

Culturally Relevant Play-Based Pedagogy as a Panacea for Implementing Early Childhood Development Curriculum: A Synopsis of Zvishavane District.

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Abstract

Educational practices in Early Childhood Development (ECD) environments continue to evolve globally, in pursuit for sustainable education. Modern trends in education had seen play-based pedagogy tremendously gaining recognition in ECD settings. This study delineates the richness of culturally relevant play-based pedagogy as a panacea for implementing the ECD Curriculum in Zvishavane District of the Midlands Province in Zimbabwe. A mixed paradigm coursing a mixed approach and a descriptive survey design formed this study's methodology. Fifty ECD teachers and ten Teachers-in-Charge were purposively selected from ten ECD environments in the District, to form the study's sample. Questionnaires, interviews and observations were data collection instruments used. The study found out that the utilisation of the culturally relevant play-based pedagogy was marred by a number of barricades, where some ECD educators were having limited knowledge on how to contextually utilise play for curriculum implementation, thereby becoming less confident in their educational practices. Community skepticism, cultural erosion, lack of cultural competences and training, higher academic expectations by parents, lack of access to digital resources and tools and limited digital skills, rigid curriculum and unsupportive educational policies were impeding on the endeavours to revitalise culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in the implementation of the ECD curriculum. The study therefore recommends the utilisation of culturally relevant resources in embracing culturally relevant play-based pedagogy for implementing the ECD curriculum. Multi-stakeholder collaboration, teacher empowerment to develop cultural competence, formulation of culturally supportive policies, availing digital devices and empowering ECD educators to use these resources and tools were seen as a necessity to support culturally relevant play-based pedagogies for the effective implementation of the ECD curriculum.

Keywords: Culturally Relevant Play-Based Pedagogy; Culture; Panacea; Early Childhood Development (ECD); ECD Curriculum.

1. Introduction

Culturally relevant play-based pedagogy is pivotal in instilling the sense of cultural identity and pride among Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners. As a delicate phase in human life, education at ECD level should lay a fundamental base for future learning, socialisation, moral, emotional and physical development which are culturally relevant to the life a people. For this reason, the effective implementation of the ECD curricula is considered as a critical component in

human life and development from the global perspective. Properly implementing the ECD curricula world-wide and across diverse cultures, is in congruence, with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4; Target 4.2 which emphasises on the need to promote sustainable Early Childhood Education programmes globally. Access to proper education, play and care are children's rights, which need to be guaranteed among mankind (Marais et al., 2024).

Though education and play are taken as a right for young children by United Nations (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989); Zimbabwe is among the African countries which are still striving to embrace culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in the implementation of the ECD curriculum. Failure by ECD environments to embrace culturally relevant play-based pedagogy as a medium for implementing the ECD curriculum is an infringement of the children's rights to sustainable education and play. There is need by educationists, curricularists and policy makers to rethink about how culturally relevant play-based pedagogies can be revitalised for effective curriculum implementation in ECD environments. Muchandiona (2025), Moyo & Mlambo (2020) & Chireshe (2019) concur that Zimbabwe made eminent strides to support the implementation of the ECD curriculum, with the government launching the National Early Childhood Development Policy (2017) and the ECD Curriculum Framework (2015). With this in place, ECD environments across the country still struggle to embrace culturally relevant play-based pedagogy in the implementation of the ECD curriculum.

Multitudinous challenges which continually derail the utilisation of culturally relevant play-based pedagogy in a number of ECD environments in the country include inadequate and inappropriate infrastructure, shortage and unavailability of resources, lack of stakeholder support and lack of expertise on the part of teachers (Muchandiona, Mwaruta & Chiromo, 2025; Chireshe, 2019). A number of ECD educators also have a tendency of formalising education in ECD environments, as a way of early preparation of the learners for formal schooling, while shunning cultural play. Moyo & Mlambo (2020) echo that the Zimbabwean education system has traditionally followed a didactic approach to teaching which focus on rote learning, where memorisation and standardised tests have taken precedence over other pedagogical approaches such as play-way method. Standardising and formalising ECD education is ineffective for educating young learners, for its inefficacy to contextually promote holistic development among ECD learners (Chireshe, 2019; Fler, 2018; Frost, 2018 & Bruce, 2015).

Zimbabwean cultural context, presents unique opportunities for educators to embrace culturally relevant play-based pedagogy in the implementation of the ECD curriculum. The nation's rich tapestry cultures open a leeway for collaboration and socialisation in communities, in line with child-centred nature, where culturally relevant play-based pedagogy can be contextually embraced for curriculum implementation. Due to cultural and societal misconceptions in a number of societies in Zimbabwe about education and culturally relevant play, a number of stakeholders render cultural play as unproductive, unserious and time wasting in ECD environments. Where communities fail to accept that play need to be culturally relevant and to be used as a medium for curriculum implementation in schools, teachers tend to follow the community expectations and formalise their teaching while focusing on numeracy and literacy skills (Smith, 2017). For this reason, a number of ECD teachers in the country are resorting to formalised teaching which is against the Zimbabwe Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005, which entails that no formal learning should take place in ECD settings.

As an approach to education, culturally relevant play-based pedagogy is pivotal in ECD environments where children's play can be capitalised productively, that is, for education and development of life skills. Muchadiona, et. al (2025); Bodrova & Smith (2017); Maunganidze (2016);

Leong (2015); Tatira (2014); Mutema (2013); Nyota and Mapara (2008) all concur that embracing culturally relevant play-based pedagogy in elementary grades has an international acclamation, for its ability to enhance cognitive development, quintessence social-emotional growth, creativity, collaboration, critical thinking and increased problem-solving techniques among the learner, in socio-cultural contexts. Embracing culturally relevant play-based pedagogies for the implementation of the ECD curriculum is in alignment with the Zimbabwe ECD curriculum goals and objectives which seek to promote holistic development, socialisation and form a strong base for future learning. In countries such as United States of America, Germany, Italy, and New Zealand, the utilisation of culturally relevant play-based pedagogy in ECD environments had been successfully implemented and desired results were achieved. Basing on this argument, effectively revitalising culturally relevant play-based pedagogy in the implementation of the ECD curriculum is pivotal for promoting children's rights to education and play, while opening potentials to bring solutions to challenges faced by humans in societies. In this assertion, play activities should not be used for the sake of playing in ECD environments, but its cultural relevance, potency and value should be prioritised for sustainability in education.

Research Gap

While research has demonstrated the effectiveness of utilising culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in ECD settings globally, there are misconceptions by various stakeholders leading to their failure to appreciate the indispensable value of culturally relevant play in the implementation of the ECD curriculum in Zimbabwean environments. As play based pedagogies are being utilised in implementing the ECD curriculum, most of the play activities done are modernised and not have the much needed cultural relevance, potency and value to the traditional people in local societies. The question on how to revitalise culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in the implementation of the ECD curriculum is yet to be answered.

Problem Statement

Despite the efforts by the Zimbabwean educationists to embrace play-based pedagogy in the implementation of the ECD curriculum, a number of ECD environments around the country still utilise this pedagogy in a manner that does not address the cultural needs of societies. The cultural relevance and value of this pedagogy is not maintained contextually. Most types of play activities employed in the implementation of the ECD curriculum do not depict the cultural value of the communities served by this education, neither do they promote culturally relevant critical thinking among the learners for solving problems faced by the local people. On the other hand, there is a tendency by some ECD teachers to cling to traditional didactic approaches to teaching due to higher academic expectations from parents; which persistently force educators to neglect ECD learners' inclination towards play-based learning. A vast educational gap was evident here, where a number of educators were prioritising more formalised teaching and ignoring the use of play-based pedagogies. Other ECD educators were embracing play-based pedagogy in their education practices which are not culturally relevant. As a way of filling this educational gap, this research study, proposes how culturally relevant play-based pedagogies can be revitalised for enhancing learner development and improve overall learning outcome in Zvishavane ECD environments.

Basing on the above context, this research was structured and guided by the main research question and specific research questions below:

Main Research Question

- Which strategies can be employed to revitalise culturally relevant play-based pedagogy for the effective implementation of the ECD curriculum, in order to improve learning outcomes among ECD learners in Zvishavane District?

Specific Research Questions

- What pedagogical approaches are utilised in the implementation of the ECD curriculum in Zvishavane District?
- Which challenges are encountered in ECD environments in the efforts to revitalise culturally relevant play-based pedagogies for the implementation of the ECD curriculum?
- How can culturally relevant play-based pedagogy be revitalised in the implementation of the ECD curriculum?

2. Review of Related Literature

Theoretical framework

This study was guided by the Reggio Emilia Approach to curriculum implementation in ECD environments. Loris Malaguzzi an Italian educator and a psychologist developed the Reggio Emilia Approach to education between the 1940s and 1960s. The approach emphasises the need to implement an educational curriculum in a way which fosters holistic development among ECD learners. Malaguzzi elucidates on the need to create a conducive teaching and learning environment in order to enhance child-led learning experiences and open room for experiments, explorations and discovery learning. Malaguzzi (1963) came up with a number of core principles to be capitalised in early learning environments, to promote holistic development and sustainable learning in early years. These principles include: child-centred education, self-directed learning, hands-on-exploration, project-based learning, collaborative learning and capitalising the environment as the third teacher (UNICEF, 2022; Madondo & Tsikira, 2021; Moyo, 2020; Frost, 2018; Smith, 2017; Shamoona, 2017; Berk, 2017). The Reggio Emilia approach to education gained more recognition internationally, as from the 1970s till now because it managed to produce anticipated results in the Italian education sector. Its positive impact in ECD settings in Italy made its adoption in ECD settings among various nations globally unstoppable.

Zimbabwean ECD environments like other nations, had been striving to embrace effective play-based approaches to education. Wood & Attfield (2018); Fleer (2018); Bodrova & Leong (2015) concur that the Reggio Emilia Approach to education emphasises on the adoption of play-based pedagogy in the learning process over product, making it indispensable in ECD environments. The main thrust of this approach to education is to ensure that the teaching and learning process is done in a proper way for ECD learners to gain culturally relevant knowledge and skills which will allow them to co-exist in their societies. Madondo (2020); Moyo (2020); Chireshe (2019); Maunganidze (2016); Bruce (2015); William (2015); Edwards, Gandini & Forman (2012) echo that harnessing the Reggio Emilia Approach to education in ECD environments provides avenues for enhancing learners' cognitive development, socio-emotional growth, critical thinking, problem solving, creativity and imaginative skills.

Overview of the Zimbabwean ECD Curriculum

The Zimbabwean education sector appreciates that proper educational provisions in ECD environments can significantly contribute to the nurture and welfare of children from birth up to eight years of age. Affording ECD learners access to high-quality and culturally relevant education and play is rendered as a fundamental human right for the country's sustainable development (Muzembe, Machaba & Modise, 2021; Zimbabwe Curriculum Framework, 2015; Zimbabwe Constitution, 2013). The Zimbabwean ECD curriculum had gone through a metamorphosis of transformations, as the country tries to adopt transformative pedagogies, which suit the current educational demands, as guided by national, regional and global policies. With these efforts in place, a number of ECD educators are unable and less confident to embrace culturally relevant play-based

pedagogy, which speaks to all diverse needs of ECD learners due to lack of knowledge, experience and confidence (Muchandiona, 2025; Civitillo et al, 2018).

Prior to the Zimbabwean independence, only the elite privileged ECD learners had access to organised childcare and development programmes in the country (Nziramasanga Commission, 1999). ECD curriculum content by then, emphasised on instilling basic literacy and numeracy skills among the learners. The government adopted the Education Act 1987, as amended in 1996, 2006, 2013 and 2020 which outlines that every child in Zimbabwe has the right to education. The government made strides to come up with a comprehensive ECD curriculum and introduced ECD 'B' and ECD 'A' classes in schools in 2005 and 2006 respectively; acting in line with the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) number 2, which aimed to achieve universal primary education by 2015 (Secretary's Circular Number 14 of 2004, Zimbabwe; Director's Circular Number 12 of 2005, Zimbabwe).

The Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) Framework of Zimbabwe 2015-2022 which was adopted in 2015, calls for skills-based related education, nutrition, health and safety practices in ECD environments. The ECD 'A' - Grade 2 CBC included learning areas like Mathematics and Science, Physical Education, Visual and Performing Arts, Mass Displays, English Language, Heritage and Social Studies, Indigenous Languages and Information Communication Technology, with emphasis on health, nutrition and psycho-social stimulation to promote holistic development through play-based pedagogies and skill development among ECD learners (Zimbabwe Education Act as amended, 2020; Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP), 2016 - 2020; Zimbabwe Curriculum Framework, 2015 - 2020.) The Competence - Based Curriculum broadened the scope of the ECD curriculum to accommodate diverse talents among ECD learners and was shaped to be play driven, learner-centred and to speak to the demands of new trends in education. Though the Competence - Based Curriculum was viewed as holistic approach in accommodating diverse needs of ECD learners and addressing vast developmental needs and domains of human beings, its implementation did not yield the much anticipated results in education. Failure to guarantee sustainable education in ECD environments is greatly linked to the curriculum's failure to revitalise culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in the teaching and learning environments.

Culturally Relevant Play and ECD Learners

ECD learners cannot be weaned from play, hence culturally relevant play-based pedagogy has to be utilised as a medium for implementing the ECD curriculum. According to Muchandiona, et. al (2025), it is easy to compile children's play activities and difficult to describe children's environment while ignoring their playful nature. In this regard, it's hard to talk of learning in ECD settings without mentioning play-based pedagogies. ECD learners are naturally playful irrespective of their background, culture, race, gender, language, or ethnicity. Children are born with the urge to play, which allows them to interact with peers and the immediate environment (Madondo & Tsikira, 2021; Mutema, 2013; Hedges et al., 2011; Riojas-Cortez, 2001). Muchandiona (2025) seconds that young children learn best when exposed to environments which are flexible for exploration, experimentation, discovering, and playing within their socio-cultural contexts. Culturally relevant play-based learning assist ECD learners to be creative and acquire culturally relevant basic learning and problem solving skills in the early years, which are key for future human development and learning.

In ECD environments, learners need both indoor and outdoor play activities to develop fine and gross motor skills, creative skills, problem solving skills, socio-emotional skills and critical thinking abilities within their cultural contexts. Play is motivating and interesting among ECD learners where they can achieve the learning objectives in a fun and amazing way. Utilising culturally relevant play-based pedagogy to implement the ECD curriculum provide room for self-awareness and tolerance of

others' thoughts, feelings and ideas, and improved communication skills among ECD learners (Madondo & Tsikira, 2021; Berk, 2017). Culturally relevant play activities boosts self-confidence among ECD learners and is inclusive in nature, where learners from diverse cultural backgrounds have room to learn at their own pace and in a friendly and calm environment. As ECD learners engage in culturally relevant play activities, they interact with others, develop cognitively, socially, emotionally, morally and linguistically, which is a necessity for holistic development in socio-cultural contexts.

3. Methodological Delineation

Mixed paradigm embracing mixed research approach and a descriptive survey research design formed the research methodology for this study. The mixed methodology gave the researchers the pliability to delve deeper in the problem at hand, where both numeric and text data were combined to present the findings of the study and discuss the results. Corroboration and convergence of both qualitative and quantitative data was done to unearth how culturally relevant play-based pedagogies can be revitalised as a panacea for implementing the ECD curriculum in Zvishavane District. Bak, (2020); Crossman, (2020); Creswell (2017) support that mixed methodology in research ensures triangulation where a multidimensional approach to a study allows the researchers to collect rich data which is likely to be unbiased and can be interpreted with a greater degree of assurance.

A descriptive survey research design was utilised in this study for the researchers to gather original data and describe human opinions, perceptions, attitudes and orientations in relation to the utilisation of play-based pedagogy in implementing the ECD curriculum. Bak (2020); Creswell (2017); Tichapondwa (2013); Maree (2007), concur that a descriptive survey allows researchers to obtain in-depth data where a sample of respondents within a population with identical characteristics supply information which can facilitate the generalisation of the findings. The researchers strived to achieve objectivity on how culturally relevant play-based pedagogies can be revitalised for the effective implementation of the ECD curriculum in Zvishavane District, while being detached from personal biases, where objective data collection instruments were capitalised during data collection.

Data Source

25 ECD 'A' and 25 ECD 'B' teachers, making a total of 50 ECD educators, who were purposively sampled from 10 ECD centres in Zvishavane District completed questionnaires. Through the questionnaires, the researchers were interested in understanding various pedagogical approaches which were being utilised by ECD educators in the implementation of the ECD curriculum. The educators were also required to explain how effective were these approaches in meeting the demands of the ECD curriculum content. The questionnaires also required ECD educators to indicate challenges they were facing in utilising culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in the implementation of the ECD curriculum and suggest on ways to revitalise this pedagogy for sustainable education in ECD settings.

10 Teachers In Charge (T-ICs) from these ten ECD departments were also subjected to semi-structured interviews and the researchers also proceeded in making observations while ECD learners were learning and playing. The interview questions were similar to those on questionnaires, but what differs was the way the questions were structured and that they were now applied to a different target group (T-ICs). T-ICs were required to elaborate how ECD educators were implementing the ECD curriculum, challenges they were facing in utilising culturally relevant play-based pedagogies and to suggest mitigation strategies to these challenges for sustainable ECD education in the district. The researchers also observed on how ECD educators were utilising play-based pedagogy in the implementation of the ECD curriculum and the types of play ECD learners engaged in during break-time, so as to evaluate their cultural relevance in the lives of the people of

Zvishavane. Interviews and observations were used as tools to triangulate data which were collected from ECD teachers through questionnaires and authenticate its validity and relevance to the question at hand.

Data Analysis

Data which were collected through questionnaires were analysed using tables and the results were expressed in percentages, due to their quantitative nature. Data which were collected through semi-structured interviews and observations were transcribed verbatim, where respondents' views were utilised to generate themes and meaning which relate to the topic under investigation. The researchers went on to discuss the findings under themes in order to answer the research questions and create meaningful data which speaks to the need to embrace culturally relevant play-based pedagogy in ECD environments for sustainable education in Zvishavane District.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers ensured that they implemented all the necessary research ethics before conducting this study. Ethical clearances were sought from all the relevant authorities before getting into the field of study. The researchers explained to all the respondents the purpose of the study, the research methodology, how the respondents were selected and the expectations to all the participants. The researchers and the respondents co-signed consent forms before each member takes part in the study. The respondents were given the platform to ask questions for clarity before they signed consent forms and the researchers explained the obligations, rights and responsibilities of both parties. The respondents were given freedom and room to withdraw from the study anytime they feel like they are no longer interested with continuing.

4. Findings and Discussion of Results

Presentation of results

The presentation and analysis of data on the revitalisation of culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in ECD environments in Zvishavane District was done in three phases as guided by the research questions. Major findings of this study and the discussion of the results were supported by related literature reviewed. The researchers presented the results on quantitative data using tables and supported them with thematic analysis for qualitative data, so that the data shown communicate meaningful information on the problem at hand.

Culturally Relevant Play Based-Pedagogies

The respondents were required to give their understanding of the phrase '**culturally relevant play-based pedagogy**.' 60% of the respondents were able to explain that culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in ECD environments refer to teaching approaches which are employed by ECD educators in the teaching and learning process, where play activities are utilised for curriculum implementation, within the the socio-cultural contexts of the learners. The researchers noted that 55% of the ECD classes were being taught by mature teachers who were over 40 years of age, hence they could understand more about cultural play. This was inline with Ladson-Billing (2017) who insinuates that culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in education practices aim at promoting the cultural identity, a sense of belonging and a deep connection to the heritage of the learners which foster critical thinking for solving life problems in social cultural context. These pedagogies seeks to revitalise learner-centred approaches to education, prioritising cultural responsiveness, community engagement, hands-on experiences and discovery learning in socio-cultural contexts, language usage and literacy development among ECD learners.

40% of the respondents were unable to give literally acceptable definition of the phrase '**culturally relevant play-based pedagogy**.' Their answers were referring these pedagogies as games which are done by ECD learners in their communities, which can be utilised in the teaching and learning

process in ECD settings. 5 of the ECD educators wrote that, the current generation of ECD learners has no culture to talk of hence they indicated that they cannot find a proper term to define 'culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in ECD environments.' Where one cannot define a certain component in education, implementing such an idea becomes a glitch. ECD educators who cannot understand the culture of ECD learners they teach, cannot incorporate diverse perspectives and culturally relevant practices in their education practices.

How effective is the use of culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in the teaching and learning of different learning areas in the ECD curriculum?

Table 4.1

Learning area	Greater Ext	%	Ave Ext	%	Neutral	%	Lesser Ext	%	No Ext	%
Physical Education	50	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
English Language	30	60	15	30	5	10	0	0	0	0
Chishona	45	90	2	4	3	6	0	0	0	0
Mathematics	40	80	10	20	0	0	0	0	0	0
Science & Agric	45	90	4	8	1	2	0	0	0	0
V.P.A	37	74	13	26	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mass Displays	45	90	5	10	0	0	0	0	0	0
I.C.T	40	80	10	20	0	0	0	0	0	0
F. H. S	30	60	18	36	2	4	0	0	0	0
G & C	40	80	8	16	2	4	0	0	0	0

The data presented in Table 4.1 above shows the views of 50 ECD teachers who completed questionnaires on the extent to which culturally relevant play-based pedagogies are effective in the teaching and learning of different learning areas which are found in the ECD curriculum (ECD 'A' and 'B' curricula).

All the respondents amounting to 100%, were in agreement that Physical Education (P E) is best taught through culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in ECD environments. 60% of the interviewees claimed that cultural play is effective to a greater extent to utilise in the teaching and learning of English Language and, Family & Heritage Studies (F H S) while ChiShona, Mass Displays and Science & Agriculture secured 90% of the respondents with the same acclamation. Visual & Performing Arts (V P A) was believed to be best taught through culturally relevant play-based pedagogies by 74% of the ECD teachers while Mathematics, Information Communication Technology (I C T) and Guidance & Counselling (G & C) got 80% support.

It emerged from the respondents that culturally relevant play-based pedagogies are effective to a greater extent in the teaching and learning of any subject in ECD environments. This was also in compatible with the arguments by Muchandiona, et al (2025); Madondo (2020) & Moyo (2020); Chireshe (2019); Maunganidze (2016); Bruce (2015); William (2015); Edwards et al, (2012) who echo that harnessing play-based pedagogy in ECD environments provides avenues for enhancing learners' cognitive development, socio-emotional growth, critical thinking, problem solving skills, creativity and imaginative skills. In the same vein, the Surplus Energy Theory which was proposed by Friedrich Frobel (1782-1852) and further developed by Karl Groos (1861-1946) delineates that young children should engage in playful activities to enable them to release both physical and mental energy which is always in abundance. To this effect, the study truly believes that culturally relevant

play-based pedagogies form the basic part of human life in societies, hence the implementation of the ECD curriculum in its totality cannot be complete without embracing culturally relevant play activities as a medium of instruction.

From the interviews which were conducted with ten T-I-Cs in the ECD departments from Zvishavane District, it showed that the implementation of the ECD curriculum was being driven by play-based pedagogy to a greater extent. T-I-C 'A' posits that:

The generation of ECD learners we have in schools nowadays is too playful as compared to infant learners of our time. ECD learners in the present world are now leaving a better life than we used to do. They walk very short distances to school and they carry a lot of food to eat which is at times junk and sugary. As a result of this, they are always hyper-active, with a lot of unused energy which has to be released. With this at hand, ECD teachers need to capitalise culturally relevant play-based pedagogy in ECD environments. I think there is need to align our play activities to the culture of a people we serve. Culturally relevant play-based pedagogies can be capitalised to teach any subject in ECD classes and produce best results if well tailored. It is only through cultural play where ECD learners get to know their culture and challenges encountered in their societies which require culturally specific lenses to solve them.

Observations made by the researchers showed that play-based pedagogies were being utilised to implement the ECD curriculum in observed environments but the cultural relevance of these plays was greatly missing. In one of the lessons observed at School Red, the learners showed much interest in a lesson which was done using play and they all participated well, showing that they were motivated to learn, but imported toys cars were used as media, which had no local material in them. At School Green, the researchers observed ECD learners during break-time, were playing a lot of games, where they were jumping; running; pulling and pushing each other; skipping ropes, kicking and throwing balls among other games. The learners were all happy and participating, with a lot of energy, in vigorous physical play activities. In all these plays, modernity showed that it has replaced cultural plays to a greater extent, thereby having a lot of play activities which are not entrenched to the culture of a local people of Zvishavane. Muchandiona (2025); Madondo & Tsikira (2021); Moyo (2020); Fleer (2018); Berk (2017) all concur that well-planned play activities facilitates holistic development of ECD learners. All the respondents agree that the implementation of the ECD curriculum should be driven by culturally relevant play-based pedagogies, if sustainable education has to be achieved.

How often do ECD educators use culturally relevant play-based pedagogy when teaching different learning areas in the ECD curriculum?

Table 4.2

Learning area	Very Often	%	Often	%	Sometimes	%	Rarely	%	Never	%
Physical Education	45	90	5	10	0	0	0	0	0	0
English Language	1	2	3	6	10	20	36	72	0	0
Chishona	38	76	10	20	2	4	0	0	0	0
Mathematics	20	40	10	20	20	40	0	0	0	0
Science & Agric	45	90	4	8	1	2	0	0	0	0
V.P.A	45	90	3	6	2	4	0	0	0	0
Mass Displays	45	90	4	8	1	2	0	0	0	0
I.C.T	4	8	8	16	5	10	33	66	0	0
F.H.S	38	76	10	20	2	4	0	0	0	0
G & C	44	88	5	10	1	2	0	0	0	0

Table 4.2 above presents the views of 50 ECD teachers who shared information on how often they use play-based pedagogy in the teaching of various learning areas found in the ECD curriculum. 90% of the respondents indicated that they capitalise culturally relevant play-based pedagogy very often when teaching PE, Science, Visual and Performing Arts, and Mass Displays; while G & C was standing at 88%. Culturally relevant play-based pedagogy was reportedly being used very often in the teaching of ChiShona and FHS as shown by 76% of respondents making this claim. Mathematics was standing at 40%, ICT received 8% and English Language was at 2%.

Collected data showed that culturally relevant play-based pedagogy was mostly capitalised in teaching learning areas which require practical activities such as Guidance and counselling, Science, Physical Education and Mass Displays. FHS and Chishona were indicated by the respondents that they were also being taught fairly well through the utilisation of culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in ECD settings in the district. The teaching of Mathematics shows that 60% of the ECD educators were unable to utilise culturally relevant play-based pedagogy in teaching this area. For ICT, only 8% of the educators claimed to be competent to utilise culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in teaching this learning area, while English Language proved to be difficult to teach using culturally relevant play-based pedagogy and was standing at 2%. Muchandiona, et. al (2025); Madondo & Tsikira (2021); Maunganidze (2016); Bruce (2015); Edwards, et. al (2012) support that teaching in elementary grades should encompass culturally relevant play activities.

Leveraging the use of culturally relevant play-based pedagogy is rendered central in the teaching of any learning area and has the potential to produce perfect results in ECD environments. As delineated by the Surplus Energy Theory, young children need relevant play activities as they learn for easy understanding of taught concepts. Moyo (2020); Weisleder (2015); Gray (2011); Frost (2010); Wood, (2003), allude that play-based pedagogy can be utilised in the teaching of subjects such as Mathematics using block-play, geometry and puzzles; Literacy skills through storytelling, role-playing and word games; and Scientific concepts through exploratory play, experimentation and sensory games. As play activities are embraced in teaching of various concepts, the cultural relevance of offered play activities need to be prioritised for the education to be culturally relevant to the demands of the society.

Interviewed T-I-Cs in the ECD departments of Zvishavane District unearthed that the teaching and learning activities in ECD environments need to revitalize culturally relevant play-based activities across all the learning areas in the ECD curriculum. In other words cultural play and children's learning are like water and fish, they are inseparable where ECD learners are the fish while cultural play is water which allows them to learn, explore and experiment freely in culturally relevant activities, empowering them with skills to co-exist in societies.

Facilities available in ECD environments to facilitate culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in the implementation of the ECD curriculum.

Table 4.3

Play Facilities	Yes	%	No	%	Good	%	Fair	%	Bad	%
Outdoor play area	50	100	0	0	10	20	15	30	25	50
Indoor play area	50	100	0	0	5	10	10	20	35	70
Building blocks	20	40	30	60	5	10	10	20	5	10
Art material	10	20	40	80	3	6	3	6	4	8

Musical instruments	5	10	45	90	1	2	0	0	4	8
Sand & water area	3	6	47	94	0	0	1	2	2	4
Dolls & props	10	20	40	80	1	2	5	10	4	8
Tablets / laptops	0	0	50	100	0	0	0	0	0	0
Science corner	0	0	50	100	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sensory materials	8	16	42	84	3	6	2	4	3	6
Swings & ropes	10	20	40	80	0	0	3	6	7	14
Climbers & slides	12	24	38	76	3	6	2	4	7	14

Table 4.3 above summarises the answers from 50 ECD teachers who responded on resources available in ECD environments around in Zvishavane District to embrace culturally relevant play-based pedagogy in the implementation of the ECD curriculum. The major concern was that, none of the ECD environments in the district had science corners with culturally relevant materials and tablets / laptops to facilitate culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in the implementation of the ECD curriculum. Both indoor and outdoor play areas were available in all the visited environments, however, their sensitivity to culturally relevant content to address the needs of diverse learners from different cultures found in Zvishavane District was greatly lacking.

The results showed that art materials, building blocks, musical instruments, sand and water play areas, dolls, props, toys, sensory materials, swings, skipping ropes, climbers and slides were very minimum in ECD environments in Zvishavane District, worse still for them to be culturally relevant to the demands of diverse cultures where ECD learners come from. In few ECD environments where these facilities were available, their conditions were rendered as unfit for ECD learners to capitalise culturally relevant play activities in their learning process. The idea that ECD environments do not have enough and culturally relevant resources to revitalise culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in the implementation of the ECD curriculum were in congruency with Madondo & Tsikira (2021), Moyo (2020); OECD (2020) Chireshe (2019); Hewett (2001)'s views who delineate that resources necessary for capitalising play-based pedagogy are in scarcity in most educational institutions. In this discourse, what counts as "culturally relevant play", "education" and "knowledge construction" appears uncontestable in ECD environments, yet all are contestable and partial.

Discourses of culturally relevant play, learning, teaching and construction of knowledge through culturally relevant play-based pedagogies are misunderstood as shown by vast shortage of culturally responsive resources in ECD environments for educators to revitalise culturally relevant pedagogical approaches in the implementation of the ECD curriculum. Muchandiona (2025); Muchandiona & Manyumwa (2024); Kusakara, et. al (2024); Muchandiona, et. al (2024) support that there is need to utilise digital resources in ECD settings as a way of embracing digital technologies which have cultural potency in the teaching and learning process, inline with the new technological skills demanded by the modern world of education. The value in digital technologies in promoting culturally relevant pedagogical skills in ECD environments of Zvishavane District is not being serious considered as a critical part of education, as indicated by serious lack of digital devices for the implementation of the ECD curriculum.

Challenges encountered by ECD educators in efforts to revitalise culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in the implementation of the ECD curriculum.

A number of ECD educators in Zvishavane District were believed to be facing challenges to effectively revitalise culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in their educational practices due to lack of cultural competences which speak to the lives of diverse ECD learners. 85% of the consulted

ECD educators claimed that most ECD teachers in the district have limited understanding of the local cultures, traditions, beliefs and values, making it difficult for them to embrace culturally relevant pedagogies in their practices. 4 T-I-Cs claimed that:

A number of teachers lack confidence in embracing culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in their educational practices because they did not receive adequate training in teachers' colleges in this area. Zvishavane District is greatly affected by cultural erosion due to vast immigrants who come from different towns and countries to do mining. As a community with multitudinous cultures in existence, it is very difficult to incorporate culturally relevant pedagogies in educational practices.

The respondents were in agreement that the Zimbabwean ECD curriculum is fully packed with a number of expectations from both the educators and the learners, leaving limited room for play activities. The rigidity of the ECD curriculum gave ECD educators very limited room for flexibility and innovation for revitalising culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in ECD environments. A policy gap was also blamed for the teachers' inability to embrace culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in ECD environments. 70% of the respondents argued that the country has no clear educational policies to support the utilisation of play activities which are culturally responsive to the needs of societies.

Zvishavane community was also seen to be affected by community skepticism where a number of parents were seen to be skeptical about the value of cultural play activities in ECD environments. This skeptical behaviour, together with high expectations for achievement from the parents of ECD learners exacerbate the teachers' unwillingness to revitalise culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in the implementation of the ECD curriculum. 75% of ECD educators in the district were claimed to be elderly female teachers who have very limited information communication technology (ICT) skills to embrace technological devices to support the implementation of the ECD curriculum through culturally relevant play-based pedagogies, which are technologically driven. Muchadiona, et. al (2024); Bishop (2018); Hedges (2017) agree that in developing countries, ECD educators may not have access to ICT resources and tools and may lack the expertise to utilise digital technology to capitalise culturally relevant play-based pedagogies for curriculum implementation.

Ways to revitalise culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in the implementation of the ECD curriculum.

The need to make culturally relevant play resources available in abundance, in ECD environments is a necessity which requires careful planning that prioritises equity and ensure that all ECD learners, especially from most vulnerable communities, have equitable learning opportunities. Diverse ECD learners to learn better through culturally relevant developmentally appropriate activities and materials which are within their socio-cultural contexts. Muchadiona et. al (2025); UNICEF (2023) support that utilising culturally relevant play-based pedagogy has positive implications for the financial sectors, human and physical resources in any country. Revitalising culturally relevant play-based pedagogy in the implementation of the ECD curriculum demands an ECD play-focused vision where culturally relevant activities are considered, within the socio-cultural context of a people. T-I-C 'C' narrated that:

ECD centres need to make their play-based pedagogies culturally relevant in the lives of the learners through the incorporating local customs, traditions, beliefs and values for sustainable learning. Specifically there is need for ECD educators to incorporate local culture and traditions, that is, story telling, songs, dances, and cultural games.

Other recommended strategies to ensure that culturally relevant play-based pedagogies are revitalised in the implementation of the ECD curriculum in Zvishavane District include embracing

culturally available materials in the teaching and learning process such as clay for moulding, wood, grass, stones and fabric to create culturally potent learning which speak to the demands of the local community. The engagement of community members such as local elders, artisans, and musicians to share their knowledge and skills with ECD learners need to be prioritised. The value of cultural play need to be recognised and acknowledged by all stakeholders in the education fraternity.

Expansion planning is a necessity by planning officers in the Ministry of Primary & Secondary Education, where teacher training and curriculum development are given precedence to promote culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in all ECD environments in the country. Muchandiona, et. al (2025); Fleer (2018); Wood & Attfield (2018); Bodrova & Leong (2015) concur when planning for culturally relevant play-based programmes, it is important to consider national, provincial and local needs for all personnel required to deliver culturally adaptive play-based content, such as national, provincial and local officials, ECD specialist teachers, T-I-Cs, School Heads, technical experts and quality assurance inspectors. Proper planning for culturally relevant play-based pedagogical approaches in ECD environments need to factor in pedagogical approaches which is key in promoting a strong sense of identify, culture, unity and community among ECD learners. This can be ensured through the provisions of spacious ECD classrooms, flexible teacher-pupil ratios (1: 20), provision of culturally adaptive resources in abundance, low-cost for other teaching and learning materials, technology integration, proper assessment tools, policy support and multi-stakeholder engagement for sustainable education in ECD settings.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this study suggested the need to effectively revitalise the utilisation of culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in the implementation of the ECD curriculum so that ECD learners would develop holistically, within their socio-cultural contexts. Emphasis was placed on having proper and enough culturally embedded play materials to support moral, affectionate, physical, intellectual, socio-emotional and language development. The study concluded that there is need for proper collaboration and planning among multi-stakeholders in order to make culturally relevant play-based pedagogies a reality in the ECD curriculum implementation, thereby achieving holistic development among ECD learners. Furthermore, the study supports the need for enhancement of knowledge of the practitioners and researchers on the use of culturally relevant play-based pedagogy to implement the ECD curriculum.

In light of the research findings and conclusions made, the researchers recommend that ECD centres in Zvishavane District should have culturally relevant play centres that are fully equipped with safe variety of cultural materials so that the implementation of the ECD curriculum is driven by play-based pedagogies within the socio-cultural contexts of the learners. Furthermore, proper planning is needed in ECD centres if sustainability is to be achieved in utilising culturally relevant play-based pedagogies in implementing the ECD curriculum. Government education policies also need to be revised so that they clearly speak on the place of culturally responsive pedagogies and supervisions to be made to ensure that ECD learners are taking hid of such policies.

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All tables should be numbered with Arabic numerals. Headings should be placed above tables, left justified. Leave one line space between the heading and the table. Only horizontal lines should be used within a table, to distinguish the column headings from the body of the table, and immediately above and below the table. Tables must be embedded into the text and not supplied separately. Below is an example which authors may find useful.

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