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Imperative of Viable Learning Environment for Early Childhood Education: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the vital role of the early childhood learning environment as conducive learning environments are pivotal to promoting the holistic development of a child. It argues that early childhood development is a critical period that fundamentally influences intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development. Hence, the learning environment at the unique stage of education must be adequate, vibrant, and supportive for the optimal realisation of educational goals. The study utilized a literature review methodology, to identify and synthesize critical issues in early childhood education learning environment. In this regard, about 50 peer-reviewed journal articles indexed by Scopus, DOAJ, and EBSCO were reviewed. It revealed that a quality learning environments and physical exercise are essential conditions required to early childhood cognition. Educators should consciously provide a robust and dynamic learning environment that promotes different learning styles to attain well-rounded early childhood educational development of the child.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Establishing a quality learning environment that accommodates diverse preschool learners during the early years of childhood education, is highly beneficial in developing children's mental health and physical well-being. Studies have shown that an overall conducive learning environment could enhance learning motivation, readiness, learning interest, prevent health challenges and improve academic performance (Ghanbari-Azarneir et al., 2015; Aneke & Akpusugh, 2022; Shaari & Ahmad, 2016). However, while maintaining a conducive learning environment, educators must tailor learning instructions to meet the overall development and well-being of each child by addressing the learner's emotional development, cognitive, social and physical needs, in other to impact maximum knowledge (Seden et al, 2020). A learning environment is defined as an organic, holistic concept, a setting that includes the activity and outcomes of the learning; this type of learning must be innovative and can accommodate diverse children in the classroom (Glassner, 2022). A learning environment should have diverse educational activities and different learning strategies to enhance children's learning skills. In an early childhood learning environment, play serves as an active learning strategy conducive to preschool learners and a vital part of children's lives (Derman et al., 2020). Research has shown that assessing the learning environment and getting student's perceptions is pivotal in teaching and learning (Schenke et al., 2018). A study by Schweig (2016) found that assessing learners' perceptions regarding the classroom learning environment can positively affect student achievement. This finding was supported by Aldridge & Bianchet (2022), who opined that a relationship exists between a conducive learning environment and a range of learning outcomes. However, cultural background, social stratification, and learners' grade levels may cause variations in learners' perception, the quality of education, and their learning environment.

Helping student understand their learning environment and assessing their perceptions regarding their learning environment develop self-expression and self-confidence. Teachers get to have first-hand narratives regarding the quality of teaching and learning their learners acquire and the learning environment they find themselves which inadvertently assists both the teachers and school management to plan other educational interventions and the modifications of pedagogical practices that would improve learners and the ECE setting (Aldridge et al., 2021). Also, it is highly beneficial in teacher evaluation and in developing instructional techniques for diverse learners during teaching and learning.

A case study on student feedback about their learning environment as a means for co-construction in South Australia using the Classroom Climate Questionnaire (CCQ) to facilitate co-construction, shows that students' feedback through giving open tasks regarding their learning environment provided valuable results for students in co-construction and classroom improvement (Aldridge & Bianchet, 2022). The term co-construction is defined as a means of peer collaboration in a social setting to share knowledge and improve development in learning, also it is about children watching what others are doing, adding their interests, and building on it in their way (Damşa & Ludvigsen, 2016). The researcher further stated that to achieve positive co-construction children need to feel safe in their learning environment and with the support of a teacher. Furthermore, a social learning, environment teacher or a knowledgeable adult should assist children in skill development through scaffolding.

Glassner (2022) through designing a self-determined learning environment for an innovative teacher program in Israel, showed that it helped establish student capacity, autonomy, connection with peers, and responsibility for learning. In a mixed study approach where Cho et al. (2023) examined how Asian international students perceived their classroom

learning environments and learning experiences using the empirical relationship between autonomy-supportive environments and language anxiety, discussion participation, and adaptive beliefs about classroom assessments learning components. The finding shows that autonomy-supportive environments satisfied international students' basic psychological needs, which decreased language anxiety and increased classroom participation and adaptive perspectives about classroom assessments. This study also provides a strong rationale for creating a learning environment that satisfies international students' basic psychological needs so that they can adapt to US academic learning environments. The above study was conducted in the United States and among Asian international university students on their perception of the classroom learning environment. Their study did not review the importance of the early childhood learning environment and its instructional strategy such as play, which the current study reviewed.

Having a conducive learning environment that involves play is important in early childhood education. This is evident in a qualitative study in urban and rural pre-primary schools in Tanzania where they examined teachers, parent's perceptions and practices on how they view play approach in the child development, how teachers integrate play in their classroom teaching activities, and the challenges they face using play as one of their curricular tools. Findings revealed that teachers prefer only academic instructions and do not implement play in their teaching due to limited materials for play, academic pressures on teachers due to restricted time to meet up with teaching curriculum and school time table, unconducive environment for play, and lack of qualified teachers who are professionally trained to assist preschool learners. The finding of this study shows that schools must provide the necessary conditions suitable for play and implement more awareness of the benefits of play in childhood education. The Department of Education must integrate play courses in the teachers' training programs to create qualified teachers who would fit into assisting childhood education.

The application of a play-based learning strategy among preschool learners helps in developing their creativity, communication skills, and language development skills as well as improving their mathematical outcome. This is evident in the study who observed a positive result among the experimental group that was taught using play-based mathematics activities (Cohrsen et al., 2016; Derman et al., 2020). Furthermore, the term "learning trajectories" which involves a mathematical goal, a developmental pathway to reach that goal, and teaching practices matched to learners' level of thinking as the best procedure for teaching mathematics subject to preschool learners.

In the year 2018, the Department of Education in New Hampshire, USA, amended its law, which stipulates that teachers must make sure that early childhood learners are exposed to a learning environment that shows practical involvement or real-life experience involving play, body movement, socialization, creative expression and music learning. This shows that early childhood education and the learning environment that involves play are fundamental rights for every child, irrespective of social background, gender, race, and ethnicity. Teachers must diversify their play-based learning skills by initiating different types of play to accommodate diverse learners. However, they should carefully maintain appropriate time for conventional learning and recreational activities to ensure holistic support for children's development. Irrespective of how impactful play has been, studies have shown that while some teachers find it challenging to integrate actual classroom teaching and play strategy in the classroom, others still have negative and or nonchalant perceptions regarding play, which is a challenging factor for its implementation (Adams et al., 2023). Hence this review study focuses on

examining learning environments and instructional strategies used in early childhood education.

The primary aim of early child care and education is to provide safe, fostering care and activities that are developmental and appropriate for the children and to make provision for enriching program that involves socialization and development of cognitive skills (Hedefalk et al., 2015). This is evident in the study of Adams et al. (2023), who opined that a learning environment and good physical play help children maintain good health, lose weight, improve positive mental health, and acquire social-emotional and cognitive development. Another aim of early childhood program is to assist low-income families and improve children's mental health and well-being (Reynolds et al., 2017). This is evident when this category of children who are coming from lower socioeconomic family backgrounds associates with other higher socioeconomic background and have the same care received by the families of rich children and working-class families during this program. These care programs involve providing quality education, health care, provision of nurturing food, and quality play, which is believed to enhance critical thinking skills and the ability to impart positive attitudes and perceptions regarding society. As a result, a safe environment is critical for early childhood educators and childcare centres (Cumming et al., 2021). Parents expect their children to be safe when they leave them at a childcare centre. Furthermore, parents anticipate that the playground, equipment, toys, and other items will be safe for children and that teachers will closely monitor their activities. These expectations necessitate that teachers must be well-informed and aware of how to develop and maintain environments that promote the health and safety of children.

Early childhood education is essential for Nigeria and South African children's social and emotional development (Ogunyemi & Ragpot, 2015). Therefore, a loving and supportive environment teaches young children how to relate to others, develop empathy, and regulate emotions. In addition to providing a sense of belonging and security, high-quality early childhood education programs foster strong interactions between children and adults, enabling children to quickly develop crucial social skills such as sharing, taking turns, and settling disagreements through social interactions with their peers and teachers. However, they only examined various types of play and work within the standard of constructivist early childhood education, regarding playful learning. The researchers suggested that preschool teachers need to integrate play with a supportive policy and practical environment that meets the conditions for quality play.

World Health Organization stated that educational sectors have neglected the aims of childhood education programs and have focused only on the child's physical well-being. They suggested that a learning environment must create a room for conducive physical activities and energetic play of about 60 minutes. Nevertheless, Richter et al. (2019) agreed that early childhood education programs in South Africa frequently include hands-on learning experiences that encourage children to investigate their surroundings and engage in problem-solving activities. These activities, therefore, encourage cognitive growth and a passion for learning. Hence, early childhood education sets the basis for lifetime learning and academic success by fostering a good and exciting learning environment. High-quality early childhood education programs regularly improve school preparation, cognitive ability, and children's social and emotional competence (Ardoin & Bowers, 2020). The brain of a child develops rapidly during the first years of life. This moment, is known as the critical period in a child's life when the brain is most open to learning and connecting.

Early childhood education capitalises on this window of potential by providing a stimulating and caring atmosphere that aids in the overall development of children (Hamilton

et al., 2021). Therefore, the objective of this study is to: examine instructional strategies, and learning environments used in early childhood education. To fill the research gap, this study will add to the body of knowledge already in existence by offering our perspectives on the learning environment of early childhood education.

2. METHODS

This paper adopted a literature review methodology to review published peer-reviewed findings. A quality literature research method serves as a bedrock for advancing knowledge and developing theories; it also helps to integrate findings and viewpoints from different empirical studies (Snyder, 2019). To this end, data was collected through a literature review of secondary data and analysis of available existing documents through various search engines. Some of the available secondary sources utilized in this study consisted of over 50 published articles in peer-reviewed journals, among which 45 according to Scimago involved, Q1, 23; Q2, 12; Q3, 10 were categorized and indexed by Scopus, while 3 articles are indexed by DOAJ, 3 are indexed by EBSCO. It used the keywords “cognitive,” social, “emotional development, “education, etc., and to ascertain the trustworthiness of this review, other studies were used to support the study. The study was organized and analyzed by searching for patterns, trends, and interpretations based on the study's findings. The study was limited to secondary data and most of the studies reviewed were from specific contexts, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other cultural and educational contexts.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Planning for indoor and outdoor environments

Learning environments are essential to a child's development and directly impact educational experiences (Modise, 2021). Children must have access to rich learning environments that are comfortable, fascinating, and visually appealing (Sethusha, 2020). On the other hand, Adjei-Boadi et al. (2022) opined that the environments should also be tailored to children's needs based on their age or stage of development since a one-year-old would not benefit from the same learning environment as a five-year-old. Caregivers and teachers must endeavor to monitor the children and involve the grouping method during play (Hillesøy, 2016). The grouping should be categorized based on their age brackets, such as from birth -2 years, 3- 5 years, 6-8-years, and 9-12 years, or starting from infants to toddlers, preschoolers, Kindergartens, and primary grades age levels.

Using Ghana as an example in this context, noted further that the environment is where children can discover, explore, play, and learn while feeling safe and comfortable since their needs are addressed; hence, the Interior environments are carefully constructed to accommodate children's changing learning demands and interests (Adjei-Boadi et al., 2022). Nevertheless, Amisah-Essel et al. (2020) argued that an indoor setting in metropolitan Ghana includes items like a building or a tiny world area where children will learn independently and hands-on. Indeed, young toddlers learn by encountering new and varied things. Thus, it is critical to provide a variety of items to excite their senses. Diverse sights, textures, colours, noises, smells, and different social groupings and activities are all factors to consider.

Decorations are crucial on a functional level since they clearly distinguish distinct regions of your space (Tomaz et al., 2019). Furthermore, they are also vital in stimulating youngsters through colour, which, when used well, will create diverse moods across the room. Aina & Bipath (2022) noted that teachers in South Africa consider the colours of the environment's decorations based on the area of the room: bold, bright colours like red and yellow are great for gross motor areas; calming blues and greens as the ideal for hands-on activity areas; and

softer colours like pastels are suitable for low-intensity activities. Changing the decorations regularly adds some intriguing new stimulus to the atmosphere (Spence, 2020). Therefore, teachers should also use decor to support learning around subjects and themes.

The resources available must not be just high-quality and developmentally appropriate but also easily accessible to children. Indeed, this is critical for promoting independent, child-led activities that benefit them by allowing them to select activities based on their fascinations and interests (Nel et al., 2017). In this context, children should have regular access to the outdoor learning environment to support effective outdoor learning while children should be able to wander freely between indoor and outdoor surroundings if possible. Indeed, young children are physically active beings who benefit from activities that are developmentally suitable for them. Water areas and mud kitchens are two possibilities to examine, as they will allow students to experiment with various stimuli (Frimpong, 2019). Therefore, Syomwene (2017) argued that when establishing an outdoor learning environment, it is critical to make the most significant use of the area and ensure that learners can move around securely without colliding with one another or fixed equipment. Hence, there should also be a natural flow to enable experimentation and learning. Placing a mud kitchen near a water supply, for example, will allow learners to transport water in the mud kitchen conveniently.

Indoor learning spaces frequently lack space, resulting in crowded situations with a lot going on simultaneously, which can lead to accidents or injuries. In Cape Town, South Africa, explained that when designing an interior environment, the teacher must ensure it is laid out to reduce the possibility of collisions between learners. They argued further that reduction of possible collision is accomplished by distinguishing physically active activities such as role-playing and construction from quieter, sedentary pursuits such as reading or colouring. Therefore, this not only reduces the possibility of crashes but also helps to eliminate distractions between students. Hence, teachers should also ensure that furniture and equipment are adequately arranged for constant surveillance of their setting so personnel may intervene if an accident is imminent. Teachers must, above all, establish appropriate fire safety measures and ensure that all personnel are aware of fire protocols and that they are displayed during an evacuation. They must also check that all fire doors are open and that all equipment, such as fire extinguishers, is in good working order.

Outdoor learning venues are fantastic for creating unique and enjoyable learning experiences (Becker et al., 2017). They do, however, come with an increased risk of risks. Thus, teachers must take precautions to ensure a safe outside environment. Ensuring workers are stationed at appropriate spots around learning spaces to ensure every child is supervised at all times is one way to reduce danger. Furthermore, ensuring that workers are actively leading and moving around since children might quickly disappear behind large pieces of equipment is a necessary precaution. The weather is also an essential consideration. Teachers should also ensure that students have access to shade, drinking water on hot sunny days, and proper cold-weather clothes. Secondary data is presented in **Table 1** below:

Table 1. Secondary data.

Aspects	Advantage	Disadvantage
Rich Learning Environment	The secondary data summarised all elements, such as comfort and safety, that help create rich learning environments.	There may be a lack of context to the unique needs of every child.
Tailored to Children's Needs	Secondary data ensured the appropriateness and efficacy of the study by providing ideas on how to modify surroundings according to children's age or developmental stage.	There is a tendency to generalise the needs of children.
Decorations and Color Psychology	Secondary data clarifies the role that colour psychology and décor play in arousing children's senses and establishing various learning environments.	There is a lack of specification and customisation.
Accessibility of Resources	Secondary research highlights the importance of giving kids easy access to high-quality, developmentally appropriate resources.	It may not address practical challenges.

3.2. Setting up environments that encourage play environments

The teacher's perspective and goals, according to Modise (2021) will influence how the classroom or physical environment is organised. Nevertheless, the room configurations and placement of teaching materials will vary depending on the teacher's objectives; nonetheless, several vital aspects must be included in every classroom (Ogunyemi & Ragpot, 2015). For instance, one instructor may believe that students become more literate by participating in activities such as read-aloud and group reading. Given this idea, instructors will ensure that their classrooms have a pleasant library area, that students have access to various literacy materials without asking for them, and that they have table space for silent reading and writing.

On the other hand, teachers must consider the following questions while designing the physical setting for play: How is the space organised, both inside and out? Is it possible for youngsters to discover housekeeping, reading, and block supplies in clearly indicated areas? Is there enough room to stroll between the zones? These classroom aspects enable children's flexibility to choose their activities, which develops the complexity of their play and fosters continued play (Merrienboer et al., 2017). Size is crucial in addition to classroom design. In a research on children's play spaces, explained that 40 to 50 square feet of usable space per child are appropriate for indoor surroundings as children's hostility and unfocused behaviour tend to rise in spaces with less than 25 square feet per child (Maifala, 2024; Cooper, 2015). Therefore, for teachers, congested physical environments encourage more directive teaching and limit possibilities for students to interact socially (Phajane, 2019). Hence, when planning room layouts, teachers should remember the spaces for children's play and the surrounding space, allowing people to move around. In general, the flow of play and communication in the classroom or outdoors is influenced by space.

For extremely young children, a broad, open space without impediments is recommended for the play area (Raikes et al., 2020). This place allows newborns and toddlers to walk freely and investigate their surroundings. Fire laws require all classrooms to have working fire extinguishers and smoke and carbon monoxide monitors. Fire exits, alarms, and escapes should be well-labelled, and workers should be familiar with building exit locations and emergency procedures. However, to achieve this, teachers should be trained and perform regular fire drills to familiarise youngsters with fire drill procedures (Bartie et al., 2016). This would keep children calm in the event of an actual emergency. Also, daily sanitising of classroom toys and other equipment is necessary to prevent germs from spreading (Matafwali & Mofu, 2023). All childcare facilities must have sufficient washing sinks, toilets, soap dispensers, and a towel rack. The availability of appropriately sized fixtures helps youngsters to care for their requirements. Bathrooms must be accessible from both indoor and outdoor play spaces. According to health rules, a childcare centre must have one toilet and washbasin for every 10 to 12 children (Yeh et al., 2024). In a classroom, adequate illumination is critical. Of course, natural light from windows and glass doors is preferable, but a no-glare light will suffice if this is not available.

3.3. What is play?

Play is more challenging to describe. Many educators and philosophers have defined the phrase, each adding their twist to it. Swinging, sliding, running, digging in the mud, constructing with blocks, dancing to music, making up nonsense rhyming words, dressing up, and pretending are all activities that fall under the umbrella of play. Because of its diversity, no single definition of play can effectively explain its elements. Some could claim that play does not need to be defined, described, or studied because most people recognise it when they encounter it. Play is sometimes perceived as the polar opposite of work done on weekends, holidays, or with children.

Understanding the concept of "play" academically is vital for early childhood educators. A well-known psychologist, characterised play as follows: Play appears to serve various critical roles (Sparaci & Gallagher, 2025). For starters, it minimises the consequences of one's actions and learning; therefore... it is a less risky environment... Second, play provides an excellent opportunity to attempt combinations of behaviour that would never be performed under functional strain. According to Bruner, play is the primary opportunity for youngsters to take risks without fear of failure. It helps in cognitive development, social development, emotional development, language development, and physical development.

Play is an essential component of healthy development for children of all ages. Play impacts all aspects of development because it allows children to learn about themselves, others, and their surroundings. It promotes aspects of social, emotional, cognitive, and physical growth that are impossible otherwise. Children engage in play activities and learn to interact with their peers while developing key schemas about the real world. Although many people regard play as only a time filler for carers, significant studies have been committed to the advantages of play, suggesting that play is essential for every child. In the theoretical framework of Piaget and Vygotsky to our understanding of the qualities of play are in the aspects of abstract thinking and rule formulation. According to Van der Westhuizen & Hannaway (2021) citing Piaget & Vygotsky play is constructing knowledge inside the child through interaction with the object (toy). While on the socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky, play is social engagement (two children playing together) where children learn about themselves through their relationships with others. Finally, children start to see the evolving self through play.

Steps to prepare an environment that encourages play by Phajane (2019) is: 1) Make room for young children to leap, climb, crawl, and roll and allow newborns and toddlers to roll, crawl, and pull themselves up, 2) Expand the learning area by including outdoor play activities in centre-based or family childcare settings. Indoor activities that provide many mobility opportunities can easily be moved outside. For instance, take the big foam blocks outside so kids may construct towering structures where they have to climb over objects to reach the highest blocks. Alternatively, draw obstacle courses outside with chalk, 3) To assist the development of fine and gross motor skills, provide open-ended objects that can be carried around and used in different classroom areas and various learning activities, 4) Make room for jogging in circles and smashing blocks together. When the weather permits, move the activity outside, and 5) Discuss with parents how they involve their child in whole-body and large-motor activities. Guests in the house might brainstorm ways to use things around the house to continue the play.

3.4. Preparing the learning resources

Various early childhood education options are available to help children learn and develop. These resources address multiple aspects of learning, including cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development (Haslip & Gullo, 2018). Many materials can be used to improve children's early childhood education learning experiences. Each resource type provides unique benefits and opportunities for young learners, from educational toys to books and digital tools (Caceres et al., 2016). Early childhood education relies heavily on educational toys as they provide hands-on learning experiences for youngsters while encouraging problem-solving, creativity, and critical thinking. Therefore, building blocks, puzzles, and shape sorters are just a few examples of educational toys that aid in developing cognitive and physical skills.

Furthermore, educational toys can help with language development and early literacy, the researchers noted further that toys that teach narrative, letter recognition, and phonics assist children in developing a solid foundation for reading and writing access photographs, videos and audio (Van der Westhuizen & Hannaway, 2021). Hence, children have fun while learning essential skills that will set them up for future academic success when they play with these toys. Instructional toys encourage children to engage in imaginative play while role-playing with dolls, toy kitchens, or construction sets allows children to explore diverse scenarios while developing social and emotional abilities. They learn to interact, negotiate, and express themselves, which promotes growth.

Books have enormous potential to impart a love of reading and broaden children's understanding. Young children benefit from reading age-appropriate books that stimulate their imaginations and offer new concepts. Indeed, picture books, nursery rhyme collections, and short storybooks are terrific resources for this age group. Reading materials also aid in the development of language abilities, the expansion of vocabulary, and the improvement of listening comprehension. Hence, parents and instructors can read aloud to their children, encouraging them to ask questions, create connections, and better understand their surroundings. Children improve their literacy abilities and develop a lifetime love of reading by including books in early childhood education.

On the other hand, technology has become an indispensable part of our lives, and early childhood education has evolved to incorporate digital tools. Interactive educational applications, websites, and online platforms provide various learning opportunities for young children (Papadakis & Kalogiannakis, 2017). These digital tools include enjoyable and interactive activities, games, and films that boost learning. Hence, children can engage with animated characters while exploring virtual realms, solving puzzles, and exploring virtual

worlds. Furthermore, digital tools provide a dynamic and immersive learning experience for learning numbers, shapes, colours, and even coding skills. To create a meaningful learning experience, age-appropriate and high-quality content must be chosen. Parents and educators should evaluate digital resources carefully, considering their educational value, appropriateness, and safety. Early childhood education may leverage the power of digital resources to engage and inspire young learners by successfully employing technology. Finally, early childhood education resources provide a variety of possibilities, each of which contributes uniquely to children's learning and development. Educational toys, books, and digital resources promote cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Providing different resources to children can enrich learning settings that empower early learners and set them up for lifelong success.

When it comes to early childhood education materials, quality is everything. Teachers must look for developmentally appropriate, engaging, and educationally aligned resources (Meng, 2023). They must also look for reviews and suggestions from reliable sources, including other educators, child development experts, and reputable organisations. Nevertheless, each child has a unique learning style, and discovering tools that suit their requirements might help them learn more effectively (Essa et al., 2023). Therefore, hands-on activities may give confidence to youngsters, while others prefer visual or aural learning. Hence, examining a child's interests and preferences is critical to finding resources that match their learning style. Their efficacy is increased by incorporating early childhood education resources into daily routines and activities.

Steps to prepare learning resources including: 1) Determine the learning objectives that align with the children's social, cognitive, emotional, physical skills and language development goals, 2) Acquaint yourself with developmental milestones that are appropriate for the lessons, 3) Choose themes or topics relevant to the children's interests, then organise materials appropriate for identified themes, 4) Organize learning resources into centres or stations, 5) Promote hands-on and experimental learning, 6) Incorporate multi-sensory learning, 7) Design resources that encourage play-based learning, 8) Ensure safety of learners, 9) Refresh and rotate learning resources.

3.5. Planned and unplanned learning environments

Early childhood development is an essential stage in a child's life because it lays the groundwork for future learning and well-being (Richter et al., 2017). Children's learning surroundings significantly impact their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Planned learning environments as educational settings that purposefully promote specified learning goals. Preschools, kindergartens, and daycare centres are typical formal education settings. These environments' curriculum, activities, and interactions are carefully designed to meet developmental milestones and educational objectives. The systematic and intentional approach to education is one of the critical benefits of planned learning settings (Wu & Goff, 2023; Grieshaber et al., 2021). Educators follow a curriculum to enhance cognitive, social, and emotional growth in these contexts. Because planned learning environments are structured, children are exposed to various experiences, supporting well-rounded development.

On the other hand, unplanned learning environments are distinguished by their casual and haphazard nature. These habitats include home settings, outdoor play, and everyday experiences. Unstructured play, social connections, and exploration of their surroundings are all ways for children to learn. One of its main characteristics is the potential of unplanned learning settings to stimulate creativity, problem-solving abilities, and self-directed learning.

Children in these settings can pursue their interests and make decisions based on curiosity. Unstructured learning environments promote social and emotional development by teaching youngsters how to negotiate unstructured social situations and form relationships.

However, unplanned learning environments are complex. A lack of deliberate structure may result in developmental deficits in specific areas. Without a clear framework, essential educational factors risk being ignored, jeopardizing a child's preparation for formal learning. Recognising the capabilities of planned and unstructured learning situations is part of a balanced approach to early childhood development. Integrating scheduled educational activities with unstructured play and discovery provides a complete and total developmental experience. Educators and parents are critical in achieving this balance. They must be sensitive to each child's unique needs and preferences and change their approach accordingly. Flexibility in planned circumstances and intentional direction in unplanned environments might be optimal for encouraging well-rounded growth.

To summarise, both planned and unplanned learning environments contribute to early childhood development, each with advantages and disadvantages. A rigorous examination demonstrates that a balanced approach that integrates the best characteristics of both settings promotes holistic development. We can build a setting that fosters a child's cognitive, social, and emotional well-being by recognising and embracing the benefits of planned and unplanned learning contexts, establishing the framework for a successful and satisfying future.

Steps for Creating Planned Learning Environments among others: 1) Determine whether the learning outcomes align with the developmental goals of the children, 2) Design the learning environment to support activities such as reading and play, 3) Choose appropriate learning materials that align with the developmental milestones of the children, 4) Create a daily plan for learning activities, including play, reading and outdoor exploration, 5) Designate learning centres or stations within the environment for play, 6) to promote intentional teaching and integrate learning plans and curriculum activities that support learning across various domains.

Steps for Creating Unplanned Learning Environments is: 1) Accept spontaneity and adaptability in the classroom, 2) Take note of the interests, interactions, and impromptu play habits of the kids, 3) To take advantage of teachable moments and child-initiated learning experiences, follow the lead and interests of the kids and adjust the surroundings and learning activities as needed, 4) Provide flexible materials and tools that foster imagination and creativity, 5) Encourage social connection and peer collaboration by providing chances for group projects, cooperative play, and shared material and idea exploration, 6) Make use of outside areas for impromptu educational activities that promote links with the natural world, such as sensory exploration, gardening, outdoor play, and nature hikes, 7) Using observations, pictures, and anecdotal notes, record the unstructured learning experiences of the kids while thinking back on their interests, discoveries, and learning goals.

3.6. Designing play-based learning activities

Play is the route via which the three approaches above are frequently promoted and established (Bodrova et al., 2023). Toddlers create, explore, try new things, learn, communicate, socialise, acclimatise, and problem-solve through play. Play-based learning helps children engage in intentional activities that simulate the situations they are likely to experience (Ali et al., 2018). Thus, Abraham Maslow's remarks, "Almost all creativity involves intentional play", is appropriate in this context. Play influences the functional layout of the brain, and secure attachments and excitement are essential parts of brain development

(Sumiya & Nonaka, 2021). Furthermore, play promotes active exploration, which aids in forming and strengthening brain networks, resulting in a brain with more fantastic liveness and an improved likelihood for learning later in life.

Play is one of the most important ways young children acquire crucial knowledge and abilities. Pre-primary programs that promote play-based learning, discovery, and hands-on learning are considered beneficial at the core. Finally, it should involve some degree of agency, allowing children to take an active role and ownership in their experiences, acknowledging and believing children to be capable, independent, and drivers of their playful, educational adventures. Children grow emotionally through play because they may master emotional challenges like worry, impatience, painful circumstances, foreign thoughts, and overwhelming experiences. As a result, play assists youngsters in discovering new methods to cope with their emotions and reality.

Nevertheless, individuals create interactions, share, cooperate, master their emotions, broaden their range of experience, test ideas, and form correlations among objects, events, and concepts (Savva & Erakleous, 2018). Children use their imagination to conceive or build something new through creativity. Young children have numerous chances to express and develop their creative talents in the early years; given these points, a play-based curriculum is critical in the early years as it is hands-on, child-centred, appropriate for development, and serves the specific interests of children (Kessel, 2018; Mead, 2017).

The strategy for the indoor play-based learning environment is very crucial in kindergarten. Savva & Erakleous (2018) noted that it should develop the following core skills: social and emotional skills, cognition and problem-solving, language and speech development, and gross and fine motor skills. It is vital to remember that kindergarten classrooms differ from learning environments for older students in that they emphasise independent research and playful engagement with materials. Therefore, Healey et al. (2019) explained that part of the creche classroom is devoted to encouraging growth and development, a basis for imminent learning and problem-solving. The arrangement and appearance of the classroom are essential since they influence the behaviour of both children and adults (Barblett et al., 2016). As a result, educators should have the following considerations when designing a play-based classroom: Learning centres should serve multiple purposes rather than focusing solely on one; Allow as much natural light as possible in the school because it not only saves energy but also improves work performance and the appearance of the space; Areas for theatrical play and music should be placed opposite the silent area, allowing each area to conduct its activities in a comfortable setting.

The indoor play space is important in allowing children to learn through play. Children need the freedom and time to play. Play is not an extravagance, play is essential. It is essential because it contributes to the child's holistic development (physical, moral, social, emotional, cognitive, and language) and normative development (Healey et al., 2019). Children learn about their world through play, in which they are active participants, and gain skills that are necessary for present-day and forthcoming relationships, study purposes, including their career trajectory, and for the ecosphere of engagement, with a concentration on their intra and interpersonal skills.

As a result, the design of the indoor play space is critical to a learner's overall development. The learner must be able to participate in meaningful learning opportunities to learn more about themselves while exploring and discovering the world around them and developing their strengths. For these reasons, it is critical to establish a stimulating interior environment that fosters creative, inventive, and discoverer learners.

Steps to design play-based activities including: 1) Make sure that play-based learning includes a variety of child-directed activities in which the teacher plays the role of both an observer and a play partner, getting to know the children's interests and using that information to design lessons. After that, the teacher should lead activities in small or large groups that are in line with learning objectives, 2) Establish a continuous training program that provides research-based strategies for play-based learning implementation, such as goal-setting for the kids and suitable observational documentation. By doing this, administrators' support for teachers in facilitating practices will be guaranteed, 3) Provide manipulatives, pertinent picture books, and open-ended materials for building, experimenting, and art extensions in your classroom to foster inquiry-based learning. This could include extracurricular activities, including field trips, lectures by other speakers, and homework assignments, 4) Add items like Cosy furnishings such as a couch or big armchair; plants that are not harmful; Natural or gentle lighting obtained from lights or windows; Toss cushions, blankets, and pillows; Additional ornamental elements, including area rugs or recycled furniture, as well as staff and child family images; Low-cost frames to display kids' artwork on the walls paint colours that are neutral, 5) Facilitate language development by involving kids in conversations fueled by open-ended questions, giving them plenty of opportunity to reflect, and supplying vocabulary, 6) A well-planned classroom will encourage proper play among the kids and help deter risky or unwanted behaviour.

3.7. Organising different learning spaces

"Environment is the third teacher." That remark will be familiar to many early development instructors. It is sometimes seen as the foundation of the Reggio Emilia approach but applies to various program models and ideologies (İnan, 2021). A child's learning environment shapes his or her entire learning path is part of it (Manassakis, 2020). The materials in a classroom, as well as how those things are structured and presented, have a significant impact on the learning process. That is true for the instructors and the students in their care. Of course, the environment is not the only factor. It is one thing for a child to interact with their surroundings, but it is another to interact with their teachers. The importance of teacher-child contact cannot be emphasised.

How an instructor designs their room determines how a youngster interacts and moves through it (Tatham-Fashanu, 2023). As an early childhood educator, an instructor should undoubtedly know the importance of providing extra space for noisy or energetic play and separating your classroom's loud and quiet spaces. That designating locations where peer-to-peer and adult-child interaction can occur comfortably is critical. Therefore, the instructors must consider how an adult might fit into the central portion of each room.

However, Harris (2018) pointed out that many instructors design high-activity spaces for youngsters, such as blocks or dramatic play. These sorts of play are often associated with children, although adults can contribute significantly to the discussion. Nevertheless, Oliveras-Ortiz et al. (2021), argued that there has to be adequate space. Therefore, instructors can increase interactions in these locations and provide a passable place for an adult to sit and encourage peer social interactions. In other cases, limiting space for youngsters might improve their overall learning experience. Hence, creating areas only large enough for a few youngsters at a time promotes quality interactions inside that space.

Furthermore, quiet activities, such as reading a book or working on a puzzle, are ideal for focusing on interactive communication (Hasibuan & Fitriani, 2023). Therefore, reading to the kids in a conducive learning environment and conversing with them about the book is a unique opportunity to receive one-on-one time. To actively involve children in all areas of the

room, remember that an adult must be both conscious and present in that space. The items an instructor chooses for a classroom can have a momentous impact on the learning of children. The finest toys should provide a variety of play experiences. Using open-ended materials encourages a child's creativity, imagination, and curiosity (Harris, 2018). The instructor must be deliberate in their selection of products. Everything should serve a purpose and contribute to learning. It is critical to integrate these materials so that youngsters develop connections to their world/environment without even realising it. For example, placing a farm book or poster beside an exhibit of farm animals offers context for learning about the topic.

Correct material presentation improves engagement and accessibility. Instructors can place graphics at children's eye level to make the space more attractive. They should also include low chairs for both adults and children. Furthermore, instructors must place their items on low open shelves while organising them. They must play on the child's level rather than above them so that the child believes they can interact with them (Tatham-Fashanu, 2023). They can show the instructor what they have, and the instructor may discuss what they are playing with or drawing. Imagine a place where everything kids can do is safe and suitable. The instructors must reduce problematic behaviour by analysing and organising resources regularly to promote engagement and stimulation in each area. They must set up different activity tables to encourage conversation as youngsters enter the classroom each morning. One table can be set up for breakfast, while others can be set up for free-form play. Mealtimes and unstructured play can both foster creativity and collaboration. Hands-on items, such as wooden blocks and Play-Doh, encourage open-ended discussion.

Steps for organizing different play-based spaces by Manassakis (2020) is: 1) Put together an independent organization. Keeping materials on low, open shelves is the most effective method to achieve this. This enables kids to view the resources offered, select an option, and return the item without assistance from an adult; 2) It is essential to arrange materials so kids want to play with them. Keeping your supplies organized will help kids locate what they need when needed; 3) Children's interests can be sparked or developed through provocations. Children's work, images related to their interests, or images encouraging more investigation should all be displayed at eye level.

Learning environments and instructional strategies provide significant variations due to cultural context, educational philosophy, and resource availability. However, play-based learning, a significant aspect of early childhood education in many parts of the world, has a similar style and objectives, prioritizing holistic development that addresses children's cognitive, emotional, social and physical needs; hence instructions are planned for the overall development of the child.

Nevertheless, early childhood teachers create environments that are often adaptable, accommodating and flexible which push them to explore, create, solve problems, and engender social interactions among learners. However, instructional strategies and learning environments in African settings often integrate aspects of local culture, language, and traditions, creating avenues for teachers to deploy culturally relevant materials, local songs, games, and stories to engage children to make their teaching relatable. Furthermore, teachers use outdoor spaces to explore nature givens, gardens and other physical activities, setting the stage for children to learn in original and natural settings. Quality early childhood education programs prioritise strong interactions between children and adults, establishing the groundwork for positive relationships and social competency. In the African context, there is also the element of community involvement where teachers collaborate with families, and communities to provide rich learning experiences that promote cultural exchange.

Play-based learning activities are an essential component of early childhood education. Play is vital for discovery, communication, socialization, and problem resolution. Developing play-based learning activities demands careful planning of indoor and outdoor environments, consideration of developmental needs, and using resources that promote creativity. In today's ever-changing early childhood education landscape, educators and parents play critical roles in establishing and facilitating adequate learning settings. By prioritising excellent materials, play-based activities, and intelligent space organisation, we can all help children develop healthily in their early years, laying the groundwork for a lifetime of curiosity, learning, and academic success.

4. CONCLUSION

Early childhood education fosters strong identities and self-esteem by recognising and nurturing each child's distinct characteristics and abilities. Planning for indoor and outdoor surroundings is critical in developing effective learning places. Providing appropriate and widely accessible resources promotes independent, child-led activities and accommodates various learning interests. Indoor and outdoor areas should be planned to promote safety while stimulating discovery. The study reviewed the imperative of a viable learning environment for early childhood education, recommends the integration of a play-based learning curriculum during teachers' training, and further research on investigating the effect of various play-based learning methods in developing learning styles.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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