

Parental perception of play in childhood in socioeconomically deprived communities in South
Africa

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Abstract

Play is an essential factor in childhood development, which contributes to cognitive, social, physical and emotional well-being of children. However, the extent to which primary caregivers who live in socioeconomically deprived communities know about the role of play in childhood has been neglected in South Africa. This qualitative study was conducted from a phenomenological framework paradigm; and it was aimed at addressing the views of South African women who reside in low SES communities about the nature of play in childhood. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with 12 black South African women who reside in different townships, who are the primary caregivers of children aged two to ten years old. A thematic analysis approach was used for the analysis of the results from the interviews. The themes that emerged included indication of the benefits of play, parental role in play, their involvement, the location where children played and challenges that restrict children from fully engaging in play activities. The study revealed that parents consider play as an important factor for child development; however, from the numerous benefits of play, they only knew few of them. Furthermore, it indicated that parents were aware that they have to be directly and indirectly involved in child play. Finally, caregivers indicated that the communities that they live in have more factors that restrict children's free play. The findings from this study underlined the need for interventions that will target child's play in socioeconomically deprived communities in South Africa.

Keywords: Play; Caregivers; Perceptions; child development; children; benefits

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Introduction

Play is a universal activity that children engage in on daily basis. The playing activities that children engage in differ between communities and every parent has different perceptions about child play. It is every child's birthright to play, with play being now understood as important to optimal cognitive, language, emotional, physical and social development in children (Cutting & Dunn, 1999; Ginsburg 2007; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera & Lamb, 2004). Children explore the world through play, which provides them with the opportunity to interact with their social environment (Ginsburg, 2007), which includes playing with their immediate families, peers, siblings and their parents (Bergen, 2002). Vygotsky theory of development asserts that childhood development is influenced by the interaction of the individual and his or her social environment (Gupta, 2009).

Mendez, Fantuzzo and Cicchetti (2002) argue that socioeconomic status has the potential of limiting children from obtaining full benefits of play due to several factors that may restrict the child from engaging in certain play activities, thereby lessening opportunities for this important aspect of development. The factors include the degree of parents' knowledge about the importance of play, the safety aspects associated with play activities, availability of resources and parental involvement during play. Ginsburg (2007) stated that some parents, particularly those from high and middle-income communities, usually promotes structured. However, according to Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff & Gryfe (2008), unstructured play has more developmental benefits than other recreational activities that children engage in.

Lindell and Kruger (1989) argue that South African children who grow up in townships, who are from large families are less likely to engage with their parents on play activities because of the number of family members in the household. In addition, Dass-Brailsford (2005) explained that children from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities in South Africa have demonstrated poor academic performance due to lack of access to cognitively stimulating resources and activities.

Low socioeconomic status communities may derive less developmental benefits of play, possibly because of limited resource and poor education (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Ginsburg (2007) argues that parents who are not educated about the importance of play are less likely to facilitate or engage in play activities with their children. Furthermore, lack of knowledge

concerning the importance of play may increase the enforcement of parental values that are concerned with improving only school performance, such as encouraging the child to concentrate only on academics thus focusing less in play activities (Mendez et al., 2002). Moreover, the degree to which children are encouraged to play is determined the parents' perceptions concerning the role of play (Fisher et al., 2008).

Furthermore, the beliefs of what constitute play and its value in childhood development influences parental practices concerning activities that children are encouraged to play (Fisher et al., 2008). The degree that parents allow their children to play is determined by their assessment of the safety of the location in which they play in and the safety of materials they play with (Veitch, Bagley, Ball & Salmon, 2006). Rothlein and Brett (1987) conducted a study in Australia and they found that mothers and teachers of preschool children did not perceive play as an important factor for child development, therefore more emphasis of academic related play activities were given priority in the preschool curriculum. Moreover, parents and teachers in the study viewed play and learning as separate entities. Therefore, this is an indication of lack of knowledge of the developmental benefits associated with play.

In South Africa, there is an increase in the incidences of childhood developmental issues (Dass-Brailsford, 2005). These issues are mostly evident in socioeconomically deprived communities (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). The increase of these incidences facilitates the curiosity to understand how parents facilitates their children's development. Ginsburg (2007) stated that play has developmental benefits, with this notion in mind, one gets to think about the extent in which parents encourage their children to play and the degree in which they are involved in these activities. It thus seems important to investigate how parents from economically deprived backgrounds view and understand play.

Childhood development

Piaget's model of childhood development states that all children go through four main stages of development (Gupta & Richardson, 1995). The first stage of development that Piaget described is the sensorimotor stage, which lasts from birth to two years. During this stage, the child learns about the world through physical actions that he or she can perform, and it is at this phase that language and thought development begin to emerge. Language development is facilitated through play and other interactions the child has with others in their environment. The

key activities during this stage include moving of limbs, which is accompanied by some form of spoken word that promotes the emergence of babbling and one-word phrases.

The second stage is the preoperational stage, which is from two years to seven years, and is associated with increased cognitive development, the emergence of logical thinking, problem solving and memory (Gupta & Richardson, 1995). Rothlein and Brett (1987) assert that during this stage, learning happens through active involvement and interaction with their environment, which is facilitated through play as well as academic learning. The third stage is the concrete operational stage, which begins at seven to twelve years. During this stage, thought is reversible and the child can think logically about concrete problems, indicating problem-solving skills. The final stage is called the formal operational stage, which begins from twelve years onwards (Gupta & Richardson, 1995).

Vygotsky's theory states that interaction between a child and other people is essential for language and cognitive development as this is how children learn most skills (Gupta, 2009). Emotional regulations is one of the skills that children learn through such interactions, which implies that in addition to cognitive and social development, emotional development is facilitated as well (Gupta & Richardson, 1995). In disadvantaged communities, the interactions that children engage in, may not be developmentally stimulating due to the socioeconomic stress that is associated with these communities (Dass-Brailsford, 2005).

Play in childhood

Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) indicate that there are four basic types of play. The first one is functional play, characterized by simple muscular or sensory motor activities and reflects child's need to activate his or her physical movement skills. Functional play appears throughout early childhood. During infancy, play is also characterized by babbling which is accompanied by arms and feet movements, when parents respond to these utterances the infant does it more, producing more movements. This has been found to promote physical and motor development (Orr & Geva, 2015). The second type is constructive play, characterized by sensory motor activities, but unlike functional play where the activities are of a preconceived plan, this one incorporates creative activities such as block building. According to Bergen (2002), constructive play facilitates the development of cognitive abilities.

Dramatic play is the third type, which incorporates both symbolic and pretend play. Pretend play involves object manipulation, which facilitates the development of cognitive strategies such as planning, problem-solving, goal seeking and negotiating (Bornstein, Haynes, Legler, O'Reilly, & Painter, 1997). A mature form of dramatic play referred to as sociodramatic play characterized by complex, joyful concentration, intensity and expressive fluency. This type of play facilitates social development as the child expresses an increase in awareness of his or her social surrounding (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

Other types of play activities in infancy includes uttering sounds, hitting and sucking objects and motor movements, activities that are associated with language development in early childhood (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Rothlein and Brett (1987) assert that dramatic play contributes to the child's cognitive development, evident in the child's later ability to deal with abstract symbols, hypothetical reasoning and problem-solving, and understanding logical transformations. The fourth type of play is termed games with rules, and it includes board and table games. This one allows the child to accept prearranged rules, adjust to them and follow them and through it, the child learns to control his or her behavior (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

Lindell and Kruger (1989) found that the children from small households with many family members played alone or observed their peers play with no attempt to engage in their activity indicating slow emergence of social development. These children were also observed to focus on playing with one toy only, which suggests the possibility of developmental deficits.

The benefits of play in childhood

Rothlein and Brett (1987) contend that play provides children with the opportunity for social development, language learning, gaining independence and development. In addition, Bergen (2002) argue that the benefits of play includes negotiating skills, joint planning skills, problem-solving skills and goal seeking skills. Vygotsky's theory of development emphasizes the importance of children's communication with others as being important for social interaction, learning and development (Mendez et al, 2002) and children communicate with their peers through play. Vygotsky argued that children's interaction with their peers or adults aids to their cognitive development (Gupta & Richardson, 1995).

Parental involvement during in child's play has developmental benefits to children. (Tamis-LeMonda, Baumwell, & Cristofaro, 2012). Ginsburg (2007) argues that it is also possible that the way a child wants to play may be very different from the way his parents want him or her to, therefore, Ginsburg (2007) suggests that child-driven play should be encouraged as it has been found to be most beneficial. The language that parents use when they are engaging with their children is proportional to the child's language development (Tamis-LaMonde et al., 2012). Therefore, parental involvement in child's play during infancy is more crucial because it promotes language development (Meins, Fernyhough, Arnott, Leekam & de Rosnay, 2013; Tamis-LaMonde et al., 2012). Cutting and Dunn (1999) found that when parents gave appropriate mind-related comments during play or when engaging with their children, the theory of mind scores of the children improved and it promotes secured emotional attachments (Meins et al, 2013).

Research aim

This study is aimed at investigating the knowledge and understanding of parents raising their children in informal settlement concerning the importance of play in childhood development. Exploring the understanding of play from these women will close the gap in research and allow the establishment of future intervention programs aimed at educating parents who reside in low socioeconomic status communities about the importance of play in childhood development.

Main research question

How do South African, women who live in informal settlements, view the role of play in childhood?

Sub-research questions

- What are the benefits of play?
- What are the roles of parents in play?
- What are the challenges that are faced by children that limits the degree to which they play
- To what degree are parents involved in their children's play?
- Where do children play?

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study is located within a phenomenological paradigm. A phenomenological approach gives insight into how subjects in a situation perceive certain phenomena thus allowing the gathering of deep insights and perceptions from studying the experiences of the individuals (Lester, 1999). This approach attempts to represent personal experiences and it is concerned with the perceptions of the individual. The proposed study aims to gain insight of the degree to which parents understand of the role of play, which is a subjective understanding of a particular phenomenon. The phenomenological approach will bring to the fore the perceptions and understanding of the mothers from the informal settlement regarding child's play. Furthermore, this exploratory study has no preconceived hypothesis and is in line with Lester (1999) assertion that the phenomenological approach seeks to understand and describe phenomena from the individual's perspective whereby a hypothesis has not conceived.

The phenomenological question posed in the current study is, from the experience of raising children in informal settlements, what does play mean in their children's lives. According to Bradley and Corwyn (2002), South African parents who reside in informal settlements are less likely to educate themselves about child development, particularly the developmental benefits that can be obtained in play. In addition, most of the knowledge that they have about child rearing activities are obtained through experience (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Therefore, by using the phenomenological approach the researcher was able to study and explore the parents' experiences, which is associated with their perceptions of child's play. The phenomenological approach framework was useful because it allowed the researcher to engage during the process of the interviews, thereby guiding the researcher through the analysis of the data.

Methods

Research design

This study employs a qualitative research design. Qualitative methods have been shown to generate rich data and provide an opportunity to gain insights in areas whereby there is not enough literature available (Veitch et al., 2006). In addition, qualitative research is concerned with the development of explanations of social phenomena (Hancock, Windridge & Ockleford, 2009). This type of research design focuses on reports of experience or data that cannot be expressed numerically, and allows descriptions and interpretations of certain phenomena, which can potentially lead to the development of new theories and concepts. Furthermore, this type of study is concerned with the different characteristics within the sample; therefore, it is not aimed at generalizing its findings to the entire population that is being investigated (Hancock et al., 2009)

The purpose of the current study is to explore the views of parents concerning play; therefore, this qualitative research design employs an exploratory research. An exploratory design allows for the gaining of insight about a particular phenomenon that has not been clearly defined (Hancock et al., 2009). This type of research is appropriate for the current study because perceptions of parents who reside in socioeconomically deprived communities in South Africa, concerning play has not been clearly defined.

Sampling

A sample of twelve primary caregivers of children aged between two and ten years old, who reside in different townships located in Cape Town, were invited to participate in the study. The townships included Philippi, Nyanga, Khayelitsha and Gugulethu, which were chosen as an attempt to acquire variation in the sample. The participants were recruited using a purposive sampling strategy, whereby a sequential sampling strategy was used. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling strategy whereby participants are selected based on the characteristics they possess of which the researcher is interested in investigating (Tongco, 2007). Furthermore, the type of purposive sampling that was used is snowball sampling, which is defined as is a sampling strategy whereby existing participants in the study refer the researcher to individuals who can possess the characteristics required in the study (Hancock et al., 2009).

The Child Guidance Clinic (CGC) located at the University of Cape Town was approached and the staff was asked to refer the researcher to their clients who are primary caregivers of children aged between two and ten years old, and who reside in informal settlements in Cape Town. Moreover, to recruit more participants, one of the cleaning service staff who worked at one of the residence was approach and asked to participate. After the interview, the woman was asked to refer the researcher to more women who fulfilled the criteria described above. Snowball sampling was chosen in this study because the child guidance clinic only have a few clients who reside in informal settlements; therefore, the client that was recruited from them referred the researcher to other women who possessed the characteristics that are of interest to the study.

Data collection tool and procedure

The data was collected using semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Semi-structured interview was chosen because according to Hancock et al (2009), it allows open-ended questions and it allows the interviewer and the participants to discuss issues in detail. The participants were interviewed individually in their home language in a quiet room that they considered safe. Allowing participants to engage in the interview using their home language enabled them to express their views properly without being limited by language. Seven of the participants were interviewed at their homes because they were unemployed and five of the participants were interviewed at their work place. The interviews were recorded and they lasted between 15 and 20 minutes. At the end of the interviews, the participants were given R20 as a token of appreciation for their time.

Data Analysis

The data was recorded, transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method that can be applied across a range of epistemological and theoretical approaches, which allows identification, analysis and reporting of themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach is appropriate for this study because it describes the data set in rich detail and interpret various aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The current study seeks to explore the views of mothers concerning child play and thematic analysis is the most appropriate for this study because the themes will not be defined according to any pre-existing coding frame. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that when using thematic analysis, the codes are developed based on the themes identified. This is an explorative study, which means research on this subject has not been done in a South African context, therefore it is expected that there is no specific coding frame available that can produce tangible results (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The researcher was interested in what the caregivers said rather than how they said it; therefore, the most appropriate type of thematic analysis approach is inductive analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) assert that the inductive approach means the identified themes are strongly connected to the data.

The researcher familiarized herself with the data by listening to the recording repeatedly. This process allowed the researcher to immerse and engaged with the data, thereby allowing the her to be familiar with the depth and breadth of the content. The recorded verbatim was translated from Xhosa to English and transcribed. Patterns in the data were identified and important transcripts were color-coded. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), transcription of the data allows the creation of the meaning to the data.

In the next step, the researcher generated initial codes. As stated by Braun and Clarke (2006), codes are generated from the identified themes. The themes identified in this study were driven by the data, which were identified after coding the entire data set. The themes were reviewed and refined, then defined and named accordingly. The researcher went back to the collected data and matched each theme according to the verbatim to ensure that the themes were coherent and that they were internally consistent to the collected data extracts. Finally, a report with all the worked out themes was produced. The researcher attempted to provide a report that was concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and must convince the reader of the validity of the analysis. To ensure valid data analysis, careful attention was paid to the analytic process because according to Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is a straight forward data analysis method, however, failure to carefully pay attention to the analytic procedures even to a lesser extent may lead to loss of validity.

Ethical consideration

Ethics apply to any type of study whether qualitative or quantitative (Richards, 2002); therefore, for this study, the ethical concerns of this study were communicated to the participants. The participants were asked to fill in a consent form after the researcher has explained all the procedures and implications of this study. The study received ethical approval from the ethics department in the faculty of psychology at the University of Cape Town. This ethics clearance ensures the protection of the participants.

Harm to subjects. In any form of a research study, the researcher has an ethical obligation of protecting the subjects (Richards, 2002). In the current research investigation, the participants were not harmed during study and the outcomes of this study will not harm them either. The interviews that were used as for collecting data were conducted in a venue that the participants considered safe. This was a means of ensuring that their personal safety is secured during the process of the interviews, as they chose the venue. Stigma about bad parenting styles may be attached to the participants; therefore, the participants' identity is protected. This is an endeavor to ensure safety of the participants.

Informed consent. Each participant received and filled in the consent form before the interview commenced. The consent form provided the details of the researcher, the purpose of the study, the research procedures and the issues of confidentiality. The consent form informed the participants that their participation was voluntary. The researcher verbally confirmed that the participants understood the processes and their implications. The consent form is included in the appendices of this study.

Actions and competence: reflexivity

The competence of the proposed study will depend on the researcher's influence (Lester, 1999). Power imbalances exist between the researcher and the participants due to lack of shared experiences. The research process may further be impacted by the way the participants perceive the interviewer, as she is a young student who does not have children and different demographics. They may have been reluctant with their responses. Moreover, due to the researcher's familiarity with the literature of play in childhood, the questions might have been asked in a way that directed the participants to answer in a directed manner. Furthermore, the content of the interview

and the data analysis process can also affect the results of the study. An attempt to control the way in which the participants view the researcher, will be dressing in a presentable manner in order to allow the participants to see that the researcher is prepared and professional about her work.

Significance of the study

The participants will not benefit from the study; however, as a token of appreciation the participants received R20 and a toy for their children. In addition, the participants will be provided with an information form about the benefits of play. The finding will contribute towards generation of further theoretical and academic insight of the subject under study thus leading to future research. The generation of future research can lead to the development of interventions to educate parents in informal settlements about the importance of child play and the developmental benefits involved.

Limitations of the research

The findings from the study cannot be generalized to the entire population that reside in South African low socioeconomic status communities because the sample was small and was not the representative of the entire population. The sample only included a few townships that are in Cape Town and it only included Black women, excluding Coloured and Indians. Moreover, it is possible that the perceptions of caregivers who reside in low socioeconomic status communities differs considering the diversity of the population in the country.

Results

The themes and categories that emerged from the data were grouped into five main themes. The categories are: (1) the benefits of play, (2) the role of the parents, (3) the location in which the children play, (4) the degree in which the parents are involved in child's play and (5) identified challenges that are faced in socioeconomically deprived communities concerning play.

From the identified themes, a variety of subthemes emerged. The reported themes are supported by direct quotations from the participants' interviews transcripts and they are accompanied by a reflection on the current literature on the subject of play. Goncu, Mistry and Mosier (2000) define child play as any activity that the child is involved in that is fun and enjoyable. Similarly, the participants identified play as any activity that brings pleasure to the child while they were doing it. Furthermore, most of the participant explained that play differs with age. For toddlers, play is anything that they find enjoyable in front of them, and for older children, it is a routine of activities that they engage in, which Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) refer to as functional play. One of the participants explained that toddlers have no sense of differentiating on what is acceptable to do in the house:

Eish... he plays in the house, destroying stuff in the house. He plays with the tv stands and all of that his play activities includes everything that he can gets his hands on. Younger children's play activities are different to what we traditionally refer to as play, which is why I have to always keep an eye on him.... sometime he would throw the ball at the tv and without realizing that it is dangerous to throw a ball at the tv. (Participant 12)

Theme 1: The benefits of play

Participants reported that playing is an important activity in the child's life. They explained that play in childhood is accompanied by various benefits for both the parent and the child. Ginsburg (2007) asserts that play in childhood is accompanied by developmental benefits and in this study five subthemes of the benefits of play that were identified. The caregivers explained that play is a tool for detecting the state of well-being of the child, that it improves communication skills, promotes learning and physical growth as well as a platform for the establishment of relationships.

Play enables the parent to detect when there is a problem with the child. All the participants reported that play is an effective way to tell the state of well-being of the child at any given moment. They reported that when the child is not playing they immediately get the sense that something is wrong with their child. This may indicate that the child is sick, being abused or there could be something that is bothering him or her. Interestingly, available literature does not indicate that play enables the parent to determine the state of well-being of the child:

Play is important because ... and you get to see from play when a child is a healthy child or a child requires attention. (Participant 1)

Play helps me to know when something is wrong with my children. When they are quiet and not playing as usual, I know that something is not right with my children. (Participant 2)

Play is very important because for me, it gives me an idea to tell when the child is not feeling well, therefore, I go to him and ask what is bothering him. (Participant 8)

... It is a quick way of showing me as a parent that my child is not well today. As a mother you do not miss these signs I'm telling you (Participant 10)

Although the above benefit indicates parental gain, it is beneficial to the child as well, because it allows the parent to care for the child. It also enables a show of affection because the parent takes time to ask the child rather than assume that he or she is being moody or lazy. Children may lose interest in play because they have to do other activities such as watch television or do homework however; unexplained loss of interest in play was reported to be associated with problems in the well-being of children.

Improves communication skills. A majority of the participants reported that play promotes effective communication between the child and the parent. Most of the parents who reported that they play with their children indicated that they have good communication with their children, who are free to state what is bothering them without hesitation. These findings are consistent with studies that target autism; Aldred, Green and Adams (2004), found that targeting parent-child relationships improves communication skills of the child. Moreover, play improves the communication of the child through interacting with peers:

Play improves the way my child and I communicate with one another. She is free to tell me when something is bothering her, in some cases, I do not even ask, she just come to me and say “mom I do not like this and that”. It is always a nice feeling that my child is free to tell me things that are bothering her. (Participant 6)

Play allows the child to interact with other children and helps improve the communication skills of the children with their peers. (Participant 2)

Promote learning. Fisher et al. (2008) emphasized that unstructured play promotes both academic learning and attainment of social skills. A majority of the participant reported that play provides a platform for learning. However, most of these participants only referred to academic learning. Only a few of the participants specifically reported that play is a tool for learning about social skills:

I want my children to play because they learn through playing. The kids even play school with the older kids who are already in school. The older children pretend to be teachers and teach the younger children. I think that helps the kid to learn how to read. Sometimes she will act like is reading a book, even though she does not know how to read yet. (Participant 3)

They learn quickly and easy from their peers, they find it more interesting if they are teaching each other. Because almost every day they come home with something new to show me, they even learn new information that I have not even told them. Most of the time I just get so surprised that they know such things. (Participant 8)

play is important because the child learns a lot... sometimes she learns school related things depending on the play activity that is going on, sometime they play house and learns how grown up act. (Participant 12)

Establishment of relationships. Approximately half of the participants reported that play is important for the establishment of relationships among peers. Furthermore, the participants reported that it is not healthy for a child to grow up in isolation. Fein (1981) explains that pretend play promotes the establishment of social relationships, and when the parent is involved in the play activity; it strengthens the relationship between them, particularly the mother-child bond (Ginsburg, 2007):

Play is important because it allows the child to make relationships and not grow up in isolation. (Participant 7)

... And it is important in forming a strong bond with my child. The bond that we have makes my child trust me. (Participant 10)

So if a child is forced to stay home at all times and denied the chance to play, even if he is being abused by other people, he will not be able to tell you because you do not have that relationship that allows you to communicate efficiently, and play helps form that relationship. (Participant 11)

Play promotes growth of the child. Current literature on play indicates that play facilitates physical growth and health of the child (Wooldridge & Shapka, 2012). In this study only a few of the parents spoke about this aspect of play. They reported that active children grow in healthier than those who are inactive. Ginsburg (2007) explained that the physical activity that children engage in during play, promotes growth:

... but all children have to play, it is an essential factor for their growth.(Participant 10)

Play allows children to learn, and grow... a child that does not play does not grow properly. (Participant 1)

The benefits of play that the participants reported are in line with available literature. However, the reported benefit that play enables the parents to tell the state of well-being of their children was not found in the literature. These findings indicate that primary caregivers are aware of the benefits of play in their children. With the knowledge, that play has developmental benefits; they have an important role to play in child's play. This is the next theme that emerged from the study.

Theme 2: The role of the parent.

Parents are potential mediators of play (Veitch et al., 2006), which suggests that there is a role that parents play during play. A majority of the participants specified that every they have to play a specific role in their children's lives when it comes to play. They reported that a parent has to be aware that their child is playing somewhere. The subthemes that emerged here were that

parents have to ensure the safety of the children when they are playing, they have to support them and they have to provide appropriate play materials for them.

Ensure safety. A majority of the participants reported that their role as mothers is to ensure the safety of their children when they are playing. Correspondingly, Veitch et al. (2006) found that parents are concerned about the safety of their children when they are playing; therefore, their role is to ensure that their children are safe. Safety could be ensured by assessing the safety of the materials that they are using when they are playing and the location where they are playing:

You have to make sure that the materials he is using are not harmful. As a parent, I have to ensure the safety of the child. Make sure that he does not use things that could hurt him things that are sharp, such as knives and razors. (Participant 1)

Yes, my role is to ensure their safety, I have to make sure that they do not play far from home, the community I live in is very dangerous my child. Children get “stolen” (abducted) a lot. So I have to have a very sharp eye for the protection of my children (Participant 8).

As you can see we live near the main road and the children may run into the streets, therefore they are not allowed to go play away from home, even with the park I am afraid they might be hit by cars while they are on their way to the park. (Participant 3)

These results indicate that parents who live in socioeconomically deprived communities perceive the safety of their children as a crucial part in child’s play. These findings are in accordance to the results found by Veitch et al. (2006) that parents have to make assess that safety of their children before they allow them to play.

Provide support. Leslie et al (1999) found that children, who had family support in play, were motivated to engage in play activities, particularly in sports. Providing support for child’s play included that the parents went to watch them play in case of sport. Only a few of the caregivers explained that it is important for them to provide support for their children when they are playing:

Uhm..The problem that we have as parents, although we know that it is important to support our children, we never support them. I have never went to watch his games, not even once, and I always wonder what his coach see in him. I blame myself for not attending his games. (Participant 11)

Because she is always alone and I have to support her and play with her, in order to close that gap of being alone, so that she does not feel lonely. (Participant 10)

I really encourage my child to choose what she want us to do. It allows me to know the play activities that my child loves and provide her with the support that she needs. (Participant 6)

A minority of the participants reported that as part of supporting their children in play, they teach their children some of the games that they used to play, as well as guide them:

A mother is everything to a child; the mother has to guide the child when he is playing, you as a parent have to ensure that the child is playing well. (Participant 1)

My role is teach them to tell what is right and what is wrong, when they are playing, there certain things that I have to show them, especially games that we used to play when during our time.

Provide the children with playing materials. With play now recognized as a child's birth right (Ginsburg, 2007); it is the responsibility of the parent to provide play material for their children (Wooldridge & Shapka, 2012). A majority of the participants explained that their duty as parents is to provide their children with playing materials and assess whether they are safe and appropriate for the children:

However, they do not enough play materials, they play with balloons and balls but since I cannot afford to buy them toys, they do not really have all the playing materials that children need to have. (Participant 1)

Yes, yes, yho!!! (laughs), sometime my ten years old girl will take shoes and pretend they are babies. Yes, they do use other stuff as toys. They improvise to make it look like

anything they have in their minds. I also do buy them toys to play with though, because I have to make sure that my children have something to play with. (Participant 8)

Theme 3: The location where children play.

Weir, Etelson and Brand (2006) assert that children from socioeconomically deprived communities are more restricted to free play due to lack of access to play areas. Similarly, a majority of the parents reported that it is imperative to know the area in which their children are playing. Most of the parents expressed safety concerns about the location where their children played. These findings are in line with Veitch et al (2006), who find out that, parents were concerned about the safety of where their children played:

No, here there is no park, but there is a park in our neighboring communities, but it is very far. Some children do go and play there but it is very risky. (Participant 1)

The child can only go to the park when there is an elder person around to ensure their safety because the park is very far and it is not safe for the children to walk alone. (Participant 3)

More than half of the participants lived in a place that did not have a park or a playground in their neighborhoods. Most of the older kids that were older were allowed to go to play in other neighborhoods that had parks and sportsgrounds:

Sometimes when I have time the children play at the playground or the park which is located in another township, but I have to accompany them when they play there... (Participant 4)

At home during weekends he plays soccer because there is no rugby field in our township, there are only soccer fields. So he goes to play there during weekends and only play rugby at school. (Participant 11)

Moreover, in households that have a yard, the participants reported that the children were allowed to play there, however the parents had to constantly monitor the children. The reason for the monitoring was that the children were not allowed to leave the house without permission. The participants explained that it is important to know the whereabouts of their children, particularly

because their neighborhoods are dangerous. The younger ones were only allowed to leave the houses when there was someone to supervise them:

They play with their friends inside the yard, because I do not want them to leave the premises. Because they are still young, and there are many cars in the streets, children are abducted and rapped. (Participant 9)

They play around the neighborhood, outside the house, particularly in the yard, especially when they are playing together... (Participant 8).

A majority of the two and four years' old parents reported that their children were not allowed to play outside. The mothers who live in shacks reported that the only time their children were allowed to play outside was when the mothers were cleaning the house, because there is not enough room for movement in the house:

most of the time they play inside the house. But when I am busy doing my chore they have to play outside, as you can see there is not space in the house to move around. (Participant 1)

... My last born is still very young, she is not allowed to play outside, I allow her to play inside the house (Participant 6)

The comments above strongly point to parental concerns regarding where their children play due to safety reasons. Weir et al (2006) assert that parents restrict their children from playing when they suspect safety issues the area in which their children play. These findings indicates that their parents care about their children's well-being as they play. Safety concerns about the location in which children play are similar across communities (Veitch et al., 2006).

Theme 4: parental involvement in the play activities. More than half of the participants reported that they play with their children. Most of the ones who reported this were mothers of younger children:

...playing with my child is important in forming a strong bond between my child and me. It is important sometime to bring yourself as a parent to the level of the child and join her in whatever she is doing. (Participant 10)

After that, I ask the child what she would love to do at the mean time. I want her to tell me what activities you would like me to do with her. (Participant 6)

Moreover, mothers of older children reported that their children are more independent and mostly prefer to play with their siblings and peers from the neighborhood.

when it comes to play the young child requires more attention, she require my attention during the play activities than the older ones. The older one are a lot more independent.(Participant 5)

She plays with her little brothers in the house. And sometimes she plays with her friends... The younger one is that one that usually demand my attention; the older on prefers to play with other children from our neighborhood, she is a lot independent. (Participant 12)

A few participant reported that they do not play with their children because they want them to explore on their own. According to Ginsburg (2007), play allows the child to explore a world that they can master and conquer their fears, while practicing adults' roles. Participants further reported that it is important for children to only play with their peers because they learn quickly from playing with others:

Honestly no I do not play with my child, I allow her to play on her own. The child needs to explore on her own (Participant 2).

I allow the child to come to me and ask me to play with him. I do this because I do not want the child to do what I ask I want him to explore on his own first then he can ask me to join after he knows what we are doing.(Participant 7)

Ginsburg (2007) asserts that the benefits of children playing with their peers include learning how to work in groups, to share, to solve conflicts, to negotiate and learn self-advocacy skills. The participant showed less knowledge of about these benefits.

Theme 5: challenges that restrict children from playing

In relation to challenges that restrict children from playing freely, research findings indicate that socioeconomically deprived communities have to contend with factors face such as

the safety of the play spaces, high crime rates, lack of access to parks and traffic in the roads (Weir et al., 2006). Similarly, most of the participants indicated that a major issue was the safety of the streets and lack of access to parks; the communities do not have parks for the children to play to be specific. Most of the participants reported that the community setting is a major challenge when it comes to child play, particularly the availability of parks in these communities:

As you can see, our community does not have enough space for children to play in, so that can be very restricting and especially since my four year old is autistic. (Participant 1)

The child place closer to the house because there is no play space, park or playground in the community and we do not have yards as you can see the houses are very close to each other. (Participant 2).

Secondly, it was reported that it is not safe for children to be playing on the streets as they could be abducted or hit by car, for example, while trying to cross the roads, when going to neighboring communities that may have playgrounds or parks:

....the community I live in is very dangerous my child. Children are abducted... the crime rate is high. (Participant 8)

Children are stolen and rapped all the time in our community, which is why it is not safe for them to leave the premises. That is why I want them to stay within the premises. (Participant 9)

Another issue that the caregivers reported was the lack of adequate and safe playing materials at the park:

She can get hurt at any time when playing at the park... But I have to let her play even though it is not safe for her to play on the slide and all but all children have to play, it is an essential factor for their growth. (Participant 10)

Especially if I take them to the park, the equipments in the park are not safe, children may fall and really injure themselves. That is why I always have to accompany them, and stop them when they are playing with dangerous equipments. (Participant 4)

In summary, the reported results indicate that caregivers have limited knowledge about the benefits of play. In addition, it is evident that they perceive play as an important factor in children's lives, and that they have a role to play in child's play and they are aware of the factors that are beyond their control that restricts their children's activities. This is in line with the literature that explains that children who live in socioeconomically deprived communities may be limited to the attainment of the full benefits of play, due to the limited knowledge that their caregivers demonstrate (Weir et al., 2006).

Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the knowledge and understanding of parents raising their children in informal settlement concerning the role of play in childhood development. The findings from the study show that women who reside in socially deprived communities perceive play as an important factor for childhood development, which is in line with current literature on the subject. However, they showed limited knowledge concerning the benefits of play. Childhood development advocates explain that play is an essential factor in childhood development, which is accompanied by a variety of benefits (Cutting & Dunn, 1999; Ginsburg 2007; MacDonald & Parke, 1984; Tamis-LeMonda & Baumwell, 2004). To illustrate the role of play, the study investigated different aspect that contributes to the nature of play. The caregivers identified five aspects that contribute to the nature of play. These included the benefits of play, the role of the parents in child's play, the degree to which parents are involved in child play, the location in which children play and finally the challenges that make it difficult for children to play to their outmost potential.

The activities that were identified to constitute play included playing with toys, singing, dancing, playing a variety of traditional games, playing house and dress up, sports and playing school, and for toddlers, as anything that they showed to be enjoying; Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) refer to this type as functional play. This type of play is evident throughout early childhood, during the preoperational stage of development (Gupta & Richardson, 1995). The caregivers indicated that older children, particularly during the concrete operational stage of development (Gupta & Richardson), engage in a more planned and strategic ways of playing, similar to what are described by Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) as constructive as well as dramatic play that includes both pretend and symbolic play, and finally games with rules. They indicated that these different types of play are beneficial to the child.

Caregivers indicated that play is an important tool for them to detect the state of well-being of the child, which was not reported in any of the literature reviewed for this project. Child development advocates (Ginsburg, 2007; Gupta, 2009) argue that parental involvement in child play promotes the growth of trust between parent and child, which allows the child to be able to communicate openly with his or her parent when there is something that is bothering him or her. The results further suggest that as much as play is important for the development of the child, it is

equally so for the caregiver, with a key benefit being the potential improvement in communication and trust between the caregiver and the child. This is similar to Eisenstadt, Eyberg, McNeil, Newcomb and Funderburk's (1993) argument that parent child interaction improves communication between the dyad. Similarly, the findings from the current study showed that parents understood that when children play with their peers, their communication skills improves.

Autism studies have found that parent-child interaction promotes communication (Aldred et al., 2004). The current study found that parents who reside in socio-economically deprived communities only participate in child's play only when the children are still young. In addition, parents who indicated that they were involved in their children's play activities demonstrated to have good communication with their children. Moreover, the caregivers let their children lead the play activity, and according to Ginsburg (2007), the benefits that are associated with child driven play includes the child's ability to make decisions on his or her own, discover his or her own interest and fully engage in the passion that they wish to pursue. Moreover, child driven play promotes the development of creativity, leadership and creativity (Ginsburg, 2007).

Children explore their world through play (Ginsburg, 2007), which includes that children establish their social relationships through play (Bergen, 2002). The findings from the study indicate that the caregivers were knowledgeable in the fact that children form relationships through playing with their peers. Furthermore, parents indicated that when they play with their children, their relationship becomes strong thus enhancing the bond between the mother and the child. Ginsburg (2007) asserts that this promotes healthy emotional regulation.

Although the caregivers did not mention all the benefits of being involved in their children's play activities, it is clear that the children are not deprived of those benefits because their parents are aware of the importance of play as well as their engagement in child's play. Furthermore, these findings suggest that caregivers who reside in socioeconomically deprived communities have knowledge of only a few benefits of play, while research shows that there numerous benefits of play. However, although theoretically, children who reside in high and middle socioeconomic status communities are at the advantage of acquiring most of the benefits of play, Veitch et al. (2006) found that the safety of the children during play was a restricting factor to free play for those children. Similar results were obtained in the current study.

The degree to which parents allow their children to play is influenced by the safety of the location in which the children play, the safety of the play materials and the degree to which parents perceive the type of play appropriate to that particular age (Veitch et al., 2006). The major concerns that the caregivers had were the safety of their children. Similarly, Veitch et al. (2006) found that the major concerns that were reported by parents of all socioeconomic status were safety concerns and the level of independency. This study indicated that parents who reside in low socioeconomic status communities give more freedom to their older children. The caregivers reported that this is because that older children are more independent and they prefer to play with their peers in the streets rather than play at home with their parents. In addition, caregivers believe that children learn more and easily from their peers than from them; therefore caregivers have to allow their children to go play with their peers, for the sake of learning. Moreover, the findings suggests that it is safer for the older children to go play in the parks that are far than the younger children.

In addition to the communities not being safe due to high levels of crime, the findings suggested the caregivers were concerned about the roads that leads to the parks and playgrounds, which was also similar to Veitch et al. (2006) findings. They found that parents who resided in high and middle socioeconomic status communities were concerned also concerned about children walking alone to parks, therefore they had to accompany them and leave them there. In contrast the current study suggest that the caregivers who reside on socioeconomically deprived communities were concerned about the road that leads to the parks as well as the safety of the park itself, therefore they explained that have to stay and watch their children play or ask someone older to watch them. Furthermore the study by Veitch et al. (2006) indicated that when it came to safety of the parks, parents who resided in low socioeconomic status communities were concerned about the risky behaviors that teenager engaged in when they were in parks.

On the contrary, South African caregivers who participated in this study were concerned about their children being kidnapped from the parks. Furthermore, another concern that came up concerning the safety in the parks was the safety of the equipments that the children play with. Veitch et al. (2006) also find similar findings across all socioeconomic status communities. Moreover, playing in the park was restricted for the younger children because they can be injured very easily; therefore, parents were not happy about their children playing in the park. If they had

to play in the park, the caregivers had to play with them in order to ensure their safety. Furthermore, caregivers expressed that it is safer when the child is playing in the yard, that way the caregiver can keep an eye on the child while she or he is playing at the same time get her house duties done. Moreover, playing in the yard allows the parent to ensure that the materials that the children are safe and that the children do not injure one another.

Shortage of play materials for children to play was one of the perceived challenges that were found in socioeconomically deprived communities. According to Rothlein and Brett (1987), there are play activities that specifically target the area of development in the child's life. Therefore, shortage of play material for children in low socioeconomic status communities deprives the children the opportunity to attain that developmental aspect. Rothlein and Brett (1987) also identified shortage learning stimulating play equipments in the community as a challenge in the study. They explained that the problem of shortage of play equipments that stimulates learning for children is a global issue for these communities (Rothlein & Brett, 1987).

The findings from the study indicated that mothers perceived play as a platform for learning, specifically academic learning. In contrast to Rothlein and Brett (1987), who found that parents perceived that academic learning could only be promoted through structured play. Fisher et al. (2008) explained that learning is acquired when it is rooted in playful exchanges that allow generalization of new knowledge and skills. This suggests that unstructured play may carry more benefits than structured play. This notion was drawn from the reports obtained from professionals in the study conducted by Fisher et al. (2008). Fisher et al. (2008) argue that the reason for this notion is because structured has rules and guidelines, which takes away the aspect of freedom from the child, therefore instead of this type of play being fun and exciting; it becomes a task that the child has to complete. In addition to the academic learning benefits that are obtained from playing, Bergen (2002) explain that pretend play promote attainment of social skills. The present study confirmed this notion. The parents emphasized that when children are imitating adults, they learn how adults conduct themselves and the consequences that result from certain behavior. Ginsburg (2007) asserts that pretend play and symbolic play allows the child to view the world in the adult's point of view, which is associated with attainment of social conduct and morals in children.

In conclusion, the study attempted to address the gap identified in literature around primary caregivers who reside in socioeconomically deprived communities in South Africa, on how they perceive the nature of play. The findings showed that South African women who reside in socioeconomically deprived communities understand the role of play in childhood development. They identified five benefits of play, which included that play allows the caregiver to assess the state of well-being of her child. They explained that it promotes growth, learning and the development of communication skills in children and finally the establishment of social relationships. Literature on play shows that play in childhood is accompanied by numerous developmental benefits; however, the caregivers only mentioned a few of them. This indicates that mothers have limited knowledge of the importance of play in childhood development. Moreover, it shows that mothers are aware that play is an important aspect in a child's life, which should be encouraged.

Furthermore, the findings indicated that parents understood that they have an important role to play in child play. They indicated that they could be involved in child play directly, by actively participating in the child's play activity and indirectly by supporting their children, ensuring their safety and providing them with appropriate and safe playing materials. This shows that parents perceive play to have a positive influence in their children's lives. The findings from the study indicated that parents are aware and concerned about the challenges that restrict their children from fully engaging in play activities. They identified challenges such as crime, lack of resources for play activities, which includes playgrounds and parks, and play materials such as toys particularly developmental stimulating toys. The findings in the study showed that play in childhood, in socioeconomically deprived communities is considered as important and factors associated with it are recognized. The findings from this study has contributed to understanding of how parents in socioeconomically deprived communities in South Africa, perceive the nature of play.

Recommendations

The limited scope of the study prevented more questions to be asked. Therefore, for future research, studies that address similar areas should target a broader population and conducted nationwide. The results from the study suggest that there is more research that need to be done in order to establish interventions that will target similar population but on a broader spectrum.

Moreover, interventions that will target educating the whole community about the benefits of play should be investigated and implemented, these interventions should be practical and appropriate for specific communities.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Potential follow-up questions

- How many children do you have and how old are they?
- How is your routine from morning to bedtime?
- Where does your child play and who does he or she play with?
- What do you think child play entails and what materials for playing do you give your child?
- Why do you think it is important for a child to play?
- As a parent, what is your role in child's play?
- How do you manage to engage in the play activities with your children after working long tiring hours?
- What are the challenges that children face, that inhibit them from playing

Appendix B

Participant information sheet and consent form

University of Cape Town

Consent to participate in a research study:

Parent-child play in socioeconomically deprived communities

Study purpose

My name is Nqobile Shelly Mogale, I am a student at the University of Cape Town and I would like to ask for your consent to participate in a study that I am conducting. The study is about finding out the views of women who reside in informal settlement about the importance of child play.

Study procedures

The researcher will interview you on different topics about play, in an area that you feel safe and comfortable. The interview will last between 15 and 25 minutes. The conversations will be recorded and notes may be taken during the interview, this will be done to help the research remember all the information that will be discussed. Any information that you provided will be strictly confidential and your name will not be linked to the report that will be compiled at the end of the study.

Possible risks

There are no known risks for participating in this study.

Possible benefits

You will receive an information form about the benefits of play, a toy and an amount of R20. In addition, the results that will be obtained will help generate new research that may in the long term provide interventions for educating parents about play in childhood. Furthermore, you will gain knowledge about the importance of parental involvement during child play.

Voluntary participation

Your participation in the study is voluntary and if you would like to stop participating at any point of the interview, you are allowed to do so. If you are not comfortable answering certain questions, you are not obliged or forced to answer. There will not be any penalties given if you decide to stop participating or if you do not answer certain questions.

Confidentiality

All the information that will be obtained from the discussion will be kept confidential and your name and your name and identification details will not be part of the report produced from the study. All written documents and recorded information will be kept in a secure place and only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the information.

Questions

Any questions, queries and concerns about the study can be directed to:

Nqobile Shelly Mogale Principal Investigator (0840604321)

Dr. Nokuthula Shabalala Supervisor (+27216503900)

Declaration by the participant

I have read the consent/assent or the consent form has been read and explained to me and I understand what the study is about. I voluntarily consent to participate in the study and that the interview can be audio recorded

Participant's Name _____ date _____

Participant's signature _____

Appendix C

Information sheet

The benefits of play in childhood development

Play is essential for childhood development. Children interact with the world around them through play. Play is important because it has been found to promote emotional, physical, social, cognitive, affective and educational/academic development. Play improves children's ability to store and process new information. The benefits of play are listed below

The benefits of parent child play

- Play allows parents to view the world through the child's eye and point of view, thereby allowing effective communication and effective parental guidance. Less verbal children may be able to express themselves through play, including expressing their frustration, which may allow parents to understand their children's needs. When children are playing with their parents, it allows the children to see that their parents are paying attention to them, which promotes strong bonds. Furthermore, play allows children to create fantasy heroes that help conquer their fears, adults can notice these fears and learn to help their children.

The benefits of play are:

- It enhances physical health by building active, healthy bodies. Physical development include is associated with the prevention of obesity. Healthy brain development leads to enhanced cognitive

Emotional benefits include...

enjoyment, fun, love of life
relaxation, release of energy, tension
reduction
self-expression

Language development:

communication skills
vocabulary

Cognitive development:

creativity
abstract thinking
imagination
problem-solving
social cognition, empathy, perspective-taking
mastering new concepts
school readiness

story telling
emergent literacy

Social development:

cooperation
sharing
turn-taking
conflict resolution
leadership skill development

Attentional development:

attention regulation
concentration
persistence

Affective development:

self-confidence
self-esteem
anxiety reduction
it has therapeutic effects

Physical development:

It enhances physical health by building active, healthy bodies. Physical development include is associated with the prevention of obesity.
Gross motor experiences
fine motor experiences
physical challenges
self-help skills

Educational benefits include...

providing a meaningful context for children to learn concepts and skills;
making learning fun and enjoyable;
encouraging children to explore and discover together and on their own;
allowing children to extend what they are learning;
encouraging children to experiment and take calculated risks;
providing opportunities for collaborative learning with adults and peers;
Allowing for the practice of skills.