

Selection of a Preschool: Comparison between Play-based and Academic-based Preschools in Eldoret Municipality

Scholastic Musakali Adeli

Abstract

Parents and/or guardians normally consider many factors in selecting a preschool for their children. Among such factors are location, accreditation, and teacher credentials, past performance, children's safety, school philosophy and discipline. This study sought to establish whether parents/guardians were aware of classroom methods in preschools and whether they consider such as factors for selection of a preschool. This study therefore compared parents'/guardians' awareness of play-based and academic-based preschools in Eldoret Municipality. The study adopted a survey design. Data was collected from all willing parents/guardians from various churches in Eldoret Municipality. Churches were selected because they brought together different people with different school priorities. A questionnaire was the main instrument for data collection. All parents/guardians who had a preschool child were free to participate in the study. Using convenience sampling therefore, a total of 253 parents/guardians were involved in this study. The major finding of the study was that 72% of the parents/guardians preferred academic-based schools rather than play-based schools because the focus in most schools is on academic achievement rather than play. Findings from this study are important in creating awareness to preschool teachers, administrators, parents/guardians on the differences between the two types of preschools. The assumption is that if parents are aware, they will make informed decisions concerning the type of preschool they would want for their children.

Keywords: Preschool, play-based schools, academic-based schools, classroom methods

Contact: Scholastic Musakali Adeli - Moi University, Email: adelis2004@yahoo.com

Introduction

Do you remember the 'kati', 'chababa-chamama' games that you played? As a young boy do you remember a torn short because of sliding down a slippery hill on a banana stem? As a young girl, do you remember singing

'bubli -gumx2number 28.....' which was actually (public van, public van number 28...) on your way to the river? Did you care what the song meant or you cared about the steps to make? Did you have any stress at age 3-5 years even when you had slept hungry? As a child, did you play more in kindergarten than your children are allowed to play today? Were you taught to read in nursery school? Honestly speaking, for some of us- at what age did we learn to read?

These are some very important questions that guided this study and which form the basis for taking this study. In Kenya today, very young children who are less than 6 years are seen carrying large school bags (sometimes bigger than their age) on their way to or from school. Inside the bags are books and sometimes a lunch box." Have you completed your homework?" seems to be the song for every parent/guardian. School seems to be everywhere even at home and as a child plays their mind is not free because at the back of their mind they are aware that they have homework to be done. A child fears to go to school if they have not completed their homework because they know what to expect from their teachers.

The focus on academic achievement has increased in Kenya leading to physical activity (PA) opportunities in schools to decrease. In an attempt to discover how the decline in PA may affect academic achievement, Buchmann (2000) researched on factors that determine school enrolment in Kenya whereas Wangari (2011) studied on factors hindering outdoor play in preschools. The major conclusions of these studies show a negative effect on PA by constructs related to academic achievement. Because the primary goal of schools is student academic achievement, the key to increasing PA in schools would be to show that PA improves academics. Academic outcomes have become even more important in Kenya with free primary education legislation (Wanyama & Chang'ach, 2013) making focus in Kenya to be on academic achievement. This has

therefore led to many schools increasingly eliminating PA opportunities in favor of academic achievement.

Many parents spend hours agonizing over whether their child should join a play-based or an academic-based preschool. The other issue is whether their decision in reality was based upon extensive, long-term research or not. A child's first school experiences can color his/her perceptions about school and learning for years to come. Child development experts and early childhood educators agree that the preschool years are a time for the development of social skills and hands-on sensory learning that is experimental and exploratory (Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 2007).

Contributing factors for preschool selection

Kindergarten has evolved from being a time for play, socialization, cartons of milk and afternoon naps to structured lessons in reading, writing and arithmetic (Wangari 2011). Selecting a preschool for a child is therefore not easy. It can be overwhelming given the so many different contributing factors as discussed by Farver, Kim and Lee (2005).

i. Institutional characteristics

Beyond school philosophy and classroom methods, parents/guardians should consider many other aspects of a given school, including cost, location, schedule, accreditation, teacher credentials, safety, discipline, and most importantly the specific child's needs, such as how he does in social situations or even whether he needs a nap.

ii. School Philosophy

Parents and guardians should consider what they value in their child's early education included here is free play or more structured activities, teacher to direct the day or for your child to choose activities based on interests, language immersion or a focus on music or the arts, or maybe a little of everything. In general, a preschool will describe itself as either play-based or academic. Understanding the different terms will help in finding the program that suits a child's needs, since many of the approaches tend to overlap.

iii. Play-Based preschool

In a play-based program, children choose activities based on their current interests. The term "play-based" is often interchanged with "child-centered," which could be used to describe the majority of available preschool programs. The play-based classroom is broken up into sections, such as a home or kitchen, science area, water table, reading nook, space with blocks and other toys, or other areas. Teachers encourage the kids to play, facilitating social skills along the way. "Even though it seems like they are just playing, they are learning valuable skills, including important social skills and cooperation with others. A play-based, child-centered program includes both an extensive period of time for children to choose activities from a rich environment as well as planned activities, such as story time. The teacher has given much thought to the environment of the classroom so that children will have the opportunity to experience many types of activities that incorporate language, fine motor, problem-solving and other skills essential for academic success. It is especially important to note that during free choice time the teacher is circulating among the children. She/ he engage them where appropriate and expands their learning and vocabulary, she teaches children how to negotiate and resolve conflicts, and she observes so that she can meet the needs of each child.

It isn't "just play," but play-based, allowing the young child to learn what he or she needs to learn in the best, most developmental way.

iv. **Academic-Based preschool**

There are academic programs, considered didactic, "teacher-directed," "teacher-managed." In these classrooms, teachers lead the children in a more structured way, planning the activities and then guiding the children in doing them. This design is aimed at preparing kids for the kindergarten setting. For the most part, classroom time is devoted to learning letters and sounds, distinguishing shapes and colors, telling time, and other skills.

According to Muthoni (2012), it is important for parents/guardians to remember that a preschool can not be equated to an elementary school. A preschool should be organized so that there is a plan and routine for the day but at the same time, it should not be regimented. This is so because according to Kabiru and Njenga (2007) Play is any action that is done for enjoyment and for no rewards, it is the life and work of children. In agreeing with Kabiru and Njenga, Wangare (2011) says that because of the children's high imagination and energy, children enjoy playing very much. They like outdoor play a lot because it involves adventure. They mainly engage in activities such as hide and seek, jumping, climbing frames, sliding, riding, swinging, balancing on logs and seesaws, chasing one another, construction, water play, filling and emptying. Play therefore has a wealth of value for young children. As children play they learn new things and also develop their mental, social, language and physical abilities. Bergen and Mauer (2000) propose that what children need for future academic success is definitely present in a

play-based, child-centered program and is not present in an early childhood program of teacher-led instruction and worksheets.

Guinhouya, Lemdani, Vilhelm, Hubert, Apete and Durocher, (2009) carried out a 5 year longitudinal study in Washington ,D.C. to establish why too many pupils were being retained in kindergarten and Preschools and were not succeeding to proceed to the next level. The researchers studied the Preschool and Kindergarten classrooms and found that they fell into three categories: child-centered, (play-based), teacher-centered (direct academic instructions such as memorization and work sheets) and a “combination” approach classroom (where the children had some play and direct academic instructions). When the children reached 4th grade the researchers established that the children who were in the play-based programs in their early years did substantially better than those in the academic programs. The children in the child-centered, play-based programs did best academically at the end of kindergarten, but most importantly, continued to grow and make academic gains over the next 4 years. The children in the academic-oriented classrooms declined in skills over the next few years to end up substantially behind their peers by a 22% decline in relative skill level in the primary grades. The children in the programs with a mix of both child-centered and academic directed approaches (“combination” model) did worst of all.

Since some of the children are orphaned and some do not stay with their biological parents, this study chose to include both biological parents and guardians. Anybody charged with the responsibility of taking care of a preschooler whether as a parent or a guardian therefore qualified to participate in this study. This study sought to establish whether parents/guardians were aware of classroom methods in preschools and whether they consider such as factors for selection of a preschool. The study therefore, compared

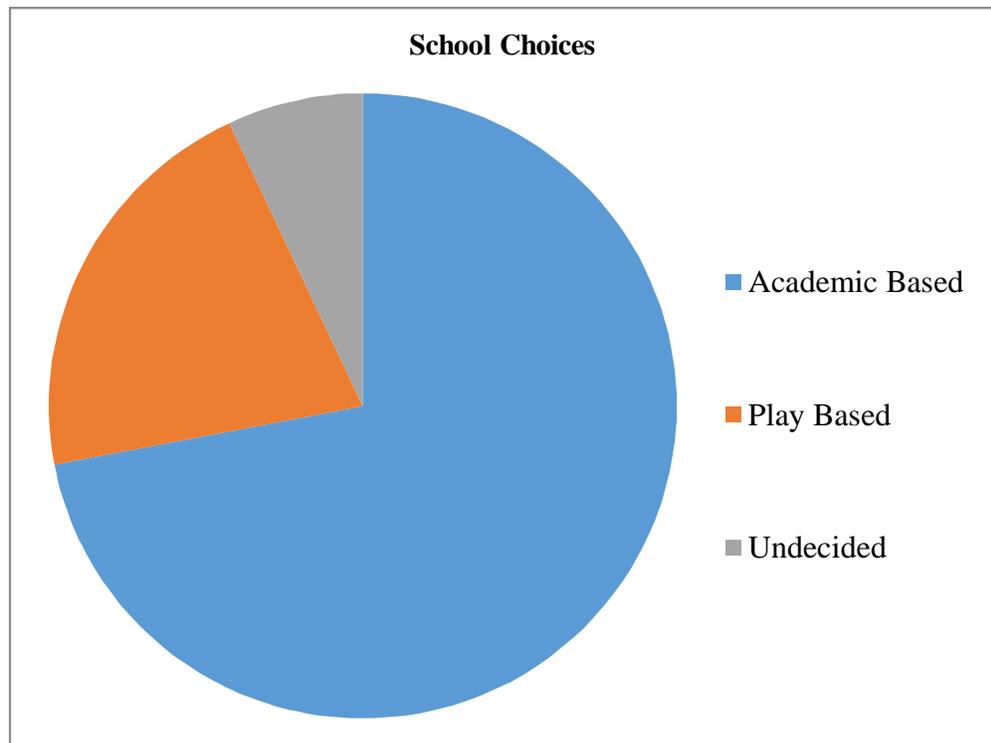
parents'/guardians' awareness of play-based and academic-based preschools in Eldoret Municipality.

Research Approach

The study adopted a survey design with an aim of collecting as many views as possible. Data was collected from all willing parents/guardians from various churches in Eldoret Municipality. Churches were preferred for ease of getting the required respondents with a variety of views, socio-economic status and even education levels. The convenience sampling technique was used to select any willing parent/guardian who had a preschool going child. A questionnaire was the main instrument for data collection. With the help of research assistants, parents/guardians were given questionnaires to fill after a Saturday or Sunday service. The questionnaires were collected immediately to avoid losses. A total of 253 parents/guardians were involved in the study (92 men and 161 women) and all questionnaires from the 253 of them were returned ensuring a 100% return rate.

Results

Out of the 253 parents/guardians who participated, 72% preferred an academic-based school, 21% preferred a play-based school while 7% were undecided. Figure 1 gives the contrast.

Figure 1. Preschool choices

Many parents/guardians (72%) preferred academic- based schools to play-based schools because of the reasons given in Table 1. The figures in Table 1 do not add up to 100% because the respondents gave more than one answer.

Table 1. Reasons for academic-based preschool

Reason	Percentage
Makes child bright	57
Child is given homework/kept busy	42
Keeps child in school longer	37
Good usage of fees	47
Report form can show child's performance	52
In line with primary school requirements	60

Results in Table 1 indicate that majority (60%) of the parents/guardians preferred a preschool which is in line with what was being taught in primary schools. It is worth noting that all reasons given for the preference of an academic-based pre-school give more weight on the cognitive domain and less on the psychomotor and affective domains.

Advantages and disadvantages of a play-based preschool

The respondents knew very little about the importance of play to a preschooler with 80% stating that play is simply having fun with peers which added little value to the academic life of a Preschooler. Play was seen to be important with only 40% of the parents/guardians indicating that it helped in the socialization process of a child while 22% said that play helped a preschooler to learn to work with others. There were however more disadvantages of play-based schools given by parents/guardians as compared to advantages. These disadvantages are summarized in table 2.

Table 2. Disadvantages of play-based preschool

Disadvantage	Percentage
No report forms	82
It is just part of learning	90
Makes children loose focus of school	92
Makes active learning to become useless	55
Cannot teach math through play	67
You cannot pay fees just for your child to play	97

Results from table 2 clearly indicate that majority of the parents/guardians do not have information concerning play-based preschools. Given that 97% of them argue that they cannot just pay fees for their child to go and play in school clearly indicates how parents and guardians have little information concerning the importance of play to a preschooler. Parents/guardians seem to accord so much importance to the teaching of mathematics that 67% of them believe that mathematics cannot be taught through play. Results in Table 2 therefore explain why majority of the parents/guardians prefer academic based schools.

Discussions

Over the past 50 years, free play with other children has declined sharply. Over the same period, anxiety, depression, suicide, feelings of helplessness and narcissism have increased sharply in children, adolescents and young adults (Frost, Wortham & Reifel 2001). The decline in play has contributed to the raise in the psychopathology of young people. According to the African Child Policy Forum (2008) reasons for this include;

- Preschoolers are being taught with methods and curriculum appropriate for older children

- Preschoolers are now expected to master skills related to reading and math which lead to teaching reading and writing in a preschool
- Emphasis on testing –yet tests measure a narrow range of knowledge and skills so they often miss important objectives of early childhood education like creativity, problem-solving, and social and emotional development.
- Young children have trouble completing standardized tests; how they perform often depends on the day.
- Teachers sometimes have to eliminate worthwhile learning experiences, introduce skills too early, and “teach to the test” if they are pressured to produce high test scores.
- Much less time for hands on, active learning and child-directed play yet young children learn best through these activities.
- Demand that children learn specific skills and facts by a certain age, despite the fact that children don’t all learn at the same rate and in the same way.

Importance of play to a preschooler

Play is the most natural of childhood activities and one of the most frequently observed. It is an activity that eludes simple definition, although the criteria used to define play typically include freedom of choice, personal enjoyment, and a focus on the activity as an end in itself rather than on its outcomes (Castle 1998). Freedom of choice seems to be an essential component of a definition of play. Cognitive theorists have long supported the view that spontaneous imaginative play facilitates children’s intellectual development. Pepler and Ross (2008), in their argument about play and child development agree with the views of one of the leading psychologists, Jean Piaget. Piaget (1999) maintained that “games of construction” often arise from symbolic play, and these games are initially imbued with play symbolism, but tend later to constitute genuine adaptations

(mechanical constructions) or solutions to problems and intelligent creations. Thus he argued that spontaneous play facilitates intellectual development in that it can lead to discoveries about the physical environment. Research on children's intellectual development indicates that a number of cognitive skills, including measurement, equivalency, balance, spatial concepts, conservation, reversibility, and logical classification are enhanced during play, and particularly during the course of symbolic play (Pepler & Ross 2008).

Farver, Kim and Lee-Shin (2000) suggested that pretend play facilitates the mastery of symbolism, the understanding of a relationship between the signifier and the signified, which is one of the cognitive foundations of literacy. Imaginative play frees behavior and thought from the domination of the immediate perceptual field, and represents a middle ground between the literalness of seeing meaning as inherent in objects themselves and a form of thinking that totally separated from real situations. Play therefore gives children the opportunity for creative expression, as well as to actually facilitate creative processes, including divergent thinking (Dansky, 2000). These findings are quite contrary to what parents/guardians in Eldoret municipality know about the importance of play to a preschooler. To them, play is simply for socialization and has no importance in the academic world of a preschooler.

Group play allows children to create alternative worlds, encourages them to engage in subjunctive representation of reality. It enhances the child's need to organize a complex environment into meaningful scripts and schemas for possible action in the future, and encourages children to plan, to consider a variety of courses of action (Piaget 1999). Play therefore, forms the basis for mature reasoning and problem solving skills. It stimulates children to think creatively, and has been found to predict later creativity. Piaget further says that, extensive involvement in socio-dramatic play improves children's memory, language and cognitive development.

Development of language skills

Unlike the current study where parents/guardians do not see the value of a play- based preschool, there is a growing body of evidence in support of a relationship between various forms of spontaneous play and linguistic development. Farver, and Lee-Shin (2000) findings suggested that there are four different types of language play, which roughly correspond to the different aspects of language (1) play with sounds and noises, (2) play with linguistic systems, such as those involving word meanings or grammatical constructions, (3) play with rhymes and words, and (4) play with the conventions of speech. Play is therefore thought to facilitate cognitive, social, and linguistic development (Laasko, Poikkeus, Eklund & Lyytinen, (1999). A study by Isen, Daubman and Nowicki, (2007) revealed that Play is generally important to a preschooler because it;

- Relieves stress and boredom
- Stimulates creative thinking
- Enhances memory skills
- Develops language skills
- Aids in the socialization process
- Makes the child to experience joy and therefore love for learning
- Leads to development of intrinsic interests and competencies
- Makes the child to Learn how to make decisions, solve problems, exert self control and follow rules
- Encourages Learning on how to regulate their emotions
- Helps children to Make friends and learn to get along with others as equals
- Promotes mental health

Though play is quite important to a preschooler as discussed above, the current study suggests otherwise. Parents/guardians in the current study do not see the value of a play-based preschool because they believe such a school makes children lose focus on academics. Focus on academics has been stressed so much making the today's preschooler carry a school bag full of books and nothing like play materials. The preschooler therefore benefits from rote learning and impairs all the other skills development gained from play. Stress on academics by parents/ guardians, curriculum and Education policies have made play- based preschools less popular than academic-based ones.

According to the current study, academic –based preschools make children bright, is kept busy in school, a report form at the end of a term measures performance and such a school is in line with the requirements of primary schools. According to Piaget (1999) however, preschoolers spend most of their time questioning everything that happens around them. Serious conversations like what happens in academic- based schools make them lose interest or turn their attention to more entertaining matters, such as toys this is because they have not developed well enough for detailed explanations. Cognitive development is in stages and it is not until children are around age seven, that they finally understand that they have to look at multiple aspects of a problem before arriving at an answer. The expectation of a parent/ guardian in the current study is for a preschooler to perform well, be kept longer in school and go home with homework. To them this is learning, however studies have shown that the best approach is to offer a child a wide range of learning opportunities to allow for mastery of skills. While the number and quality of studies have increased in the past 5 years, it is still difficult to draw definitive conclusions regarding the relationship between play and academic achievement. The overall findings however continue to be positive; that is, as Play increases in a preschooler's life, cognitive function and academic achievement generally increase (Ahamed, Macdonald, Reed, Naylor, Liu-Ambrose & McKay 2007).

About 52% of the respondents in the current study said that they preferred an academic-based school because at the end of a term their children are usually given a report form which can be a good measure of a child's performance. According to DuPaul and Rapport (1991) several methods are used to measure a child's performance, including standardized achievement test scores, teacher ratings of academic performance, report card grades and skill acquisition. Standardized achievement tests are objective instruments that assess skills and abilities children learn through direct instruction in a variety of subject areas including reading, mathematics, and writing so this kind of evaluation might not be the best for a preschooler. Report card grades allow teachers to report on classroom academic performance but they lack a standardized grading system and uniform subject areas that children are evaluated on. Teacher rating scales allow teachers to rate the accuracy of the child's work compared to other children in the class, and allow for ratings on a wider range of academic tasks. This kind of evaluation is good for a preschooler but most parents/guardians would love to see a class position of their child rather than general comments given by the teacher. Skills acquisition on the other hand involves a teacher's comment on how many skills the preschooler has gained or perfected. This kind of evaluation like the teacher ratings has no class position which again makes parents/guardians uncomfortable with it. Despite the play-based schools having their own forms of evaluation, most parents/guardians consider it to be non-academic and not serving as a preparation for the primary school therefore leading to preference for the academic-based preschools. Results of this study therefore revealed that most (72%) of the parents/guardians preferred academic-based preschools in Eldoret municipality. Their reasons for the selection of an academic-based preschool were purely academic and very few had any idea of what a play-based preschool entails. The respondents also had very little information on the place of play in the academic development of a preschooler. According to Oravec (2000-2001) however, improving literacy, increasing availability of formal education, a decreasing sense of isolation, and greater exposure to the media and mass communication have all had an influence on play

patterns of a preschooler and care needs to be taken when selecting a preschool for such a child.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Kindergarten has changed, but children haven't. Today, there is more teaching, more homework and more punishment to a preschooler than the time spend in play. Teaching academics earlier is not helping children develop cognitive skills any sooner. Funneling academics down to preschools to "better prepare" children to deal with an already overly academic Kindergarten experience is a waste of time, and this can cause damage to a child's self-esteem, the loss of the positive attitude a child needs for learning, the blocking of natural gifts and potential talents. Parents/guardians may not have the power to effect changes in Kindergarten, but they do have the ability to choose a positive preschool atmosphere for their children in which curiosity and skills development are encouraged. The focus here is on enriching experiences rather than performances and when experiences are enriched, children will be able to perform to their ability. Researchers have made considerable progress in examining play and academics in the past 5 years. The overwhelming majority of published articles as discussed above report positive associations between play and cognition, particularly academic achievement. It is important to note that development or nature cannot be rushed and so parents/guardians have a big task of finding out the best school for their children and make informed choices.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are important:

- Sensitization to legislative bodies, school boards, teachers, parents, groups and even neighbors on the types of preschools available and what they offer.
- Sensitization to parents/guardians on what to look for when making choices for a preschool is important.

- Support of best practices by the Ministry of Education such as regular supervision of both the curricular and teachers in both public and private schools. This will ensure that play time is not used for other academic activities that are deemed to be more important.

References

- Ahamed, Y., Macdonald, H., Reed, K., Naylor, P.J., Liu-Ambrose, T. & McKay, H. (2007). School-based physical activity does not compromise children's academic performance. *Journal of Medical Science and Sports Exercises*, 39 pp. 371–376
- African Child Policy Forum. (2008). *The African report on child wellbeing*. Addis Ababa Ethiopia: Plan International.
- Bergen, D., & Mauer, D. (2000). Symbolic play, phonological awareness, and literacy skills at three age levels. In K. A. Roskos & J.F. Christie (Eds.), *Play and literacy in early childhood* (pp. 45-62). Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Buchmann, C., (2000). Family structure, parental perceptions, and child labor in Kenya: What factors determine who is enrolled in school? *Journal of Social Forces* 78 (4), 1349-1378
- Castle, K. (1998). Children's rule knowledge in invented games. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 12, 197-209.
- Dansky, J. L. (2000). Make-believe: A mediator of the relationship between play and associative fluency. *Child Development*, 51, 576-579.
- DuPaul G. J., Rapport M. D., (1991) Teacher ratings of academic skills: The development of the academic performance rating scale. *School Psychology Review*, 20: 284–300
- Farver, J. A., & Lee-Shin, Y. (2000). Acculturation and Korean-American children's social and play behavior. *Social Development*, 9, 316-336.
- Farver, J. A., Kim, Y.K., & Lee, Y. (2005). Cultural differences in Korean- and Anglo-American preschoolers' social interaction and play behaviors. *Child Development*, 66, 1088-1099.

- Farver, J. A., Kim, Y.K., & Lee-Shin, Y. (2000). Within cultural differences. Examining individual differences in Korean-American and European-American preschoolers' social pretend play. *Journal of Cross Cultural Psychology, 31*, 583-602.
- Frost, J. L., Wortham, S., & Reifel, S. (2001). *Play and child development*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Frost, L. L., Shin, D., & Jacobs, P. J. (1998). Physical environments and children's play. In O.N. Saracho & B. Spodek (Eds.). *Multiple perspectives on play in early childhood education* (pp. 255-294). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Guinhouya, B. C., Lemdani, M., Vilhelm, C., Hubert, H. G. K. Apete, G. K. & Durocher, A. (2009). How school time physical activity is the "big one" for daily activity among schoolchildren: a semi-experimental approach. *J Phys Act Health, 6*, pp. 510-519
- Isen, A., Daubman, K., & Nowicki, G. (2007). Positive affect facilitates creative problem solving. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 52*, 1122-1131.
- Jean Piaget (1999). *Family & Relationships*. NJ: Routledge
- Laasko, M., Poikkeus, A.M., Eklund, K., & Lyytinen, P. (1999). Social interactional behaviors and symbolic play competence as predictors of language development and their associations with maternal attention directing strategies. *Infant Behavior and Development, 22*, 541-556.
- Lyytinen, P., Laasko, M., Poikkeus, A., & Rita, N. (1999). The development and predictive relations of play and language across the second year. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology, 40*, 177-186.
- Muthoni, M.N. (2012). *Parental Roles in Provision of Play and Learning Materials among children with Physical Challenges: A case study of Joy Town special school, Kiambu County*. Unpublished Masters Thesis. Kenyatta University, Kenya.
- Oravec, J. (2000-2001). Interactive toys and children's education: Strategies for educators and parents. *Childhood Education, Winter*, 81-85.
- Pepler, D.J. & Ross, H.S. (2008). The effects of play on convergent and divergent problem-solving. *Child Development, 52*, 1202-1210.
- Wangari, M. N. (2011). *Factors hindering Outdoor Play in Preschools in Makadara District-Nairobi County, Kenya*. An Unpublished Masters Thesis. University of Nairobi. Kenya

Wanyama, P.M.& Chang'ach ,J.K. (2013). Education Reforms in Kenya for Innovation. *International journal of Humanities and Social Science. Vol 9 pp123-145*

About the author

Dr. Adeli Scholastic Musakali is a Senior Lecturer of Counseling Psychology at Moi University. Research interests: gender studies, traumatology, organizational and interventional Psychology and how they relate to challenges facing development. She is an accredited professional Counselor and founder Member of a Mentorship Program – YATA (You Are The Answer) where participants are mentored in discovering themselves and their potential.