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IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF ACTIVITIES IN PRESCHOOLS' LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: A STUDY OF SOUTH JORDAN

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Abstract

This study discourses the techniques through which quality of activities in learning environment within the preschools in Jordan could be enhanced. A stratified random sample of preschools was selected to represent these government (n = 84) and private preschools (n = 23). Independent observers rated the activities of preschools by ECERS-R. Overall, 13% of government preschools were found to be inadequate, 43% were of minimal quality, 43% were of good quality and 1% was excellent. The quality of government preschools activities was significantly higher than the quality of private preschools activities; nevertheless there were no significant differences in the other domains. Findings suggested the importance of continuing to implement high quality of preschools activities in Jordan.

Key Words: Assessment, Jordan, Preschools, Activities, Learning Environment, Quality.

1.Introduction

In their early years of life, children begin to learn how to live together and to build skills with foundational capabilities that precede them; moreover the early years of children's life are also considered to be crucial for developing social skills and the ability to make friend (Moss et al., 1994). Children's development is the result of the interactions between biological, maturation and environment; including their experience, relationships and activities; which can be used to predict Children's academic future and life performance (Reynolds, Ou, & Topitzes, 2004; Cassidy et al., 2005). Quality of preschools activities have become main aspect in educational policies, an imperative for practitioners in this field (Munton, et al, 1997). Preschools have wonderful activities for children, and they help to foster independence, self-sufficiency and provide a stimulating learning experience (Stipek, 2001). In relation to this, Harms et al. (2005) report that activities are an exciting way to learn something new and also explore the various areas of development needed for them, and to help them strengthen their vocabulary, listening skills , following directions, vocabulary, encourage self-expression, develop imagination, and provide many health benefits.

According to Burchinal et al. (1996) activities within the preschools play an important role in children development where children can learn through hands-on experiences. In sum, activities should have

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five defining characteristics (Scarr, 1994). Firstly, each activity should be in an adequate location. Secondly, activities should be visible to all children. Thirdly, the activities should have an adequate sitting and working surface. Fourthly, they should have sufficient display and storage space. Additionally, Morrow, (2007) states the similar findings, that each preschool can be divided into zones. Consequently, some of the typical activities in the preschool classroom include art, reading, math, science, dramatization, computer, and blocks.

Harms, et al. (1998) report that preschool ears represent a window of opportunity to practice a lot of activities such as several different types of fine motor materials, including small building toys such as interlocking blocks and Lincoln logs; art materials such as crayons and scissors; manipulative materials such as beads of different sizes for stringing, pegs and pegboards, sewing cards; and puzzles.Therefore a child will have fun while experiencing real educational and emotional growth.

2.Dimensions of Activities

According to Harms et al. (2005) fine motor materials such as play dough, clay, wood gluing, or carpentry; collage materials; tools such as safe scissors, staplers, hole punches, tape dispensers should be developmentally appropriate and accessible for daily use, and teachers should provide appropriate materials for such play. Vandell, et al. (2000) states that children need a variety of age-appropriate and developmentally-appropriate toys and materials that they can manipulate with their hands and play with at will. These activities strengthen fine motor control while encouraging skill development that contributes to academic readiness.

According to the art dimension, Harms et al. (2005) mentioned that children's art should be respected and appreciated as individual, creative expression. Materials and opportunities, which create art projects at a beginner and advanced level, should be available as children are developmentally ready for them. On the other hand, he stated that music and children's movement need a supportive environment that includes a teacher and a variety of materials to encourage their self-expression through music and movement. In another research, Walsh & Gardner (2005) reported that powerful block requires sufficient space and time in a safe area to expand on concepts and ideas. Also he stated that the blocks play should be with a variety of ways and accessories, and it should be available indoor and outdoor in preschools. In related argument, Weinstein (1987) explained that sand and water play give children the opportunity to learn concepts through active exploration with their senses. In relation to this, Sakai, et al. (2003) argued that dramatic play gives children the opportunity to discover an array of roles and responsibilities. It provides a vehicle through which they make sense of their world, and it is enhanced by space, time, props, materials, and supportive teachers. Another dimension is science and nature, Vosniadou, at al. (2001) referred that science and nature activities and materials foster curiosity and experimentation benefiting the young learner through direct experience and application to other areas of learning. Concept and observation skills are strengthened through science procedures.

Montes, et al. (2005) found that TV/video viewing and computer use tend to be passive in comparison to active involvement with materials and people. The use of each should be confined to subject material, that is, age-appropriate and mentally stimulating. Time limits encourage more active learning. Participation should not be required. To assess the quality of activities in preschools, the researcher used the ECERS-R. This instrument has been widely used in the early childhood field for many years to determine and measure the quality of child care programs. Finally, Hooks, Scott-Little, Marshall, & Brown, (2006) emphasized the role of teachers in the implementation and application of preschools activities, and providing the time and space to do that. They also state that teachers with experience and background in early childhood education are more likely to understand how to structure classroom settings and teacher-student interactions in a way that benefits children's learning than untrained teachers.

On the other hand, Jordan has been extensively reformed to be in line with the informed global movement. However, Neugebauer (2007) pointed out there are many fundamental challenges and issues that are still impeding and restraining reform in the preschool environment in Jordan, such as the preschools quality. Additionally, studies conducted by Alsror et al. (1996), Alsror (1999), Khore (2003) to evaluate the results of the reforms have shown that children still demonstrate low skill levels in areas like critical thinking.

Similarly, AL-Hrob, (2008) and Ihmedh, (2008) have noted that there is a decline in students achievement in subsequent grades when little attention is paid to the quality of preschools and its dimensions, to our knowledge, research pertaining to preschoolers' activity are limited. Therefore, the current research is designed to provide an accurate and up-to-date data on the quality of activities in preschools in Jordan through early childhood environment rating scale-revised (ECERS-R)

3. Purpose

The purpose of the current study was to assess the quality of preschools 'activities in learning environment with the special reference to Jordan in terms of: Fine motor; Art; Music Movement; Blocks; Sand and Water; Dramatic play; Nature/ Science; Use of TV; Video, and/or Computer, also the study attempted to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the activities in preschools in Jordan. And finally to determine whether there is a significant different between government and private schools .

4.Research Methodology and Samples

This section attempts to describe the population, selection of the preschools and samples of the current study. The process of sampling consists of three phases: identification or definition of the population, determination of required sample size, and selection of the sample (Gay, 2009). Sekaran (2003) refers to population as the entire group of people, events, or things of interest that the researcher wishes to investigate. Gay et al. (2009) suggest that the population in a research study may cover almost any geographical area. It is impossible to include all the preschools in the south of Jordan. Through a review of literature, Cohen and Manion (1994) suggest that the sample size depends on, first, the purpose of the study; second on the nature of the population (homogeneity or heterogeneity); third, on the types of statistical tests that are to be employed; fourth, the complexity of the dependent variables; and fifth, on the time and resources available.

The location of the study was in the Educational Directorates in south of Jordan. The researcher has elected the south of Jordan because there are many studies referred that there are many issues need to research for example quality, activities. On the other hand, these issues are neglected in south of J Jordan. The researcher has distributed within Educational Directorates, namely: 1) Ma'daba, 2) Al Karak, 3), AL-Tafela, 4) AL-aqaba, 5) and 6) Ma'an Directorate Overall, in the six Educational Directorates, there are four hundred preschools. It is impossible to include all the preschools from all the six Educational Directorates in this study.

Simple random sampling is "the best single way to obtain a representative sample" (Gay & Airasian, 2000). For the current study, a sample size of 135 is required based on Lenth's calculation. The current research utilized quantitative method to collect the data. The questionnaire was adopted to measure the subscales of activities.).

There are reasons for adopting descriptive survey methods for the current study. This study attempts to elicit information about the current status of quality in the learning environment of government preschools in Jordan. ECERS-R is a measure of activities and consists of 50 items organized into 8 subscales: (1) Fine motor; (2) Art; (3) Music Movement; (4) Blocks; (5) Sand and Water; (6) Dramatic play; (7) Nature/ science; and (8) Mathematic. Data were collected from preschool teachers. In the present study, the instrument was translated into Arabic and then given to a group of professionals in the fields of early childhood education, evaluation and measurement in order to validate the instrument's language clarity and the suitability of the items of what they are measuring in the Jordanian context. The feedback received by these experts was taken into account, and modifications were made to some items to make them more culturally appropriate.

5.Procedures

The study was carried out in the first semester of academic years 2010/2011 to ensure that every questionnaire delivered to the preschools sample according to the six educational directories in Jordan which

helps to easily administer the instruments in the preschools in different areas in Jordan. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale- Revised (Harms et al., 1998) is an observational instrument. Each item is rated from 1= inadequate, 3 = Minimal, 5 = Good and 7 = Excellent. Based on indicators, which are descriptions of the activities of preschools, the scale contains seven items. Items scores are created by averaging across each of the items within a subscale, and the overall score is created by taking an average of all the items. For categorical analyses, preschools environment's were classified as inadequate (mean score < 2), minimal (mean score ≥ 2 and < 4), good (mean score ≥ 4 and < 6), and excellent (mean score ≥ 6).

6.1.Procedures for Data Collection

The consent and support from the Ministry of Education in Jordan for permission to conduct the research was required. After that, the researcher has given the teachers two weeks to return the questionnaire. Gay (1979) claims that it is more productive to send the instrument to a person of authority rather than directly to the person with the desired information. Thus, in the case of the present study, the head master or assistants were distributing the instrument and asked the teachers to complete and return them within the time allowed.

Collecting the instruments was carried out in different ways. In some preschools that are quite far from the researcher's place, the head master or assistant were asked to collect them and to post the instrument to the researcher. In other schools which are easily accessible and therefore do not consume a great deal of time to reach, the researcher was collected the instruments in person after a specific deadline, usually three or four weeks as agreed with the head master or assistants. In a few cases, the researcher was collecting the instrument at the head master's home which is near to her place.

7.RESULTS

This study employs a descriptive survey and analytical design to assess the quality of activities in preschools in south of Jordan. Therefore, procedure of analysis examined categorically the percentage of government and private preschools that were observed to be inadequate, minimal, good, or excellent in quality. After that, comparison between of the seven items of preschools activities to ensure whether government and private preschools significantly differed.

Procedure of Analysis was revealed that 2.2% were excellent.12.1% of government preschools were observed to be inadequate, 40.8% were minimal, 43.9% were good and. In other hand, 22% of private preschools was observed to be inadequate, 62.9% were minimal, 18.4% were good and 0.0% was excellent. Table 1 shows the percentage of government and private preschoolson each of the seven items. As a result, the activities of private preschools were worse than the government preschools.

Table 1: Percentage of items Activities according to preschool type.

Quality subscale	Inadequate		minimal		good		excellent	
	Govern	Private	Govern	Private	Govern	Private	Govern	Private
Fine motor	37.5	46.8	26.6	30.9	26.6	16.4	5.0	4.2
Art	8.9	21.7	30.9	25.1	41.2	25.1	12.2	25.1
Music Movement	12.3	38.2	32.2	33.8	30.3	16.4	23.8	8.8
Blocks	35.1	68.6	38.8	25.1	23.3	4.2	0.0	0.0
Sand and Water	4	16.4	11	21.7	38.8	38.1	44.4	22.7
Dramatic play	18.3	50.2	21.9	17.3	25.6	17.5	30.2	12.0
Nature/ science	12.3	29.4	66.7	60.9	17.8	4.2	2.2	4.4
Mathematic	36.7	21.6	33.3	25.5	44.2	11.6	16.9	7.7

With respect to fine motor only 5% of government preschool were observed to be excellent and 26.6% were good. However, 27.6% were observed to be minimal, and 37.5% were inadequate with respect to fine motor within items, well organized materials had the highest mean (3.77), whereas Different types of fine

motor materials (2.55) and labeled shelves that encouraged self-help (2.54) had the lowest means. On the other hands, Art, 12.2% of government preschools were observed to be excellent, and 41.2% were good. However, 30.9% were minimal, and 8.6% of government preschools were inadequate. Within Art subscale, the time offered was satisfying to children who had the highest mean (5.44), and Art materials were advanced. (2.12) and children who had access to the art materials had the lowest means (2.65).

In music movement, 23.8% of government preschools were observed to be excellent and 30.3% were good. However, 34.2% were minimal, and 12.3% were inadequate. with respect to music movement items, music availability had the highest mean (5.44), and various type of music are used with children who had the lowest mean (3.66).

However, none of the government preschools were observed to be excellent. Only 23.3% of government preschools were good and, 38.8% were minimal, and 35.1% of government preschools were inadequate. Within the block items, blocks accessible for all children had the highest mean (5.34), and blocks of a specific type (2.33), enough space for blocks (1.77) and blocks are organized according to type (1.34) had the lowest mean.44.4% of government preschools were observed to be excellent in terms of sand and water, and 38.8% of them were good. However, 11% were minimal, and 4% of government preschools were inadequate. Within the sand and water items, children who use sand and/or water had the highest mean (5.79), whereas different activities done with sand and water had the lowest mean (3.87).

In the dramatic play, 30.2% of government preschools were observed to be excellent, and 25.6% of them were good. However, 21.9% were minimal, and 18.3% of government preschool environments were inadequate. Within the dramatic play items, children free use of materials had the highest mean (5.78), and children who were encouraged to use dramatic materials had the lowest mean (2.20).

Only 2.2% of government preschools were observed to be excellent on the nature\science subscale; 17.8% of the preschools were good. However, 66.7% were minimal, and 12.3% of them were inadequate with respect to government preschool environments. Within the government preschool collection presented which allowed children to explore similarities and differences had the highest mean (5.38), and children who were encouraged to experience the outdoors had (1.33), and collection of natural objects had the lowest means (1.22).

With respect of mathematic only 16.9% was observed to be excellent and 44.2% of the preschools were good.However, 33.3% to be minimal and 36.7% of them were inadequate. With respect of the items of mathematic many developmentally appropriate materials for counting, measuring, learning shape and are accessible for children differences had the highest mean (4.33), and daily activities used to promote math/number learning had the lowest means (1.31).

On the other hands, a *t*-test revealed significant differences between government preschools (M = 145.4, SD = 51.10) and private (M = 114.5, SD = 52.41) preschools in overall quality, t (105) = 2.56, $p < .05$. As shown in Table 2, additional *t*-tests revealed no significant differences between government and private preschools with respect to fine motor, Art and mathematic. However, there were significant differences between government and private preschools with respect to music movement, blocks and dramatic play. For all four of these indicators of preschools quality, the government preschools were rated as being higher in quality than were the private preschools.

Table 2: Differences between government and private preschools.

Activities items	Govern(n = 84) M (SD)	Private (n = 23) M (SD)	t(105)
*p < .05; **p < .01.			
Fine motor	22.66 (12.67)	21.04 (11.21)	1.[17]
Art	26.52 (8.85)	18.90 (9.66)	0.37
Music Movement	18.55 (7.89)	12.97 (8.77)	4.05**
Blocks	26.94 (15.45)	17.98 (11.76)	3.79**
Sand and Water	27.13 (8.36)	22.56 (10.82)	3.26*
Dramatic play	14.49 (6.10)	9.77 (8.02)	4.20**
Nature/ science	18.87 (8.44)	16.35 (10.11)	2.36
Mathematic	25.55(8.34)	15.54 (8.22)	4.54

8.Discussion

Overall, 13% of government preschools were observed to be inadequate, 43% were of minimal quality, 43% were good, and 1% was excellent. On the other hand, 22% of private preschools were observed to be inadequate, 61% were of minimal, 17% were good, and none were excellent. On the one hand, these findings suggest urgent need to continue working to improve activities on preschools in south of Jordan because we noted that of a large number of both government and private preschools observed to be inadequate or providing only minimal quality.

On the other hand, the results are encourage interest in open government preschools in the south of Jordan because the quality of activities available to the best and exceed the activities in private preschools and suggesting that continuing to implement government preschools that will ensure the skills and needs of children in south of Jordan better than the private preschools. In relation to this, research on early childhood education clearly indicates that quality on activities of preschool brings about more developmental benefits for children from low-income families than those from the higher-income families (Burchinal et al., 2000), previous research has also indicated that activities in preschool can have an important benefits for children's future school success; however, children without access to preschools high-quality often start school behind their peers and often do not catch up (e.g. Reynolds, Ou, & Topitzes, 2004). Thus, consentreat to interest on the quality of activities in preschools in south of Jordan is an important issue.

Sand and water, dramatic play, art and music movement were the best aspects of activities' of government preschools. The aspects preschools most in need of interest and improvement were in the domains of nature\science, blocks, and fine motor. These findings suggest the need to improve provisions for nature\since, including providing collection of natural objects, and to develop a wide range of activities in preschools classrooms involving presented collections to allow children to explore similarities and differences, and encourage the children to engage in many different activities.

The findings also highlighted the need to improve aspects of the preschool fine motor, including developmentally appropriate fine motor and different types of fine motor and labeled shelves to encourage self-help. Improving the activities of environment in preschools and the availability of materials, including technology, is crucial to serve the needs of Jordanian children better, and provide them with a good foundation on which to advance in school. The findings revealed significant differences between the quality of activities good and excellent are found in the government preschools than in the private. In sum, about 50% of government preschools need improvements and some need to comprehensive and accurate review to the plans and educational program in preschools in south of Jordan. Around 60% of the private preschools met only minimal quality standards and around 20% need even more need urgent improvements for they were rated as inadequate.

These findings consider are a guide to the attention of the government preschools in the south, this is because the most children of the south in government preschools and there are a few of people who are able to pay expensive tuition fees in privet sector (Ministry of education, 2008). However, Private schools are not

supervised by the Ministry of Education and the direct supervision of the institutions it is affiliated to the charity or the property of their owners some money.

The higher quality of activities observed in the government than in the private preschools could have reflected several policies and institutional practices. Staff at private preschools is not educationally qualified in terms of training in early childhood education, and equipped with the latest teaching methods and to deal and interact with the children, while the Ministry of Education pays much attention to the teachers through weekly training sessions for teachers.

On the other hand most of them in privet preschools do not have a degree in early childhood education or any similar field, and they are rarely provided with professional development opportunities, on the other hand the Ministry of Education requires degree to teach in preschool (Ministry of Education, 2007). Moreover, private preschools low- paid salaries to staff; This is because it is purpose of profit, and wages are not fixed, it's up to decide the participants in the establishment of the preschool or owner, But most of private preschools in the south have limited financial resources and most of them have limited budgets to pay teachers more. In contrast, the teachers in government preschools are considered employees .

Ministry of Education and are paid the same salaries adopted by the government, the Ministry is working continuously to increase their salaries and encourage them by granting them salary. Thus, differences in teachers' training, salaries and other professional opportunities, supervision and evaluation of staff and opportunities for growth could have consider for the higher quality observed in government than in private preschools. For example, higher salaries are likely to attract more motivated and qualified teachers to public settings, and teachers with a qualified in early childhood education are more likely than untrained teachers to understand how to interaction and support the children to learn and explore and play in a way that benefits children's learning (Hooks, Scott-Little, Marshall, & Brown, 2006).

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