

Full Length Research Paper

Unpacking activities-based learning in kindergarten classrooms: Insights from teachers' perspectives

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Even though previous research points to the significance of kindergarten teachers' practices which consider the nature of children and how they learn, there is still limited research regarding how learning activities impact children's development. To address this gap in literature, a qualitative multi-case study into teachers' perceptions of classrooms practices of four kindergarten teachers' in two Ghanaian schools, Tata and Kariba, were carried out over a six-months period. One research question guided the study, namely, 'what kinds of learning activities do teachers engage kindergarten children. The sources of data comprised transcripts of audiotaped semi-structured individual interviews, pair-based interviews and field notes of classroom observations. Both within the case and across case interpretive analyses were constructed. The study revealed that teachers in both rural and urban settings described child-initiated and teacher-initiated activities they believed impacted children's development in diverse ways.

Key words: Learning activities, cognitive constructivist theory, development, children, Piaget, spirituality.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching in early childhood settings is becoming increasingly characterised by teachers' knowledge about children and how they learn. In this vein, there is the need for a growing number of early childhood educators to be abreast with the nature of children and how teachers can use developmentally teaching approaches to enhance effective teaching and learning in classrooms to harness and develop children's potentials. Moreover, the teachers are expected to have insights into the needs, interests and potentials of individual children before they can effectively plan the curriculum

(Bredenkamp, 2014) by selecting learning activities to deal with the developmental needs of individual children.

Although, extensive academic research has explored preschool and kindergarten teachers' beliefs and practices regarding developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) (Charlesworth et al., 1993; Hyson et al., 1990; Hedge and Cassidy, 2009; Parker and Neuhart-Prichett, 2009; Abu-Jaber et al., 2010; Sekellariou and Rentzou, 2011; Riojas-Cotex et al., 2013), much less research has investigated learning activities and how they support children's development in kindergarten

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classrooms in diverse ways such as child-initiated activities as well as teacher-initiated activities within the classroom setting (McMclam et al., 2008; Astriayulita, 2017; Kim, 2017; Tan and Roo, 2017). The continuing use of learning activities conveys the need for research that extends beyond teachers' beliefs and their practices-oriented context into activity-oriented context. The need is illustrated in two main ways; for instance, almost all learning in kindergarten classrooms are supported by various kinds of learning activities yet, there is limited evidence regarding how they support children's development in variety of ways. Early childhood teachers use variety of learning activities to enhance and promote children development in diverse ways.

It is increasingly evident that learning activities will continue to be a critical component of effective teaching and learning process in kindergarten classrooms. Bonwell and Eison (1991) argue that 'instructional activities promote active learning because they involve students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing' (p.5) which in turn, support children's cognitive development in diverse ways.

To further our understanding, various kinds of learning activities and their perceived impact on children's development were explored in kindergarten settings. The research question driving the study is as follows: With what kind of learning activities do teachers engage kindergarten children?

The rest of the article is structured as follows: First, the literature on teachers' instructional practices in early childhood classroom settings is reviewed. This is followed by the description of the research methods and procedures. The results of the study are then discussed. Finally, implications and directions for future research are offered.

Instructional practices of early childhood teachers

Teachers' practices in early childhood settings can be classified into two; child-initiated exploration and discovery on one side and activities-initiated by the teacher at the extreme end of the trajectory (Mangione and Mamates, 1993). These practices point to differences in perception regarding how young children learn. Child-initiated learning is linked to cognitive development theory (Piaget, 1952). This standpoint sees the child as an active learner who relies on direct-physical and social experiences as well as culturally transmitted knowledge to find meaning of the world around them (Bredenkamp, 2014). However, teacher-directed learning is closely linked to the behaviourist theory which mandates schools to organise learning into smaller sequential tasks and provide external reinforcement to mould children's behaviour. Developmentally, appropriate practices in early childhood settings appear to draw from three different theoretical perspectives which comprise constructivism, behaviourism, and socio-cultural theory.

From a theoretical standpoint, it serves a useful purpose to classify teachers' instructional practices into teacher-directed or child-centred. But in practical terms, individual teachers tend to occupy different spectrum within the context of teaching practice (Coople and Bredenkamp, 2009; Bredenkamp, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study consisted of 4 participants (Kate and Sophia from Tata School and Ramatu and Akotia from Kariba School) purposively sampled from two kindergarten classrooms sited in different socio-economic contexts within the Cape Coast Metropolis, Ghana. Kate has 25 years teaching experience whereas Sophia has 19 years teaching experience. Each of them has a degree in early childhood education. On the other hand, Ramatu has 9 years teaching experience whereas Akotia has 7 years teaching experience. Each of them has a Diploma in early childhood education. A multi-case qualitative study approach was used in this study because to establish the differences regarding teachers' practices in Tata and Kariba Schools sited in different socio-economic settings.

Instruments

Two main instruments were used for this study. These included semi-structured interviews and observations. The interviews made it possible for the researcher to gain insights into participants' perspectives about their practices in kindergarten classrooms. The participants were interviewed in pairs once and individually twice. Interviewing teachers in pairs provided a platform for them to share their rich experiences with each other and the researcher as well. The interview enabled the researcher to establish the consistencies of the responses of the participants across the interview sessions. It allowed for the interviewees to talk at length and elaborate because they were given the opportunity to react to questions multiple times. The interviews were conducted at a time when children were on break. In all, each of the visits to the classrooms lasted one hour. At the end of each interview session, the data was transcribed and sent back to each of the participants to cross-check whether it reflected their views. In short, member-checking was used to cross-check the validity of the instruments. In the second phase, observation took place in all the two kindergarten classrooms. The observations provided an opportunity for the researcher to determine how teachers' level of knowledge about their practices unfolded in real-life classroom context. During my observations, on occasion, and in an unobtrusive manner as possible, the researcher conversed with the kindergarten teachers while the children were engaged in small group or individual activities to seek clarifications from them reasons for engaging children in various kinds of activities. After, the end of every lesson, the researcher engaged them in a discussion for about ten minutes to seek further clarifications on certain issues. This process of interacting with the teachers provided each one of them an opportunity to clarify an issue that was perplexing to me arising while observing the teachers' instructional practices in the classrooms. The teachers were seen moving from one group to another giving guidance to the children on how to accomplish a task whenever any of them encountered a challenge. This method provided an opportunity for the researcher to observe and interact with the teachers two or three times to explore teachers' perspectives about their practices in the classrooms. Field notes rather than recording reduced such intrusions. Such observations allowed the enactment of issues beyond self-reporting because how teachers describe their actions

and how their actions unfold in real-life teaching and learning context differ. The observations of the teachers were done after each of the teachers had been interviewed. Apart from been a technique for generating primary data, observations serve as a check on the other data collection method. This method was used to check individual biases that were likely to be exhibited in the in-depth interviews. Also, the gathering of data using two research instruments allowed for triangulation of data.

Procedure

The instruments were administered to the participants in the two case schools from May 2015 to November 2015. The data analyses were on case by case basis to identify key themes within each of the cases to answer the research questions. The teachers' thoughts were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The teachers' thoughts were further organised into categories. The themes that emerged from the analyses were further validated by the observational data. In short, the themes were determined through open and axial coding (Boeijie, 2010). From the analyses, it can be concluded that a theme is a pattern across data sets that is important to the description of a phenomenon which is linked to a research question.

RESULTS

In particular, the study's results are reported as follows: the case of two teachers at the southern school, Tata; the case of two teachers at the northern school, Kariba; and finally, a cross-case analysis.

Case study analyses of the teachers at the southern school (Tata)

Learning activities and children's development

With respect to the second research question, the study's findings revealed that in Tata School's kindergarten classroom children are engaged in a variety of learning activities. In particular, the kind of learning activities that these kindergarten teachers used to promote their children's development included those that provided an opportunity for the children to understand their environment and the existence of God; to become creative, to understand content, and to develop holistically. In addition, three broader themes emerged in relation to the kinds of learning activities which pointed to the basis (that is, children's interests, the nature of children and how they learn, and the differences in children's abilities) upon which they planned learning activities and how they used guided participation to aid their children effectively engage in learning activities.

Both Kate and Sophia were of the view that classroom activities that were relevant to children's development were the ones that promoted children's understanding of their world. However, the teachers saw hands-on activities and observations as means of helping their children to understand their world in different ways.

Kate: "I engage them in activities that help them to understand their environment. For instance, if I want the children to understand the existence of air, I engage them in activities such as running around with a piece of cloth tied around their waist with both hands holding the edges of the cloth. I also instruct them to fill bottles with water for bubbles to pop up. I even go further to ask the children about the one who created the air because we believe in the existence of God as Ghanaians".

Sophia: "To enable children to understand their environment and how they can relate to it, we usually tour the school environment. When we come back to class, I draw a chart and record whatever each of the children observed during our tour of the school environment. Before I do the recording, I ask them questions about what they saw in the environment. While others will mention the names of different plants, others will even pick dead insects".

For Kate and Sophia, the objects that children see around them in their immediate context might appear unfamiliar with them because of their limited experiences. But through classrooms activities, which explore the children's immediate environment and the integration of their learning experiences (e.g. link between objects and teachers' explanations of how they came into being) children come to understand their world.

However, as both Kate and Sophia continued to discuss such activities, they further explained the importance attributed to linking God's existence with the children's everyday experiences:

Kate: "And this adds a spiritual dimension to it because they will come to understand that it is not their daddy who did it so they must give credit to God because it is God who does everything. To illustrate this, I ask them to hold their noses tightly for a moment, but within seconds, you see them fidgeting because they cannot breathe. After the activity, I then tell them that the air around us is what we breathe in, and God, created the air, so there is the need for them to make God an important part of their lives."

Sophia: "I even go further to find out from them about the one who created the things that they observed."

Also, both Kate and Sophia perceived physical hands-on experiences as effective ways of harnessing the creative potentials of children. Kate specifically named grafting (that is, creating graphite rubbings of the object) as helping children become creative. She explained:

Kate: "The creative aspect of the lesson helps the children to manipulate things using their hands. For instance, we have a topic such as 'grafting' where we use varied materials around us such as leaves to create

patterns on pieces of paper. The activities leading to the creation of a grafted product help the children to explore things with their hands. And this is what creativity does. It helps a child to become creative in what he does."

In a similar vein, Sophia valued activities which provided children with the opportunity to act on objects, such as arranging natural objects in an orderly manner. She explained:

Sophia: "I engage children in some hands-on activities to enable children to create patterns using various kinds of leaves. I always inform them what they are expected to do and how to go about it such as arranging the patterns in a sequence in any order of their choice. So, they should arrange the patterns on pieces of paper according to how they want it to be. These processes leading to the creation of a pattern helping the children to manipulate objects with their hands and present them in a logical sequence [through the examples, I set for them]."

In addition, Kate spoke of how such creativity impacted children's moral, social and skills development. She explained:

Kate: "The design of the curriculum is such that we have the hidden aspect and the skills aspect. Obeying instructions come under the hidden aspect, while the creative aspect falls under the skills aspect. The moral aspect directs the children regarding how to do things and how to relate to others while completing a task. So, as they are engaged in their creative activities, they develop the social and moral aspects of their lives. They interact with their peers during the lesson. I also ask them to come out with their sets of rules whenever I engage them in activities. As time goes on, they can come out with new rules such as 'do not pour any colour on the table or on the ground' to deal with emerging challenges."

Moreover, Kate perceived that hands-on activities impacted children's moral development because when children could come up with their own rules during a creative art lesson, they were more likely to obey them. She explained:

Kate: "I ask the children to make the rules because I want to make the lesson child-centred. However, if I make the rules for them, they are likely to disobey them. But if they make rules themselves they will appreciate it and obey."

Understand content

Kate and Sophia valued activities that assisted children to understand the subject matter as developmentally appropriate, for a kindergarten setting such as theirs. To illustrate, they each described an activity that involved

sorting and classifying objects in math class, where sorting bottle tops by colour permitted children to gain knowledge that led them to recognise the "blue" colour elsewhere in their environment. Two elements (sorting by colour or length) were of significance to them, as Sophia indicated "If we are sorting by colour or length, the opportunity is given to children to engage in this activity." And as Kate revealed, "A child may be instructed to pick a bottle top which is blue in colour." This process helps the child identify any blue colour around him or her.

Holistic development versus content

Interestingly, the two teachers differed in their views about the type of development they associated with certain activities. For example, Kate was of the view that activities that promoted the holistic of development children were the most valued ones. She explained:

Kate: "I think activities should be organised in such a way that it will help children develop every aspect of the human person, such as intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral and spiritual as they engage in activities. So, I engaged the children in play-based activities [during every lesson]"

She further explained how to realise children's holistic development through activity-based learning settings. Kate explained:

"Kate...when I am planning the activities, I integrate various kinds of elements into a play-based activity which allows the children to emphasise key issues concerning the lesson as they sing or recite a rhyme."

For Kate, play-based activities provide children with the opportunity to interact with their peers, express their emotions and regulate their behaviour and be regulated by others.

On the other hand, Sophia valued hands-on physical activities that helped children understand the content of what they had learned in class because it helped them progress steadily in their learning. She explained:

Sophia: "It is becoming increasingly difficult for some children to progress from the primary level of education to other higher levels of education because of the limited spaces in the schools or due to mediocre performance of students in public run examinations. So as a class teacher [it] is my duty to help children understand activities we do in this class. So I engage them in hands-on activities to ensure that they understand what we are doing in class."

Sophia further perceived that her conscious effort tended to impart in children the habit of learning. She explained:

Sophia...“I always impart to children the desire to learn because I always tell them that they can only become important people in life and help others if only they are prepared to learn.”

Planning learning activities

More generally, Kate and Sophia believed that for learning activities to impact children’s development, the selection of these activities, should be planned. All the responses of the teachers indicated that the nature of children and how they learn constituted the basis for planning learning activities. For example, Kate perceived that the gradual nature of how children develop influenced her selection of learning activities in a kindergarten setting. She explained:

Kate: “I think what helps me most to plan activities for the children, is my knowledge about how children develop. Children develop gradually, so usually, I introduce them to few concepts for some minutes, and after that, I introduce play-based learning activities concerning the lesson, and after that, the children go for a break.”

Kate further reiterated how needs of children influenced her selection of learning activities. She shared: “I plan the curriculum because it helps me to take into consideration the needs of each [child as I observed] in class so that I can include activities that meet the needs of each one of the children.”

Similarly, Sophia believed that her insights about how children learn and the uniqueness that each child brought to the learning context were factors influencing her selection of learning activities. She explained:

Sophia: “I usually stick to the guidelines spelt out in the kindergarten curriculum. The guidelines consider how children learn and what I am expected to do as a teacher to promote their learning. I also consider...the time within which teaching and learning should come to an end, and the relevant activities [in which] children are expected to be engaged. Also, I consider the needs of every child when I am selecting activities for children.”

Similarly, Sophia saw effective planning of learning activities in a kindergarten classroom as a function of many factors. For example, she explained:

Sophia: “So, I also want to add that there are other activities that go on [in] this school which affect the planned activities that go on in this school such as staff meetings, PTA’s meetings and statutory public holidays. So, I take all these factors into consideration when I am planning activities for the class.”

It will seem then that, Sophia recognises that the larger

school context influences her classroom context.

Guided participation activities

Although not discussed in their interviews, analysis of the field notes, documenting classroom observations, revealed that Kate and Sophia used guided participation to give their children insights into what they were expected to do while engaging them in mathematics, language, and literacy activities. These two teachers, at Tata School, used the whole class instructional format to provide such guidance. Interestingly, such a whole class instructional format indicated thematic linkages between math activities and language and literacy.

In one mathematics and one language and literacy lessons observed, children were expected to complete specific tasks during the lesson. For instance, Kate, during the observed language and literacy class which focused on a story titled “The Lion and the Mouse”, showed the children pictures depicting the various incidents in the story. The children were expected to describe and predict what was likely to occur in the next episode of the story as the teachers flipped through the story. The children in Sophia’s class, during a math lesson which centred on sorting, the children were tasked to sort various kinds of objects into colours and sizes. These activities occurred two weeks apart.

Observations during both these lessons revealed that the teachers’ provided the necessary guidance to the children by directing their behaviour and supplied them with things they needed. In directing children’s behaviour issues such as rules concerning classroom conduct and how to complete a specific task were emphasised by the teachers. When providing information to the children, the emphasis was on most of the time telling and showing children something for them to observe. In addition, in the language and literacy lesson, teacher also guided the conversation, whereby children were expected to reflect on an issue and predict what was likely to happen in the next episode of a story.

Overall, then, evidence from the data appears to suggest that these teachers engaged the children in a variety of activities, which aimed to impact children’s development in diverse ways. That said, the teachers at Tata School also perceived that if teachers planned the curriculum and used whole class guided participation instructional format, it too could enhance, promote and improve children’s learning.

Case study analyses of the teachers at the Northern School (Kariba)

Learning activities and children’s development

Concerning, the second research question, the study’s

findings revealed that at Kariba School kindergarten classroom, the teachers believed learning occurred when children engaged in certain types of activities. In particular, the kind of learning activities teachers used to promote children's development included those that: promoted children's understanding of their environments; provided children with the opportunity to become creative; promoted children's understanding of content; developed their motor and fine motor skills, integrated their learning experiences; and unearthed their potentials. In addition, these two teachers believed activities connecting children's in-school experiences, and out-of-school experiences optimised learning. A related theme that emerged from the interviews concerned the basis upon which teachers planned learning activities (e.g. children's interests; children's attention span in class) in their kindergarten classroom and how they used guided participation activities to help their children effectively engage in them.

Understand their environment

Both Ramatu and Akotia valued classroom activities that impacted children's understanding of their environment. For example, Ramatu believed that children came to understand weather patterns through observation. She explained:

Ramatu: "I use environmental studies lessons to help the children understand their environment. If the topic is 'sources of Light' I take the children outside the classroom for them to observe the sky. If it is cloudy, the children will be able to tell me that the weather is dark so they cannot see the sun. If it is sunny, they would also be able to tell me that it is sunny. Based on what they have seen, I will tell them that the sun is the source of natural light."

Ramatu further explained her thinking about why children might need to be engaged in such activities in order to understand their environment.

Ramatu: "It helps them to relate to the environment and understand the environment because all that they know is that we have light in the room, and we put it on and off. But they do not know that the sun as a source of light. So, it is a topic such as this that I use to make them understand the sun as a source of light, and during the daytime, it gives us light."

Akotia also valued learning activities, which provided children with the opportunity to observe their outdoor environment. For example, she described a weather activity, which spanned across the children's school and home experiences.

Akotia: "During environmental studies lessons, I take the children outside the classroom to observe objects in their

surroundings because it is not a class-based activity but an outdoor one. For example, once I was teaching about the weather, so I took them outside the classroom to observe the sun and the clouds. Then I asked them to observe the weather in the evening when they go home and take note of the differences between the two weather patterns. At times, some of the activities cannot be completed at the school, so I usually instruct them to go home and continue with the activities and come back the next day and share their experiences with the class."

Indeed, Akotia valued such activities in kindergarten settings because it "helped children value nature and understand their world".

Thus, Ramatu provided examples of creative hands-on activities children were engaged in while Akotia tended to describe more context related activities.

Develops children's creativity and content knowledge

However, both teachers, Ramatu and Akotia recognised that different learning activities (that is, creating artefacts, sorting by colour or size) afforded learning outcomes related to their children's creativity and knowledge acquisition.

Ramatu: "In a creative art lesson such as artefact making we engage the children in hands-on activities. We use materials such as waste papers or clay to help the children create any artefact of their choice. If we are using waste papers, I engage the children in series of activities such as soaking the papers in water and pounding it in a mortar with a pestle. After that, I guide the children to add glue to the product that we obtained from the papers. If we are using clay, I also guide them to pound it in a mortar with a pestle. After a while, we add water to it to make it soft and malleable so that the children can create any artefact that they want."

Akotia: "In a math lesson, if I am teaching a topic such as sorting, I engage the children in a lot of hands-on activities to help them understand what we are doing. For instance, I bring some real objects such as bottle tops of varied sizes and colours to class for the children to sort them into colours first and then into sizes later."

It is evidently clear that Ramatu valued activities which provided opportunities for the children to become creative through hands-on physical experiences such as producing of artefacts. Akotia, however, valued activities that provided children with the opportunity to understand content through hands-on physical experiences where they creatively sorted materials.

Develops children's motor skills

Also, both teachers, Ramatu and Akotia perceived that

hands-on activities impact children's motor skills development.

Ramatu: "The series of activities leading to the creation of artefacts develops children's gross motor skills because the activity of pounding involves the use of larger muscles. Also, the activities leading to the creation of artefacts helps the children develop their fine motor skills because they use their fingers to engage in hands-on activities which involve the use of the smaller muscles."

Akotia: "I think these activities help the children to manipulate the objects with their hands, which helps them develop their fine motor skills because it involves the use of the muscles of the fingers."

As such both teachers perceived that hands-on activities supported children's development of gross and fine motor skills through the necessary manipulation of objects inherent in them.

Integrate children's learning experiences

When further considering the kinds of learning activities they perceived as developmentally appropriate, Ramatu described activities more generally, in terms of providing an opportunity for children to integrate their learning experiences. She explained:

Ramatu: "I think one useful thing that I can talk about is creating an opportunity for children to incorporate what they learn in class to other learning experiences they might have gone through so that they can see linkages and differences in whatever they learn in class."

She further elaborated her thinking behind the need to organise learning activities in such a way so that children can integrate their learning experiences when, she shared:

Ramatu: "I think children should be taught in such way that they can reconstruct what they already know to fit a new learning situation that is like what they already know."

Activities which address different developmental needs of children

On the other hand, Akotia described learning activities that consider the differences regarding the uniqueness that each child brings to the classroom setting, and explained how she organised lessons to address the needs of individual children in class. She shared:

Akotia: "I think children come to the classroom with

different abilities, so I usually provide various kinds of learning activities for children to explore their talents. Also, when I am selecting the activities, I include activities that are challenging and those that are less challenging to meet the needs of different ability groups."

Linking in-school and out-of-school experiences

Finally, it was Ramatu who believed that connecting children planned in-school experiences and lived out-of-school experiences optimised learning in kindergarten settings. She explained:

Ramatu: "I am always guided by the activities that have been spelt out in the kindergarten syllabus before I engage children in activities in class. But at times, I go beyond the activates that [are] specified in the syllabus by bringing in activities that go on within the child's environment such as a market scene, hospital scene and so on."

Ramatu further explained that in and out-of-school experiences that children go through in class helped them make connections between their daily experiences within their immediate environment.

Ramatu: "As a teacher, it is my responsibility to bring into the classroom setting other experiences that children go through outside the classroom context to enable each of them to understand their environment and draw linkages and differences between what they already know and their current experiences. To help children draw the linkages, I have created different learning centres in class such as shop, hospital, science and so on in this class."

Planning learning activities

With regard to planning of learning activities which have the desired impact on children's development, both teachers, Ramatu and Akotia, recognised that the selection process had to be strategic. In their interviews, these teachers revealed that their children's interest and ability constituted the basis for the selection of learning activities. For instance, Ramatu perceived that children's interests served as a basis for selecting learning activities that she believed would appeal to them. She explained:

Ramatu: "Sometimes I am guided by what children like doing. What I have observed over the years is that some of the children will do one activity repeatedly. At times, I direct some of them to a different activity, but at a point, they come back to engage in the same activity again."

Akotia, on the other hand, was of the view that the length of time children could concentrate in class was a

determining factor in how she planned learning activities in class. She shared:

“As we saw today, usually in the morning the children are more active in class when I assign any task to them. But in the afternoon, it always seems as if they have lost interest in the activity that they have been tasked to do. But rather what this reveals to me is that the children are getting tired. So, I schedule most of the activities in the morning when they are very active and full of energy. But there are some days I do not assign any task to them.”

Guided participation activities

Although these teachers did not discuss it in their interviews, analysis of the observational field notes revealed that Ramatu and Akotia used guided participation to give children insights into what they were expected to do while engaging them in math and language and literacy activities. These two teachers, at Kariba School, used whole class instructional format, to provide such guidance. Interestingly, whole class instruction within math activities and language and literacy activities pointed to commonalities for this theme.

In one mathematics lesson and one language and literacy lessons observed, the children were expected to complete specific tasks during the lesson. For instance, during the observed language and literacy class, which focused on a story titled “Ananse and the Wisdom Pot” Ramatu, showed the children pictures depicting the various incidents in the story. The children were expected to predict what was likely to happen in the next episode of the story as the teacher flipped through the pictures. In Akotia’s class, during a mathematics lesson that centred on sorting, the children sorted out diverse kinds of objects into colours, shapes and so on. These activities occurred at various times.

Observations during these lessons, revealed that the teachers provided the needed guidance to children included directing their behaviour, and showing them something. When directing children’s behaviour, issues emphasised included; rules concerning classroom conduct, and how to complete a specific task. While presenting “information”, the issues included telling and showing children something. Finally, the issues involved in guiding children’s “conversation” included reflecting on an issue and predicting what is likely to happen in the next episode of a story.

Overall, then, evidence from the data appear to suggest that these teachers engage the children in variety of activities, which aimed to impact children’s development in diverse ways. That said, the teachers at Kariba School also perceived that if teachers planned the curriculum and used guided participation as an instructional format, it too could enhance, promote and improve children’s learning.

Across case analyses: Teachers’ practices at Tata and Kariba Schools

To further understand the ways in which learning activities support children’s development in diverse ways, across-case analyses (by school) is reported next.

Learning activities and children’s development

With regard to these teachers’ perceptions of learning activities in relation to children’s development, cross-case analysis indicated that in both rural and urban school settings teachers tend to focus on learning activities that support children’s holistic development, including their understandings of their environments, content-related and language specific skills as well as harnessing their creative potentials. Nonetheless, within the urban school (Tata), Kate and Akotia linked learning activities to children’s understanding of the role of God (as creator) and as a means of addressing children’s spiritual development. This emphasis appears less related to the urban location and more to do with the Christian beliefs of these teachers and partly due to the content of the kindergarten curriculum which emphasises moral and religious education in kindergarten settings. That explains why, at one point, Kate attributed such a ‘spiritual’ focus to culture, when she claimed: “as Ghanaians, we believe in the existence of God, so I go further and ask them who created the air?” Interestingly, since Kate at Tata School is the only participant who mentions promoting young children’s moral and social development, examining this theme across the cases raises the possibility that such an emphasis may be due to an individual teacher’s orientation. Overall, when choosing learning activities to address children’s developmental needs, analyses across these two cases revealed that these teachers used three sources, namely, the recommended curriculum, children lived experiences and specific needs of individual children such as cognitive.

The participants in both cases valued planning as an effective tool for maximising the development needs of individual children in kindergarten classrooms. However, the teachers had different ways of planning their learning activities. When examined, cross cases these teachers reported idiosyncratic priorities and considerations when it comes to planning. Although three of the teacher’s used aspects of the children (their interest, attention span, and individuals need) to inform their work, the fourth teacher relied heavily on curriculum guidelines, whereby Sophia strictly adhered to the centralised curriculum demands.

DISCUSSION

As detailed in the results, all four kindergarten teachers described various learning activities they used to promote

their children's development (e.g. a science lesson about air; using plants to show patterns), elaborating at times with respect to additional foci they believed to be relevant. Accordingly, the themes that emerged (that is, understand their environment and the existence of God, understand content, become creative, develop fine motor skills, or develop holistically) seemed to delineate "the kinds of activities" in terms of the broader aims associated with them. While there were differences regarding how these teachers viewed these developmentally appropriate learning activities, one common thread appeared to be the inter-relationship between children's in-school and out-of-school experiences.

Indeed, analyses of the reported and observed learning activities revealed these participants explicit and implicit recognition of the importance of linking children's in-school-experiences with their out-of-school experiences in order to attend to and support children's development. This particular finding then points to the significance of children's lived experiences (inside and outside of the classroom learning environment) when planning and implementing effective teaching and learning in kindergarten classrooms. Within the two classrooms in this study, such connections were found to occur at two levels, namely engaging children in real-life learning activities and inter-relating children's classroom and at-home experiences with particular respect to the Ghanaian sociocultural contexts.

As the four participants elaborated, the promotion of children's understanding of concepts taught in class is tied intrinsically to children's sociocultural contexts (out-of-school experiences). Children's experiences within their social and cultural contexts point to the kinds of learning experiences that they bring to the kindergarten settings and in turn, impact how these experiences enhance and promote their development. Hence, culturally situated learning experiences are paramount. For instance, within the Ghanaian cultural settings parents mentor their children into roles that require children to learn and apply norms and values within real-life contexts as they interact with their peers and adults within their social settings. The experiences that children gain from such interactions provide opportunities for them to construct their understandings about their world (as shown in this current study's finding). This, in turn, suggests interactions between children within the classroom provide further opportunities for them to learn from each other, regarding their sociocultural settings. Nsamennang (2008) succinctly articulates the essence of children's interactions with their peers when he asserts that within "the African context, a child is seen as a cultural agent of his or her development from an early age" (p.2). This is significant because it suggests that learning is not limited to only the school (Kindergarten) context but extends beyond it, in that in the Ghanaian sociocultural context, young children are believed to be

actors of their development, beginning with experiences gained from daily interactions with peers and adults. Moreover, the value these teachers placed on, and the familiarity they seemed to have with their children's out of school experiences point to their recognition of learning as a continuous process (Pinar et al., 1995) between home and school. To further complicate this perspective, it is important to bear in mind the occasions when teachers' perceptions of children's everyday experiences may have positioned the learner at a disadvantage or unduly limited the kinds of learning activities offered to children. For example, Akotia indicated that she would not use think-pair-share because children in Kariba school would not be familiar with expressing their opinions because they "are coming from homes where parents take all decisions". While respecting her children's "out-of-school" context influences her to choose more familiar hands-on learning activities to assure their success, it raises the question as to whether these children would/should benefit from expressing themselves in the kindergarten setting (if not at home). Of course, an answer to such a question is complex and goes beyond the scope of the current study.

When considering the engagement of children in real-life contexts, the close link between children's spiritual development and particular hands-on activities the two teachers, Kate and Sophia at Tata School described are noteworthy. Although, the data collected, precludes us from knowing the extent to which these young children may understand the theoretical implications of the concept of a creator (God) in their daily lives, the connections these teachers addressed within learning activities (e.g. the presence of air around us) concerning children's daily lives (e.g. the essence of breathing) provided contextualized opportunities for them to understand such a complex phenomenon. Arguably, then, this particular finding, whereby these kindergarten teachers infuse an overt appreciation of how the things children see around them came into existence into lessons about their environment, calls our attention to ways in which learning activities and children's spiritual development might be connected in certain settings, which appears unreported in previous research into DAP. That said, teaching young children a phenomenon such as the existence of a creator, appears to related to these teachers' understanding of the philosophical basis of kindergarten curriculum in Ghana (MoE, 2007) and possibly, Carter's (2013) activity theory. For instance, the kindergarten curriculum in Ghana (MoE, 2007) emphasises the use of developmentally appropriate means to lay a foundation for the development of a well-balanced human person, who in the long run would appreciate the existence of a creator and how one is expected to lead a life worthy of emulation. Thus, while this suggests that within the Ghanaian contexts under study children's spiritual development is valued, its development appears to depend on a teacher's creativity

and the kinds of learning activities with which the children are engaged. Even though the participants from Tata School engaged their children in natural science activities, the dexterity with which the Kindergarten teachers in the urban setting (Tata School) used these activities to develop a concept such 'spirituality' is revealing and intriguing. For example, it appears all four teachers believed, as Carter (2013) asserts, that it is through the active participation of children in a variety of activities that they can make meaning of their experiences yet for Kate and Sophia, the meaning included both the scientific and the creationist perspectives:

Kate. ... "To illustrate this, I ask them to hold their noses tightly for a moment, but within seconds, you see them fidgeting because they cannot breathe. After the activity, I then tell them that the air around us is what we breathe in, and God, created the air, so there is the need for them to make God an important part of their lives (pp.124)."

What remains unclear from the study, however, is why the teachers in the urban setting used context appropriate learning activities to inform and support their children's spiritual development when those in the rural setting did not.

When considering the theme, "understand content", all four participants reported engaging their children in different forms of activities meant to promote the children's cognitive development regarding the acquisition of different forms of knowledge. The extent to which learning activities focused on children's cognitive development was also apparent from the observations of several learning activities within both settings. In contrast to research which emphasises a proclivity towards providing opportunities in kindergarten settings for young children to construct knowledge (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009), in the current study, teachers in both schools included teacher-centric activities. In doing so, they seemed to perceive such direct teaching as developmentally appropriate, and to a limited extent, the evidence seemed to support their view. For example, Piaget's (1952) assertion that children acquire socio-conventional knowledge when they are taught names of objects and symbols could be conceived as a support for these teachers' direct teaching of letters of the alphabets and number names during literacy and numeracy lessons. Likewise, activities wherein these teachers guided their children's manipulation of objects (e.g. hitting a ball or a stone against a wall to determine if and how they react differently when acted upon) could be construed as complying with Piaget's (1952) assertion that children acquire physical knowledge when given opportunity to see how objects move and function in space. And since DAP originated from Piagetian theories of learning, adherence to such principles would readily reinforce the notion that such actions are developmentally appropriate. In turn, drawing from

Vygostkyian underpinnings of DAP, the teachers' direct teaching and explicit guidance during such activities can readily be seen as the necessary mediation by the significant others that allows for inter-psychological development. That said, within these adult controlled activities there seemed to be a focus on in-school experiences (that is, reciting letters in isolation; throwing a rock against a wall) to the exclusion of out-of-school experiences (e.g. children's funds of knowledge (oral language, properties of balls and rocks from play), which stands in contrast to what was previously discussed with respect to other themes. Bearing in mind, however, that these teachers peppered their interviews with descriptions (some cursory, others detailed) of a variety of activities (some teacher-centric, others much less so) used to help children "understand content", a more elaborated analysis would be needed to ascertain to what extent this was isolated to a few, or prevalent across most, of them. It is also clear from the study that engaging children in a variety of learning activities impact on the holistic development of children in kindergarten settings.

Conclusions

The study's findings bring to our awareness the richness of sociocultural contexts in curricular opportunities for teachers to engage children in kindergarten classrooms activities which would enable children to understand what they are learning which would, in turn, develop children's problem-solving abilities. Thus, the study's findings reinforce and in a limited way extend the constructivist theories that consider sociocultural contexts of children as key determinants of kindergarten curriculum content and the way it is taught. It is therefore, recommended that child-initiated activities and that of teacher-initiated activities should inform how activity-based learning settings should be organised. This sort of learning context integrates the learning needs of individual children and professional insights of teachers which tend to impact children's development in terms of unearthing the potentials of individual children. In light of this future research should explore the kinds of learning activities teachers engage children in the socio-cultural contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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