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Relationship between Parents' Play Belief and Social Skill Development of School-Aged Children (6-12 Years) in Enugu East Local Government

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Abstract

This study assessed the relationship between parents' play beliefs and the social skills of their school-aged children (6-12 years) in Enugu East local government. A descriptive cross-sectional survey design was employed in a population of 60,676 pupils (39,455 private and 21,221 public). Multi-stage sampling was employed in the selection of 1,165 pupils from 12 schools whose parents formed the sample size/respondents. The study was guided by three research questions and three null hypotheses tested at p <0.05 level of significance. Parents' Play Belief Scale (PPBS), and Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) were instruments used for data collection. The reliability of the instrument was ascertained using Cronbach's alpha reliability index. Data obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (Pearson's product-moment correlation, and T-test), and presented in form of tables and charts. A majority (95.3%) of the respondents showed strong parental play beliefs. A greater percentage (46.6%) of the parents reported that their children showed high social skills. A positive significant relationship was seen to exist between parents' play beliefs and the social skills status of their children (r= .104**, p< 0.05). The mean play belief score of parents with female pupils was not significantly different from the males. Parental play belief scores of children in private schools (80.5±10.33) did not significantly vary from those in public schools (80.55±10.58) p < 0.05. The social skills status of children in private schools (29.29±) however, was higher than those in public schools (30.14±6.84). Schools should, therefore, devise ways of improving the social skill development of their school-age children.

Keywords: Parents, Play-belief, social skills, school-aged, Enugu-east

Introduction

Play is a primary concept in early childhood development. Play is an important component of childhood learning and development (Fisher *et al*., 2011). Children have an unconstrained

view of play and they are seeing opportunities to play almost anywhere and with almost anyone (Glennet al, 2013). Children explore and understand their environment, express various kinds of emotions, acquire skills including problem-solving, and social skills and learn how to cooperate with others through play. Vygotsky, Baumrind and Piaget stated the importance of play for a child's development. According to these theorists children learn through active interaction with their parents and their environment, which is facilitated through play. Parents are the first socializing adults and their active participation in their child's play aids in the cognitive, language, social skill, fine motor, gross motor and academic development of the child (Singh & Gupta, 2012). As parents are the first role model, children can be able to learn basic skills with their parent's participation in their play and become healthy adults. Parent beliefs and attitudes towards play are heterogeneous across cultures and societies. This is supported by Fogle and Mendez (2006) who opined that parents, who view play as a priority and see play as a teaching opportunity for their children, have high levels of play support. Parents' beliefs and attitudes have a great influence on children's active play behaviour and specifically their social skill development (Loprinzi &Trost, 2010).

Developments of social skills started at home through interaction with parents. The child enters preschool as the first social environment and continues the process of socialization. According to Bandura (1997), children's growth is dependent on the social learning opportunities afforded at home through modelling, reinforcement, and imitation. The same can be said of the social skills development of children. According to Whitcomb and Merrell (2013), social skills are said to be specific behaviours that assist the child to accomplish his or her daily social tasks. These social skills are life skills (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2012) and vital for children's development. Social skills are a collection of learned behaviours giving individuals the ability to have an influential relationship with others and to abstain from socially unreasonable reactions (Agran et al., 2016; Davies et al., 2015; Gresham, 2016; Yoder, 2015). Social skills are skills used to communicate and interact with each other both verbally and non-verbally, through gestures, body language and personal appearance (Takahashi et al., 2015). Social skills are learned and affected by the characteristics of the context in which they develop (Sørlie et al., 2021). Hosokawa and Katsura (2017) stated that social skills can also be acquired for effective performance, adaption and improvement in quality of life.

Socially skilled children often have more positive attitudes toward school, adjust more smoothly to the student role, and have better grades than their less socially skilled peers (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Zsolnai, 2002). This supports other studies which reveal that social skills are associated with academic achievement (Alexander et al., 2003; Ladd et al., 1999). Children with good social skills are more successful than their less competent peers in developing positive attitudes towards school and in adjusting to school (Hamre & Pianta,

2001; Odom et al., 2006; Semrud-Clikeman, 2007). Social skills are more learned in school-age children because their brains are ready to assimilate, understand the importance of social skills and communicate effectively with their peers.

School age is one of the developmental stages under early childhood which includes children between 6 to 12 years. They look for ways to demonstrate new skills, control their behaviour, make independent decisions and form good social relationships with peers and others outside the family. At this stage children, develop social skills on how to solve their problems, progress academically and learn to convey their desires and feelings. Children at this stage are introduced to new social roles, status, competence and performance through formal education and organized activities. Children's learning of social skills is an important springboard for their future social development, with benefits in various fields of life. Improving social skills is important for the development of school-age children since improving these skills helps them to become better relationship builders.

Parents usually have preconceived ideas of the child's play behaviours and inclinations based on their gender. This influences their role as parents. For instance, parents will typically provide their male children with toy guns, trucks and superhero play materials which mostly promote solitary play and motor skills. The female children on the other hand are mostly provided with dolls and dress-up costumes that promote role play, social status and nurturing. Parental beliefs and perceptions are strong predictors of parental involvement in children's school activities. Parental involvement is to an extent enhanced by the child's school. Most private schools create an opportunity for parents to participate in the education and social activities of their children. Such opportunities include inter-house sports competitions, end-of-year parties and parents teachers' forum meetings. These opportunities provided by schools could invariably interact with the beliefs and attitudes parents have towards the children's play activities.

Theoretical Background

This study assessed the relationship between parents' play beliefs and the social skill development of school-aged children using the social constructivist theory by Lev Vygotsky. According to this theory, individuals' thoughts and behaviours are moulded by perceptions of the reality around them (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and they gain insight through interactions with people. This suggests that people construct their understanding and knowledge of the world through their experiences and how they reflect upon them. One of the core constructs of Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism is the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which emphasizes the role of the instructor in an individual's learning. The ZPD suggests that, with the help of an instructor, students are able to understand and master knowledge and skills that they would not be able to on their own (Schreiber & Valle, 2013). Vygotsky emphasized social interaction, which is also relevant to parents' understanding of the best environment for their children. He furthermore

implied that parents form an understanding of what constitutes a suitable educational environment for their child based on their expectations, which have been informed by their repertoire of experiences. Constructivism is based on three assumptions about learning (Steffe& Gale, 1995). First, learning is a result of the individual's interaction with the environment. This implies that knowledge is constructed as the learner makes sense of their experiences in the world. The second assumption is on cognitive dissonance which suggests that the uncomfortable tension that comes from holding two conflicting thoughts at the same time, is the stimulus for learning. Thirdly, the social environment plays a critical role in the development of knowledge. This study thus, leaning on the constructivist perspective, this study postulates that parents who have positive beliefs and attitudes towards children's play are more like to provide a supportive and stimulating play environment for their children at home. This in turn is expected to enhance children's engagement in constructive play and therefore improve their social interaction with their peers.

Objectives of the Study: The broad objective of the study was to evaluate the relationship between parents' play beliefs and social skills development of school-aged children (6-12 Years) in Enugu East Local Government. Specifically, the study sought to:

- ascertain parents' play belief in Enugu East L.G.A
- determine parents' perspective of the social skill status of school-aged children in Enugu East L.G.A
- determine the relationship between parents' play belief and social skills status of school-aged children in Enugu East L.G.A

Hypotheses

The study tested the following null hypotheses:

1. There is no significant difference in the mean parents' play belief scores based on gender, type of school and child's level in school.
2. There is no significant difference in the mean social skills scores of the children based on gender, type of school and child's level in school.
3. Parental belief is positively correlated with children's social skills.

Methodology

***Study Design*:** Descriptive cross-sectional research design was adopted for the study.

***Study Population*:** The population of the study consisted of parents/ guardians of 60,676 primary school pupils in the 110 primary schools in Enugu-East Local Government Area in Enugu State, Nigeria. The parents of the selected pupils formed the respondents for the study.

***Sampling/ Sample Size Determination*:** Sampling was done in multi-stages; the first stage involved cluster sampling of the schools into the rural and urban clusters. The cluster was further divided into private and public sub-clusters. The second stage involved simple random sampling without the replacement of 10% of schools in the clusters. This gave a total of 2 schools from the rural-public cluster, 4 from the urban-public cluster, 4 from the rural-private cluster, and 2

schools from the urban-private cluster. This gave a total of 12 schools. The WHO (2013) formula for sample size was adopted. This gave a total sample size of 1,165. The final Stage involved a random selection of children who were given copies of the questionnaire for their parents.

Instrument of Data Collection: Two instruments were employed for data collection and they include: The parent's Play Belief Scale (PPBS; Fogle& Mendez, 2006) and the Brazillian version of parents' version of the (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990). The PPBS is a 30-item parent questionnaire that is rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). It has two sub-scales: play support belief and academic focus. Some of the questions include '*Through play, my child develops new skills and abilities* and '*reading to my child is more worthwhile than playing with him or her.'*

The Brazillian version of the parent's version of the (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990) was adapted and used to assess the parents' perspective of their children's social skills. Some of the items include '*my child keeps the room clean and neat,'* and '*he/she completes household tasks within a reasonable time*. The scale contains five subscales; responsibility consists of 5 items, and self-control is made up of 5 items amongst others. Items were rated based on the frequency with which they occur (0 = never, 1 = sometimes, 2 = very often).

***Validity and reliability of the instrument*:** The reliability of the instruments for the study was ascertained using Cronbach's alpha reliability test. Coefficient scores were 0.71 for the Parent's play belief Scale (PPBS), and 0.66 for Social Skills Improvement System Rating Scales. These values fell within the acceptability range of 0.65 and 0.90 as stated by Goforth (2015).

***Method of Data Collection*:** Data were collected using a questionnaire. A total of 1,165 questionnaires were shared by trained research assistants to parents of the selected children after written consent was obtained from them. Three trained research assistants gave the printed questionnaire to parents who came to pick up their children. For children whose parents did not come to pick them up from school, the questionnaire copies were put in their bags with a written note for their parents. Parents were asked to fill out the questionnaire and return it to the teacher the next day. The research assistants then collected the returned questionnaire from the teacher. A total of 1,042 questionnaires were retrieved with a return rate of 89.4%.

***Data and Statistical Analysis*:** the collected data were sorted and cleaned from errors and missing information. Data were then coded and entered into the computer software statistical Product for the Social Sciences (IBM - SPSS) version 21.0 and presented as means and standard deviation. Pearson's correlation was used to ascertain the relationship between Parents' play beliefs and the social skills status of school-aged children. T-test was used to test the null hypotheses at a significance level of $p < 0.05$. Scores on parents' play belief were summed and a total mean score within (25-63) was considered weak parental belief while scores within (64-125) were considered strong parental play belief. A total mean score of (17-43) was considered weak

play support and 44-85 was considered strong play support. A mean score of (8-20) was considered a weak parental academic play focus and (21-40) was considered a strong academic play focus. The decision rule was placed at mean ≥ 3.0 as agreed.

The Brazillian version of parents' version of the (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990) subscale of responsibility and self-control had a score range of 0 to 10 each, cooperation/assertiveness; a score range of 0 to 14, social confidence and civility; a score range of 0 to 8 each. The total social skills score was calculated by summing up all sub-scale scores with a range of 0 to 50. The scores in each subscale and the total social skill score were categorized into low, moderate, or high. Scores within one standard deviation of the mean (29.6 ± 6.9) indicated a moderate level. Scores below or above one standard deviation of the mean category fell into the low or high levels, respectively

Result

Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Many 51.7%) of parents had their children in private school while 40.8% were in public school. The respondents' children were 40.5% male and 59.5% female children. Many (57.8%) of the parents were within 31-49 years and a few (13.1%) were 50 years and above. More than half (55.3%) of them had their children in primary 4-5, 23.0% in primary 5-6 and 21.1% in primary 1-3.

Parents' Play Belief

Table 1 below shows the frequency and percentage scores of the parents on different categories of play belief. From the table, the majority (95.3%) of the respondent in the study showed strong parental play belief while 4.7% had weak parental play belief. The result on the two dimensions of parental play belief (Parental play support and parental academic play focus) showed that 91.7% of the respondents had strong parental play support while (8.3%) had weak parental play support. Furthermore, (84.5%) of respondents had a strong parental academic play focus while the least (15.5%) had a weak academic play focus.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage scores of Parents Play Belief

	Weak F (%)	Strong F (%)	Total N (%)
Parental play belief	49 (4.7)	993 (95.3)	1,042 (100)
Parental play support	86 (8.3)	956 (91.7)	1,042 (100)
Parental academic play focus	161 (15.5)	881 (84.5)	1,042 (100)

Social Skills Status of the Children

Table 2 below shows the frequency and percentages scores of the respondent's perception of their child's social skills. From the table, 46.6% of the parents reported that their children showed high social skills while 45.9% reported low social skills. The table also showed data on the dimensions of social skill; responsibility, self-control, social confidence, assertiveness/cooperation and civility. More than half (51.1%) of the parents reported high civility in their children, while 17.6% reported low civility. About 49.8% reported that their children had high social confidence

while 17.2% reported low social confidence. A greater percentage (49.3%) rated their children high on self-control while 24.9% rated their children low on self-control. Data further showed45.2% rated their children low on responsibility, 39.2% rated high responsibility, 42.2% rated low cooperation and 41.5% reported high cooperation.

Table 2: Frequency and percentage scores of on social skill status of school-aged children

Social Skills Status	Low F(%)	Moderate F(%)	High F(%)	Total F(%)
Social Skills	478(45.9)	78(7.5)	486(46.6)	1,042(100)
Categories of Social Skill				
Civility	183(17.6)	327(31.4)	532(51.1)	1,042(100)
Social Confidence	179(17.2)	344(33.0)	519(49.8)	1,042(100)
Self-Control	259(24.9)	269(25.8)	514(49.3)	1,042(100)
Responsibility	471(45.2)	163(15.6)	408(39.2)	1,042(100)
Assertiveness/Cooperation	440(42.2)	170(16.3)	432(41.5)	1,042(100)

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the mean parents' play belief scores based on gender and type of school.

Table 3 revealed that the parent's play belief mean score for their female children (80.55) was not significantly different from those of the male children (80.63), $p>0.05$. The table also shows that the mean parents' belief scores of children in private schools (80.59) were not significantly different from those in public schools (80.57), at $p<0.05$. This implies that parents' play belief is not dependent on gender and the type of school the child attends. The null hypothesis was, therefore, upheld.

Table 3: Mean difference in the Parents' play belief score based on gender and type of school

Variables	Parental play belief	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value	p-value	df
Gender of the child	Male	80.63	11.24	13	.90	857
	Female	80.55	10.58			
Type of School	Private	80.59	10.33	.02	.99	1040
	Public	80.57	11.75			

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in the mean social skills scores of the children based on gender and type of school.

Table 4 below shows the mean difference in the social skills of the children based on gender and the type of school the child attends. From the table, the social skills score of the male children (29.92) was not significantly different from those of the female children (29.44), at $p<0.05$. The social skills of children in private schools (29.29) were significantly different from those in public schools (30.14), at $p<0.05$. The null hypothesis was therefore upheld for gender and rejected for the type of school.

Table 4: Mean difference in the social skills of school-aged children based on gender and type of school

Variables	Social Skills	Mean	Standard Deviation	t- value	p-value	df
Gender of the child	Male	29.92	6.71	1.14	.257	1040
	Female	29.44	6.60			
Type of School	Private	29.29	6.49	-2.03	.043	1040
	Public	30.14	6.85			

Hypothesis 3: Parental belief is positively correlated with children's social skills.

Table 5 shows the relationship between parents' play beliefs and the social skills of school-aged children in Enugu East. From the table, a positive and strong significant relationship was seen to exist between parents' play beliefs and the social skills of their school-aged children ($r= .104^{**}$, $p< 0.05$). This implies that a positive change in parents' play beliefs will bring about a corresponding positive change in the social skills status of school-aged children. The alternative hypothesis was therefore upheld.

Table 5: Relationship between parents' play belief and social skills status of school-aged children

	Parents' play belief	Social Skill
Parent's belief		
Pearson Correlation	1	.104**
Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
Pearson Correlation	.104**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	

Discussion

The study revealed that respondents showed strong parental play belief as the majority reported providing play support for their children at home. This may be linked to the fact that most of the parents had attained tertiary education and therefore might have advanced knowledge of the importance of play. Parents with a strong play belief can be said to hold the view that play activities can aid their children in the development of

skills in life especially social skills. This is in line with the study by Ihmeideh (2019)which stated that parents who show strong parental play beliefs facilitate and support their children's play at home. This play support may encourage children's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development (Hughes & Ensor, 2009). Parent belief towards play can be said to be heterogeneous across cultures and societies. For instance, according to Parmar et al. (2004), European American parents see play as key to early growth while Asian parents feel it has little developmental benefit.

According to Fisher et al. (2008) parents' play belief ranges from considering play as an important means of development to simply a form of amusement. In the study play belief was categorized under parental play support and parental academic play focus. Parents had strong parental play support and strong parental academic play focus. This supports the findings of Fogle and Mendez (2006) who reported that respondents had strong parental play support than those that had weak parental play support. This implies that parents' belief in child's play is an important developmental activity for children, beyond entertainment. Parents with "academic focused" beliefs stress the importance of explicit academic activities, such as reading to the child. They tend to believe that play is a less valuable activity concerning child development (Fisher et al., 2008).

The majority of the children in the study showed high social skills. This may be attributed to the role of the home and school environment as agents of socialization. That is to say that the school and the child's home environment may have downplayed the role of the child's personality. This finding may be further explained by Almaraz et al. (2019) who stated that social skills are learned as the child interacts with his environment. The finding of this study is supported by several studies which have shown that family characteristics (e.g. parents' social competence, parenting style, the nature of the attachment between mother and child, and sibling effects) play a major role in the development of social skills (Cole & Tan, 2007; Denham et al., 2007; DiPrete & Jennings, 2011; Kochanska & Aksan, 2006). Children with well-developed social skills have been seen to readily enter into positive relationships with teachers and peers, which most times, reinforce their social skills. According to Grant (2013), school-aged children high in social skills received more positive performance evaluations when they engaged in voice behaviours than those low in social skills. Thus, school-aged children high in social skills may be perceived as more benevolent and thoughtful of others than those low in social skills. A low responsibility was reported among school-aged children. This could be linked to the mindset that parents in this generation have. A lot of parents no longer instil a sense of responsibility in the minds of these children as paid caregivers are made to take up some of the duties these children can assist with at home. This finding is contrary to the findings of Ludmila and Olga (2016) who revealed that a low responsibility may be seen in preschoolers and increases to a moderate level in school-aged children.

The findings of this study revealed that the parents' play belief score for their female children was not significantly different from those of the males. This is in line with a study by Albatataineh (2018) which showed that there was no statistical difference between parents' play beliefs based on their child's gender. The study also showed that the mean parents' belief scores of children in private schools were not significantly different from those in public schools. This implies that the type of school a child attends does not influence the parent's play beliefs. This finding may be because at the preschool level parents' concern is on the availability of fun for their children. As children enter the

school-age period, the focus on fun diminishes and gives way to preparing for the quality of education available for children and grades. This suggests that age rather than gender or type of school may be an influencer of parents' play beliefs as their children go through the different developmental stages. This is supported by various researchers who discovered that many preschools and elementary school administrators have reduced or eliminated play from their schedules (Bodrova& Leong, 2003; Brandon, 2002; Sisson, 2011; Vail, 2003).

This study also revealed that the social skill of the male pupils was not significantly different from those of the female children as reported by parents. This implies that parents did not find any difference in how their male and female children interacted with other people. It, therefore, suggests that other factors like personality and environment could be responsible for the social skills development of an individual apart from their gender. The findings of this study contradict those from other studies. For instance, in a study by Abdi (2010) girls were found to have received higher marks in social skills than boys. Several studies have also shown that girls displayed a larger range of social skills than boys, seeking more information about social situations, showing prosocial behaviours, as well as having less pressure to prevent emotional expressions than boys (Berger & Rodkin, 2012; Taylor & Graham, 2007; Torrente et al., 2014). This may be explained by DiPrete and Jennings, (2011) who revealed that schools and teachers mostly provide educational climates that enhance the social behavioural advantage of girls. Entwisle et al. (2007), also saw gender bias by teachers and parents in favour of girls. They argue that girls have better social and behavioural ratings not so much because of differences in maturity but rather because "they find the student role more compatible than boys do". The social skills of children in private schools were, however, significantly lower than those in public schools. Those in public schools appeared to have better social skills status than those in private schools. This result could be attributed to the nature of play found in most public schools. Most of the children come from almost the same background and so could easily understand each other. This gives room for them to interact freely. More so, due to the busy work schedule of parents who have children in private schools, it is likely they barely have time to interact with their children which may affect the social skills development of that child. Furthermore, most parents who send their children to private schools might emphasize intellectual development over play, therefore most private schools in a bid to meet the demands of the parents, focus on academic curriculum with little or no time for play. The findings of this study, however, contradict the study by McKinley et al. (2007) which revealed that private-schooled children scored significantly higher than home-schooled children on measures of cooperation, assertion, self-control and overall social skills.

A positive and strong significant relationship was seen to exist between parents' play beliefs and the social skills of the school-aged children in this study. This implies that parents who have a stronger belief in play were more likely to report higher social skills among their children. Parents' play belief may influence their attitude towards their children's play as well as their involvement in their children's play (parent-child play). Since parents are role models for their children, the child may learn some social skills during parent-child play which may affect the social skills development of the child. The findings of this study corroborate the research by Lin and Yawkey (2014) which revealed an association between parental play beliefs and their children's social skills even after controlling for the parental background

variables associated with children's social competence. Other studies have also shown that parents' play support beliefs were positively associated with their children's interactive play skills (Fogle & Mendez, 2006; LaForett & Mendez, 2016), while parents' academic-focused beliefs were negatively associated with the same set of skills (LaForett & Mendez, 2016).

Conclusion

The majority of the respondents in the study showed strong parental play beliefs. They believed that play helps to get children ready for school and that children feel better when they are engaged in play. The majority of the children in the study were found to have high social skills, based on the perception of their parents. Positive parents' belief in child's play was associated with higher social skills among school-aged children. Parents' beliefs about play and their perception of the social skills of their children did not differ irrespective of the gender of the child, however, children who attended private schools were reported to show higher social skills than those who attended private schools.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the findings of the study:

1. Parents should encourage outdoor play at home and provide toys for their children to play with as this will help their child develop social skills, cognitive ability and physical development.
2. Teachers should introduce different games during play activities for children to enable them to develop many skills including social skill develop their social skills and generally getting a holistic individual.

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