suggestions for Future Research*

Future research can explore several areas to further enhance understanding of play material usage in preschools:

- Longitudinal Studies: Conducting longitudinal studies that track children's developmental progress over time could provide insight into the impact of consistent play-based learning on cognitive, social, and emotional development.



- Comparative Studies: Expanding the comparative analysis to include more diverse preschool settings (e.g., rural vs. urban, government vs. private) could reveal more nuanced differences in play material usage and its effects on learning outcomes.
- Parental Involvement: Investigating the role of parental involvement in supporting play-based learning and providing additional resources at home could complement the findings of this study and inform strategies for bridging gaps in play material access.
- Teacher Perspectives: Future studies could dive deeper into teachers' perspectives on the challenges they face in utilizing play materials, particularly examining how institutional policies, classroom management, and time constraints impact their use of play materials.

By addressing these areas in future research, stakeholders can continue to improve preschool education in Bahir Dar City, ensuring that all children have access to high-quality, play-based learning environments.

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