

Investigating the Role of Pretend Play in Developing Creativity among Preschoolers

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the role of pretend play in developing creativity among preschoolers in isolated, associative, and cooperative play. The participants of the study were preschoolers aged from 3.5 to 5 years. The qualitative research approach was employed to observe preschoolers during pretend play of their own choice. The play was observed through nine sessions, 45 minutes each for nine weeks, which was video recorded followed by an interview with a teacher. High and low-structure play objects were provided to the preschoolers to begin the pretend play. As a result of this, cognitive and affective processes were assessed through observation. The results showed that pretend play opens the path for preschoolers to develop creativity and the prospect of an imaginative world. They exhibited imitation, correct representation of toys, irrespective of gender-based selection of toys, and conversion from isolated to cooperative play with progressing sessions. The study concluded that plays are vital and significantly contribute to developing creativity among preschoolers. Further, it is recommended that play intervention programs be introduced and implemented across the country to develop creativity through play among preschoolers.

Keywords: *Early childhood development, Preschoolers, Pretend play, Creativity*

1. Introduction

Pretend play involves an individual projecting a mental representation onto the real world (Lillard et al., 2013). Pretend play at a young age improves a child's cognitive flexibility and eventually their ability to express themselves creatively (Kaufman et al., 2012). The concept of creativity encompasses the ability to think of innovations quickly and broadly that would also be appealing to others (Paes & Janina, 2019). Further, Garaigordobil and Berruenco (2011)

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defined creativity as the capacity of the human brain to solve problems originally, reach new conclusions and ideas, and create new things. Children's limitless imagination enables them to analyze a scene from multiple perspectives and come up with different solutions. Additionally, children can play and explore in their natural environment such as school or their home through play (Mohan et al., 2022). According to Bergen (2002) many cognitive strategies such as joint planning, negotiation, problem-solving, and goal-seeking are exhibited during pretend play. Vygotsky (1978) argued that imagination represented a specific human form of cognitive activity. According to his theory, a central developmental function of pretend play was that children had to act against their immediate instincts and follow the 'rules of the game', moreover, it also helps them to gain control over their thoughts and actions (Goswami & Bryant, 2007). Similarly, Prairie (2013) stated self-regulation which is the inhibition of desires and self-control for the sake of a goal promotes socio-emotional development, helping children collaborate with peers, follow rules, stay on task, and control their impulses.

Pretend play also enables the expression of affective processes that foster creativity as children affect in fantasy is often expressed in pretend play (Russ & Schafer, 2006). According to Wallace and Russ (2015) both pretend play and creativity bring about affect-laden themes in fantasy and memory, the cognitive combination of affect, and include experiencing emotion and joy in creative expression. According to Russ (2003) creativity involves two types of affect processes: access to affect-laden thoughts and experience of the affected state. Russ and Schafer (2006) described access to affect-laden thoughts as the ability to think about and express ideas with affect-laden content i.e., affect-laden themes in narratives, daydreams, and play. This affect-laden cognition is the integration of both effects and cognition. Further, the second process is the ability to experience the effect or mood state is also related to creativity. Free play is both child-initiated and child-directed (Weisberg et al., 2015) where children do not abide by any rules and regulations, rather they innovate their own naive rules and directions. Play is one of the tools to create such individuals who can take on the challenges of the world, proving to be beneficial for different aspects—social, moral, mental, and physical of their development (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020; Cankaya et al., 2023; Golinkoff et al., 2006; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Irvin, 2017; Kessel, 2018).

In the 21st century, children need an education that prepares them for the challenges of an ill-defined world; to this end, creativity/creative thinking is the most ideal resource for addressing personal, social, and global issues (Nazir, 2020). Young children in developing countries like Pakistan are at risk for

multiple factors, including poverty, malnutrition, poor health, and unstimulating environments, which hinder cognitive motor, and social development (Asim & Nawaz, 2018). In Pakistan, parents are too busy to spend time with their children. Thus, a child's early mental, social, and psychological development occurs at school; however, it is a fact that both the public and private sector schools have failed to do their part in providing a better educational environment and curriculum for children at their early years (Arshad & Zamir, 2018).

The Early Childhood Development Index (ECDI) showed that over a quarter of Pakistani preschool children are underdeveloped in social-emotional skills, as indicated by aggressive behavior, distraction, and social competence (Finch et al., 2018). Play supports children's skills across all developmental domains: social and emotional, language (Ramani, 2012), cognitive, self-help, and large and small motor skills (Bongiorno, 2016). However, in the education system of Pakistan, Early Childhood Education (ECE) and pre-schooling are not given the attention they deserve by policymakers. The number of Montessori schools in Pakistan is growing, though most don't understand the true spirit of these schools (Arshad & Zamir, 2018). Pre-school educators continue to use age-inappropriate methods and activities for teaching young children in Pakistan (Juma, 2004). Schools in the public sector do not pay attention to the physical needs of students, preschoolers do not receive trained teachers, and public agencies do not reach out to parents to inform them about the importance of play in early childhood education (Ahmad et al., 2015).

1.1 Objective of the Study

Keeping in view the importance and benefits of pretend play, and the lack of conduct of research and attention given to the preschool years and play in the context of Pakistan, this study aimed to investigate the role of pretend play in developing creativity among pre-schoolers in Pakistan.

1.2 Research Questions

The research questions of the study included:

1. How does pretend play foster creativity [cognitive skills and self-regulation] during pretend play of pre-schoolers?
2. How did the type of pretend play change during free play of pre-schoolers?

The answers to these research questions may help in fulfilling the research and literature gap in the context of Pakistan and will help bring to light the importance of play among educators and policymakers.

2. Literature Review

Play is a form of recreation that fosters the development of social, cognitive, linguistic, and physical skills in children. There is a large body of

literature supporting the role of play in promoting healthy development in young children (Bento & Dias, 2017; Bitew & Sewagegn, 2023; Nijhof et al., 2018). The most significant physical activity for children during their childhood is play (Pioreschi et al., 2020). A child's play develops neural connections, social skills, language abilities, literacy skills, physical skills, problem-solving abilities, cognitive skills, emotional maturity, decision-making, sharing, flexibility, resilience, and the skill of tolerance (Dankiw et al., 2020; Iqbal, 2016; Xu, 2010). During play, children learn about society's norms and can explore them in a safe environment without fear of negative results (Hoffmann & Russ, 2016). From manifold theoretical perspectives, a child's imagination emerges and is developed through play which is their first creative activity (Garaigordobil & Berruoco, 2011). As stated by Wallace and Russ (2015), Vygotsky thinks of play as a vital activity in the cognition and affective processes involved in creativity and pretend play as a creative act, that provides the children with the opportunities to express these processes that are important for creativity. Piaget (1962) proposed that play, especially make-believe play (pretend play) serves as "a source of creative imagination". Vygotsky considered playing a major factor in cognitive development (Goswami & Bryant, 2007). Through pretend play, children manipulate their cognitive relations to information and take a representation as the object of cognition. Prairie (2013) stated that by using symbols and pretense, children progress in the development of language and literacy, problem-solving, perspective-taking, and other representational skills.

The results of a study by Garaigordobil et al. (2022), underscore the substantial impact of play on child development. Post-test covariance analyses showed significant positive outcomes across key domains. In terms of social development, participants exhibited increased positive social behaviours, a decrease in negative behaviours, and improved assertive cognitive strategies and prosocial resolution of interpersonal problems. The intervention also had positive effects on emotional development, leading to enhancements in self-concept, peer image, and emotional stability. Cognitive development underwent notable improvements, including increased verbal intelligence, enhanced verbal and graphic-figurative creativity, and the display of creative personality behaviours and traits. This empirical evidence solidifies the importance of play in fostering comprehensive and positive child development, emphasizing its influence on social, emotional, and cognitive aspects. Another study conducted by Jaggy (2023) showed that the incorporation of pretend play materials, coupled with play tutoring, emerges as an effective strategy for enhancing children's proficiency in social pretend play, fostering positive social behaviours, and nurturing favourable peer relationships.

Play objects or toys are generally helpful in triggering pretend play. The objects commonly used are high-structure and low-structure play objects. High-structure objects are the realia, and the pre-schoolers are familiar with their identity and functions (e.g., trucks, tea sets, dolls). Low structure objects are not bits of the toys normally and from the perspective of the pre-schoolers their identity and functions are probably less specific and unique (e.g., boxes, cardboard, round pieces of plastic) (McLoyd, 1983).

According to Parten (1933) children's play stages can be classified into non-social types; solitary or isolated play and social types; associative and cooperative play. In isolated play, the child engages in play alone and makes little interactions but no genuine attempts to communicate and collaborate. In associative play, two or three children play together around the imaginary situation. Discussions happen between them, but a very low level of organization and complementary roles are practiced. In cooperative play, children play together, organizing their behavior around the same imaginary situation, and assuming and performing the assigned complementary roles (Iqbal, 2016; Miller, 2014). Research has explored the potential of play interventions to enhance play skills in typically developing children and their predictive role in various developmental areas. These interventions are designed to target cognitive and emotional aspects of play, and the results have shown that a pretend play intervention enriched with emotional content significantly improved children's overall play skills in just three weeks (Russ et al., 2007). In another study involving school-age children without developmental issues, a group-based pretend play intervention with similarities to the previous study led to notable increases in children's imaginative play, as well as in the frequency and diversity of emotions expressed during their play sessions (Hoffmann & Russ, 2016).

Pretend play is believed to play a significant role in the development of children's social-cognitive and emotional skills, as it challenges their abilities to create mental representations while engaging in make-believe scenarios (Friedman & Leslie, 2007). When children engage in pretend play, they create mental representations of objects (such as using one object to represent another), control their impulses to align with the play scenario, and negotiate their roles with others, which can enhance their capacity to work with mental representations. This, in turn, helps foster essential social-cognitive and emotional skills like perspective-taking, social behavior, peer relationships, and emotion regulation (Jaggy et al., 2023; Vygotsky, 1978; Whitebread & O'Sullivan, 2012). Furthermore, the social context within which pretend play occurs can contribute significantly to the development of children's social-cognitive and emotional skills. By enacting various social scenarios during play,

children gain valuable social experience and learn to navigate different social situations with their bodies. Numerous studies support a positive correlation between children's engagement in social pretend play and their development of social-cognitive and emotional skills, including understanding emotions and comprehending the mental states and social dynamics of others (Brown et al., 2017; Hoffmann & Russ, 2012; Jaggy et al., 2023; Slot et al., 2017; Weisberg, 2015). In light of this wealth of research, it is evident that pretend play is not just an enjoyable childhood pastime but a vital component of early development, equipping children with the cognitive and emotional tools they need to navigate the complex social world and flourish in their future endeavours.

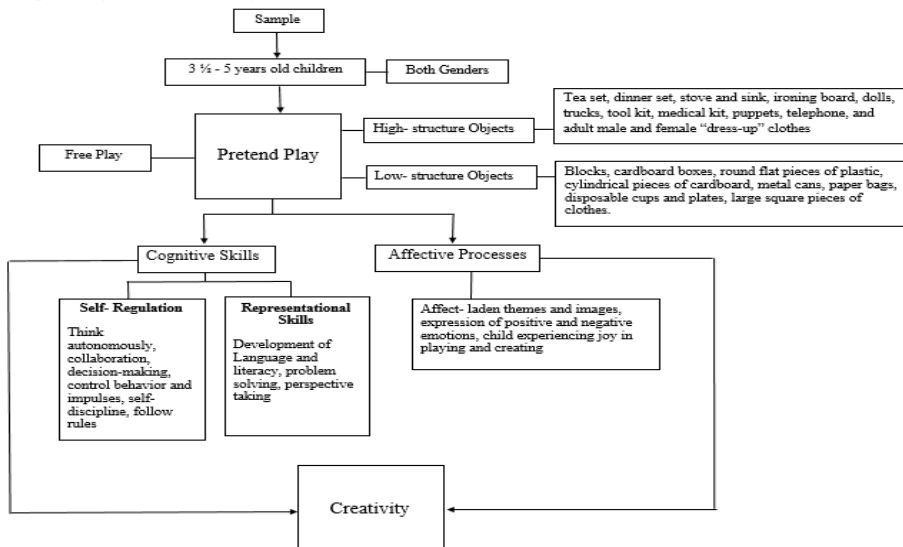
3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research study probes deeply into the research setting to get an in-depth understanding of the way pre-schoolers demonstrate during pretend play and the way observers within the context perceive them (Gay et al., 2011). The literature might yield little information about the phenomena in the Pakistani context, however, investigating the role of pretend play in developing creativity in a natural setting of a private school is worth probing. This approach includes observing the unique free-playing experiences of pre-schoolers followed by their teacher's interview to get an understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Figure 1

Conceptual framework of the study



3.2 Context of the Study

The study was planned to give more chances of independence to the pre-schoolers for free play under a single roof where they can find versatile pre-schoolers. For this purpose, one private sector school agreed with the plan and granted permission to conduct the study. The school was a small middle-standard school situated in the urban city of Punjab, Pakistan. A small playground has swings and small colourful classrooms equipped with toys and other accessories, serving as a play-encouraged setup. All the children were from the same background, language, social, and economic setup. Pre-schoolers belong to lower-middle-class families who hardly afford to send their children to school for education. Most parents were less literate and busy earning their daily means of living. The detailed plan of the study was shared and discussed with the teacher during a meeting. In setting up the study, researchers spent time with the pre-schoolers to familiarize them with the high and low-structure play objects.

3.3 Participants

The participants of the study were nineteen 3.5-5 years old preschoolers with an average age of 4.26 years. In terms of pretentious play, children between the ages of three and five are at their peak and in the first five years of life, 85% of the brain's intensive functioning and development occurs (Tahira et al., 2021; Weisberg, 2015). All participants were engaged from the same class of a medium-standard private school and were familiar with each other. They were Urdu language-speaking children however, they also understood and used common English words and sentences. All of them belonged to middle-class families living in small houses in the crowded streets of the urban city of Punjab, Pakistan. The sampling strategy in this qualitative study involves selecting participants purposefully based on specific criteria (age group, school consent). The preschoolers identity by name was hidden by devising a coding scheme to identify individuals by taking up an initial letter of their name, followed by their gender, and serial number respectively. Details of the participants along with their established code are given below:

Table 1

Detail of the study participants

| Sr. | Code | Age | Sr. | Code | Age |
|-----|------|---------|-----|-------|-----------|
| 1. | IM-1 | 5 years | 11. | HF-11 | 4 years |
| 2. | MM-2 | 5 years | 12. | KM-12 | 3.5 years |
| 3. | BM-3 | 5 years | 13. | HM-13 | 4 years |
| 4. | KF-4 | 4 years | 14. | MF-14 | 4 years |
| 5. | HM-5 | 4 years | 15. | AM-15 | 4 years |
| 6. | MF-6 | 4 years | 16. | AM-16 | 5 years |

| | | | | | |
|-----|-------|-----------|-----|-------|-----------|
| 7. | MF-7 | 4 years | 17. | MF-17 | 3.5 years |
| 8. | NF-8 | 5 years | 18. | SM-18 | 5 years |
| 9. | HF-9 | 5 years | 19. | RF-19 | 3.5 years |
| 10. | PF-10 | 3 ½ years | | | |

3.3 Materials

Adapting (McLoyd, 1983) two types of play objects were provided to the pre-schoolers to elicit the pretend play.

3.3.1 High-structure play objects: tea set, dinner set, stove and sink, ironing board, and dolls. Trucks and a tool kit. Medical kit, telephone (neutral), an adult male and female “dress-up” clothes.

3.3.2 Low-structure play objects: blocks, cardboard boxes, round flat pieces of plastic, cylindrical pieces of cardboard, metal cans, paper bags, and large square pieces of clothes.

3.4 Data Collection

Two methods were employed to collect data:

1. Observation of preschoolers during pretend play (video recording, checklist)
2. Interview with the corresponding teacher

3.4.1 Observation Protocol

The overall duration of pretend play was based on nine weeks. The investigator visited the school once a week for nine consecutive weeks and scheduled a video recording session that lasted for 45 minutes each day. The investigator recorded the play in the morning to avoid fatigue or lack of interest in pre-schoolers. An observational checklist was developed based on the Complex Pretend Play (CPP) of Play in the Early Childhood Evaluation System (PIECES). The PIECES assessment procedure involves observation of a child engaged in free play. Also, the PIECES assessment can be conducted in any setting with any toy set provided the toy set is large and varied enough to elicit a wide range of behaviors (Mohan et al., 2022).

3.4.2 Interview with the Corresponding Teacher

The interview was conducted with the corresponding teacher to have an in-depth understanding of the demonstrated behaviors of pre-schoolers during pretend play. The teacher was living in the same vicinity and had knowledge and understanding of pre-schoolers' context. The teacher has extensive experience in dealing with children of this age group. The cognitive skills and affective processes evident in the videos and PIECES were shared with the teacher and their underlying inferences to give them meaning without the mere involvement of the researcher to minimize error in tagging meaning to the observed

phenomena. The validity of the data was ensured through member checking and cross-checking of data captured through three sources to ensure the accuracy and credibility of data.

3.5 Data Collection

The researchers visited the school on the agreed days and times with the school administration. The participants were invited to the classroom where a video camera was installed. An observational checklist of Play in Early Childhood Evaluation System (PIECES) to assess procedure involves observation of a child engaged in free play. One researcher recorded all nine sessions, and the other researcher took the observations. Both high and low-structure play objects were provided for play. The researcher remained silent throughout the session and no guidance or instruction was given to the participants. During pretend play pre-schoolers demonstrated different actions explicating cognitive skills and affective processes which were observed and captured through the video recording which served as the baseline to extract information regarding creativity. The observer also observed the play activities of pre-schoolers on the checklist that indicated the cognitive and affective development of participants in isolated, associative, and cooperative play.

3.6 Data Analysis

In the first step of data analysis, video-recorded and interview data were transcribed. The data from all sources were analyzed and presented in the form of themes. The emerging themes from observed data through PIECES were matched with the video data and then shared with the teacher and sought inferences from teachers' interview to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the outcome generated. The results presented are based on three sources—observations, video recording, and interview and merged to understand the phenomena at hand.

3.7 Compliance with Ethical Standards

An institutional support letter was issued by the competent authority of the researchers' institute (AIOU) to conduct the study. An introductory consent form providing information about the study was sent to the potential study participants—the pre-schoolers (parents of the children consented on behalf of their children) so they could decide whether to participate in the study or not (Clark & McCann, 2005). Prior permission for video recording and photographs was taken from the parents of the students and the school administration. Informed consent was sought which is imperative for researchers to proceed in their research (Roberts & Allen, 2015). To hide the identity of the pre-schoolers their faces were made blur.

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

The observational data and video recordings during pretend play were analyzed inductively. The main findings that emerged from observations are presented in Table 3. Later, teachers' interview data were analyzed to know her reflection on the observed results of pretend play. The analyses were made, and cohesive results from observations, video records, and interview were merged and presented altogether. The data collected from the teacher verify the cognitive and affective development among pre-schoolers. The class teacher is the one who spends more time with children, and she was more aware of the changes/development made in the pre-schoolers during nine weeks of free sessions of pretend play.

4.1 Identification of types of play

The given table is a clear picture of the rehearsal of three types of play: isolated, associative, and cooperative. The pre-schoolers are represented by their codes in the table. The researchers identified the types of pretend play with the help of video-recorded data and observations.

Table 2

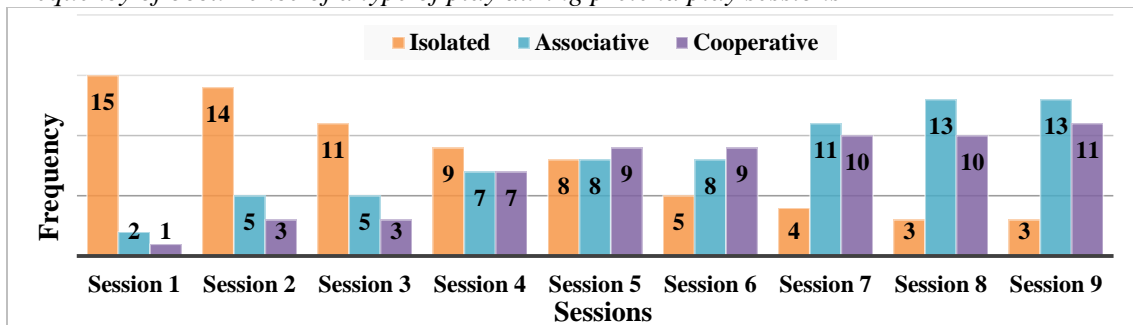
Detail of the type of play executed by the participants in nine sessions

| Sr. | Type of play | Session 1 | Session 2 | Session 3 | Session 4 | Session 5 | Session 6 | Session 7 | Session 8 | Session 9 |
|-----|--------------|--|---|---|---|---|---|--|--|---|
| 1. | Isolated | PF-10, SM-18, HM-13, MF-6, MF-7, MF-14, IM-1, MM-2, NM-3, NF-8, AM-16, AM-15 | SM-18, MM-2, HM-13, MF-6, MF-17, MF-14, IM-1, NM-3, NF-8 | MF-7, HF-9, HF-11, KF-4, BM-3, SM-18, HM-5, PF-10, AM-16, AM-15 | MF-17, MF-7, HF-9, HF-11, NF-8, BM-3, HM-5, MF-14 | AM-16, MF-17, HM-13, MF-14, HF-11, NF-8, MF-7 | HF-11, MF-7, MF-6, RF-19, SM-18, HF-11, NF-8, HM-5, MF-17 | AM-16, MF-17, HM-13, HF-11, NF-8 | AM-16, MF-17, HM-13 | NF-8, MF-14, IM-1 |
| 2. | Associative | AM-16, PF-10, HF-9, AM-15, KF-4, MF-7, MF-6, NF-8, MM-2, BM-3 | BM-3, NF-8, PF-10, HF-9, AM-16, AM-15, KF-4, MF-7, AM-16, AM-15, KF-4, MF-7, MM-2, BM-3 | HF-11, HF-9, KF-4, MF-7, SM-18, HM-13 | HM-13, SM-18, KF-4, MF-6, MM-2, HM-5, BM-3 | KF-4, MF-14, AM-15, KM-12, MF-17, MF-14 | KM-12, HM-13, SM-18, MF-17, NF-8, HF-9, PF-10 | KF-4, MF-14, AM-15, KM-12, MF-17, MF-14, MF-7 | PF-10, HF-9, AM-16, AM-15, KF-4, MF-7 | KF-4, MF-14, AM-15, KM-12, MF-17, MF-14 |
| 3. | Cooperative | MF-7, MF-14 | HM-13, MF-6 | MM-2, MF-7, HM-13, MF-6 | MM-2, IM-1, KF-4, MF-6, HF-9, HF-11, NF-8 | BM-3, MM-2, IM-1, HM-13, HM-5, HF-9, PF-10, RF-19 | IM-1, MM-2, KM-12, RF-19, NF-8, KF-4, MF-6, AM-16, HF-11 | MM-2, IM-1, KF-4, MF-6, HF-9, HF-11, NF-8, MF-17 | IM-1, MM-2, KM-12, RF-19, NF-8, KF-4, MF-6, AM-16, HF-11 | MF-7, BM-3, MM-2, IM-1, HM-13, HM-5, HF-9, PF-10, RF-19 |

The below graph represents the frequency of the plays in nine sessions. The graph represents a change in types of play in different sessions.

Figure 2

Frequency of occurrence of a type of play during pretend play sessions



4.2 Identification of aspects of pretend play appeared during sessions

During nine sessions of pretend play, multiple cognitive skills, and affective processes of pre-schoolers were seen as evident in Table 3.

Cognitive skills development and affective processes appeared during pretend play: Cognitive skills observed in nine sessions were self-regulation and representation skills. In affective processes, affect-laden themes in children's pretend play, expression of both positive and negative emotions, and the joy that children experience during play were observed.

Table 3

Cognitive skills and affective processes identified during pretend play

| Sr. # | Type of play | Cognitive skills appeared during the pretend play | | | | | | | | | | Affective processes appeared during the pretend play | | | |
|-------|------------------|---|----|----|----|-----------------|----|----|----|--------|---|--|------|-------|---------|
| | | Representation | | | | Self-Regulation | | | | | | ALT | EOPE | EO NE | CEJ P&C |
| | | DL &L | PS | PT | AT | CoI | DC | SD | FR | CB & I | | | | | |
| 1. | Cooking | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 2. | Doctor & patient | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| 3. | Ironing | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| 4. | Blocks | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| 5. | Repairing stuff | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| 6. | Dolls | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| 7. | Building a house | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----|--------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8. | Horns | | ✓ | | | | | | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| 9. | Loading/ unloading stuff | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 10. | Tools | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

Key: DL&L=Development of language and literacy, PS= Problem solving, PT= Perspective taking, AT= Autonomous thinking, Col= Collaboration, DC= Decision making, SD= Self-discipline, FR= Follow rules, CB&I= Control behavior, and impulses, ALT= Affect-laden themes, EOPE= Expression of positive emotions, EONE= Expression of negative emotions, CEJP&C= Child experiencing joy in playing and creating.

4.3 Cognitive Skills: Representational Skills

4.3.1 Language development

The results showed that linguistic skills during pretend play developed at a small level. Pre-schoolers during associative and cooperative play like playing with blocks and building a house used novel words: bodybuilder, jahaaz (airplane), khiloney (toys), and banda (man) for whatever the structure they built. Imitation of the same words by pre-schoolers was also observed throughout sessions.

4.3.2 Problem-solving

Problem-solving was the most observed skill shown by the pre-schoolers, in which the substitution of the objects happened. A girl substitutes her hands with water to do the dishes, her finger as a vegetable but later substitutes a vehicle tyre, a block, and a rolled-up piece of paper for that, a spanner and a screwdriver as the spoon and a knife (HF-9, RF-19, NF-8). A boy during an isolated play used iron to iron the available cloth. In the next sessions, a few of them substitutes cloth with paper bags, cylindrical cardboard, carpet, and a cap (MM-2, PF-10, MF-17, KF-4, HF-9, MF-7). During an isolated play, a girl substitutes blocks as a sofa for their doll to sit on, an airplane, and a man to play with them (MF-14, SM-18, HM-5, AM-16). However, during associative play, the pre-schoolers use the available blocks, tools, and kitchen items to make a fence of the parking area for the vehicles (MM-2, NF-8, KF-4, AM-15, Km-12, HF-11, HM-13).

Playing with the low structure play objects a girl uses cardboard as the dress of her doll, and her fellow imitates her, later she substitutes it both as binoculars and a trumpet. In the following sessions, many kids substitute the cardboards as the trumpets (HF-9, MF-14, HF-9). Two other girls use paper bags for packing their toys and pretend to be the mothers, who are coming back from the grocery (KF-4, MF-7).

4.3.3 *Perspective-taking*

Pre-schoolers display their perspective-taking skills during play. Cooking like her mom a girl pretends to throw the garbage in the corner of the room understanding that her mom throws the garbage after peeling the vegetables (HF-9). While ironing, a boy suggests to his fellow not to iron the paper bag, saying that his mother only irons the clothes (HM-13, SM-18). Imitating their teacher, two girls after deciding to go shopping wear the hijab like their teacher does (KF-4, MF-14). During an associative play, a boy pretending to be the contractor makes a call to do the commitment with the buyer first, and then he goes back to his crew telling them that it's time to deliver the stuff. They play and handle the situation from a professional contractor's perspective (MM-2, BM-3).

In a session, a girl tries to fix her broken doll with a screwdriver thinking that everything can be fixed by this tool (MF-6). A girl uses a hammer to fix the broken telephone thinking that elders use tools to fix the broken things (HM-13). Copying her another girl also starts hitting the available toys near her, (cooking pot with the screwdriver) thinking that maybe everyone uses different tools to fix things (KF-4).

Findings of the interview with the corresponding teacher supported the results that during and after pretend play sessions vocabulary of pre-schoolers improved. The pre-schoolers were more confident in handling different situations. Moreover, they were good at perspective-taking and imitating the roles of their parents and teachers.

“During these nine weeks, I see a change in the conversation of my students, they were more talkative and confident to name objects”. Children learn a lot of new ways to deal with situations, they were more creative in solving their issues such as with the substitute use of objects” (Corresponding Teacher).

Figure 3

Representational skills: Pre-schoolers during pretend play



4.4 Self-Regulation Skills

4.4.1 *Autonomous thinking*

Free play gives the children an opportunity to think autonomously and encourages them to take initiative. During the sessions due to the non-availability of vegetables, the pre-schoolers handle the situation so intelligently, that they use fingers, paper roll, and wheels as vegetables and think of the box's cap as a plate and screwdriver as a spoon and knife (HF-9, PF-10, HF-9, KF-4).

4.4.2 *Decision making*

Five pre-schoolers during an associative play, pretend to be setting a table for lunch. Initially, they cook the food and eat it, but after some time, they mutually decide to load the utensils onto their trucks, pretending that they are going for a picnic. They also decided to cook again once they reached the agreed destination. In another session, a boy puts all of his toys in a bag so that it will become easy for his fellows to carry the toys on their trucks. Everyone follows his lead and helps to provide him with the toys (MM-2). Dominant participants assign duties and set the rules of the game. Pretending to be the auto-mechanics the boy bosses around and assign the duties to his fellows (AM-16, MF-7, IM-1). In another session playing with the blocks, a 3 ½ years old girl sets the rules of the game and decides what to call whatever the structure they make from the blocks (MF-17).

Figure 4

Self-regulation skills: Autonomous thinking and decision-making



4.4.3 Self-discipline

Self-discipline and staying on task are also observed during the sessions. A pre-schooler while withstanding the temptation to play with the doll, stays on the cooking play that she is playing with her friend (HF-9, PF-10). Throughout the session, a pre-schooler despite wanting so much to play with the trucks stays in his role of a helper to load or ask others to make room for their trucks (BM-3, IM-1, MM-2).

4.4.4 Follow the rules

Pre-schoolers are seen to follow each other's rules. During playing with iron two girls follow the leads of a younger girl (RF-19, NF-8, MF-17). All the boys while playing with the trucks follow the rules set by their mate (IM-1). In another session, three preschoolers follow the rules of the game set by a guy. However, after some time the girls decide to play separately, and one of them leads the group (MM-2, HF-9, HF-11, IM-1).

Figure 5

Self-regulation skills: Self-discipline and following the rules



4.4.5 Control behavior and impulses

Few pre-schoolers while being dominant control the behavior of their fellows. A girl wants to cook food like her friend, but her friend does not give her the charge of cooking (NF-8, RF-19). Likewise playing with the trucks and pretending to be the bricklayers in different sessions one pre-schooler controls everyone, gives them instructions, and sets the rules of the play and all his companions follow his rules (IM-1). In another play, a girl instructs another girl and packs all their toys but after some time the least active girl becomes

dominant, she takes the bag from her friend and starts putting stuff in that bag and after that throughout the play, she controls her friend (KF-4, MF-6).

4.4.6 Collaboration

Pre-schoolers collaborate and play together while ironing, cooking, helping in loading, and unloading the stuff from trucks, and playing doctor and patient. With the progressing sessions, they mingle and collaborate more than in the previous one. Boys collaborate and pretend to be auto-mechanics and constructors repair their fellows' trucks and build a tower-shaped house respectively (BM-3, AM-16, IM-1, MM-2, SM-18). After getting tired of playing with the trucks, the boys mutually decide to play doctor and patient and decide their roles as doctors and patients (BM-3, MM-2).

The class teacher was of the view that students in the class display self-regulation skills such as cooperation, decision-making, obeying rules, etc. The teacher also stated, *"I think students in my class always follow the rules, they collaborate to play games, they sometimes become aggressive...but during these sessions, they collaborate more, make their decisions/choices, they were less aggressive"* (Corresponding Teacher).

Figure 6

Self-regulation skills: Control behavior & and impulses and collaboration



4.5 Affective Processes: Affect-laden themes

The data showed affect-laden themes during pretend play. Pre-schoolers pretend to be the contractors, mothers, teachers, guests and hosts, doctors and patients, bricklayers, and auto-mechanics. Repetition of these themes was seen throughout the sessions (BM-3, AM-16, IM-1, KF-4, MF-6).

4.5.1 Expression of the negative and positive emotions

Some pre-schoolers are reluctant to share the toys and hide them from their fellows (HF-11, MF-17, KF-4, MF-6, AM-15, NF-8, KF-14). The expression of positive emotions is seen more than negative emotions. Pre-schoolers were friendly with each other, they played together, cooperated, and looked happy during the sessions (BM-3, AM-16, IM-1, NF-8, RF-19). It is observed that overall, there is a very positive environment maintained by the pre-schoolers.

4.5.2 Pre-schoolers experiencing joy while playing and creating: Pre-schoolers enjoy creating something and playing with other fellow kids in all nine sessions. They jump with joy and share with other children when creating something with blocks.

The teacher shared that it appeared that the children were happy playing and creating things and ideas. They displayed positive intentions toward playing together and sharing toys. The teacher was of the view that “*pretend play allowed children to be happy and free, they enjoyed their time in these sessions and learned new things*” (Corresponding Teacher).

Figure 7

Affect-laden themes: Expression of emotions & and experiencing joy



5. Discussion and Conclusion

This research study endorsed that pretend play contributes at large to pre-schoolers' creativity in both cognitive and affective development. Through pretend play the pre-schoolers thought of innovative ideas and insight to develop creative products that are related to the matters of daily life. The findings were in accordance with the earlier study in a similar context which concluded that due to playing cognitive development of children enhanced, they think more logically and solve problems in a better way than others (Ahmad et al., 2016; Andersen et al., 2023). Literature on the relevant topic highlighted that cognitive skills and affective processes are critical to the development and enhancement of creativity among pre-schoolers (Bitew & Sewagegn, 2023; Russ, 2003; Russ & Wallace, 2013). Language skills of pre-schoolers improved after the pretend play. The findings were in line with the study conducted by Christ et al. (2014) which indicated that children learn novel words and their meanings by conversing with their teachers and peers.

Regarding affective process development, this study adds to the existing body of empirical evidence for using play to develop and enhance the affective development of preschool children. The positive changes in preschool children's social (cooperation, collaboration, group games, etc.) (Jaggy et al., 2023), and emotional (expression of joy, anger, happiness, etc.) development are consistent with the previous studies (Blewitt et al., 2020; San et al., 2021; White & Walker, 2018). The mentioned literature indicated that the development of a child's

physical, intellectual, social, and emotional abilities should be a primary goal of early childhood education.

According to Gillespie (2016) '*it's never just play-it's learning*' because the learning that emerges from play is deep and meaningful for children as they've shaped it themselves. Even though today children spend more time in preschools than in the past. The time that was devoted to free play has been limited and the focus has been shifted to pre-academics as the foundation of school readiness (Prairie, 2013). Play is an integral part of children's development and helps them understand the world around them. Participating in play allows them to learn how to communicate, get along, think, make decisions, solve problems, and gain confidence. Irrespective of its importance, play only occurs during the spare time when there is nothing to do (Hewes, 2010). Earlier conducted research (Amadasun, 2022; Chylinska & Gut, 2020; Weisberg et al., 2015) and this study explored that pretend play is effective in developing creativity, which proves to be more helpful for academic success than preschool academic instruction. This study sheds light on the fact that play directly hits on the learning of life skills, if taught to pre-schoolers they would have a long-lasting impact on the rest of their lives. Furthermore, the study concluded that pre-schoolers do not have much exposure to a flourishing environment even then, the pre-schoolers displayed all the skills needed to foster creativity. Together, the pre-schoolers produced new ideas and some of them they acquired from their surroundings and imagined the characters from real life. They learnt new words and the use of words in their routine conversations.

Additionally, the study emphasized the remarkable resilience and adaptability of pre-schoolers in cultivating creativity despite limited exposure to a flourishing environment. Despite potential environmental constraints, the observed pre-schoolers demonstrated the ability to generate innovative ideas, drawing inspiration both from their immediate surroundings and by imaginatively conceptualizing characters from real life. Furthermore, their engagement in pretend play facilitated language development, as evidenced by the acquisition of new words and their incorporation into routine conversations. This resilience and creative prowess suggested that even within constrained environments, pre-schoolers possess inherent capacities for creative expression and linguistic growth through imaginative play experiences.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study on the role of pretend play in developing creativity among pre-schoolers, the following recommendations can be considered:

1. The study recommended that preschool children may learn life skills, moral values, and obligations during their early years. Pre-schoolers can learn basic skills through free play and pretend play, which cannot be taught in the classroom.
2. The young child may be provided with a flourishing environment. The role of adults in developing creative, imaginative, and cognitive skills in preschoolers cannot be overlooked.
3. The study further recommended that to nurture creativity through play, play intervention programs for preschools must be designed and practiced across the country. A child has the whole universe in his mind but only needs an opportunity, and they should be provided with the opportunities to engage in creative endeavors, whether it is problem-solving, building a structure, or creating an environment to tell the imagined story.
4. Conduct longitudinal studies to explore the long-term effects of pretend play on creativity development in preschoolers. Understanding the sustained impact of play over time can further inform educational practices and policies.
5. Provide ongoing professional development opportunities for educators to stay informed about the latest research and best practices in using pretend play to enhance creativity. This ensures that teachers are well-equipped to create enriching play experiences for preschoolers.

Implementing these recommendations can contribute to creating a more conducive environment for the development of creativity among pre-schoolers, fostering their cognitive and imaginative abilities through purposeful and well-structured play activities.

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