

The Effectiveness of the Thematic Approach for Teaching Young Children

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Abstract

This research documented and described the thematic approach for teaching young children in a Samoan preschool. Thematic teaching had been implemented in Samoa since the implementation of the first ECE Curriculum. There continued to be difficulties in its implementation due to staffing problems and resource acquisition. This qualitative case study was undertaken in one of the mission schools. Semi -structured interviews collected data on teachers' understanding and application of the thematic approach in the local context. The findings indicated teachers needed more professional support and practical application to enhance their understanding of thematic teaching.

Keywords: Thematic approach, classroom teaching and learning, effectiveness

Introduction

Although the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (MESC) has suggested thematic teaching as the best way to provide an integrated, holistic experience for students in the early years of schooling, there is little empirical evidence that this is being practiced in preschools. Anecdotal evidence suggests that while teachers may plan to teach in this way, few of them actually implement this approach. However, there are some preschools where the approach is being used more effectively (Seupule, U. personal communication, 05 October 2019). An investigation was conducted on the implementation of thematic teaching in a Samoan preschool that was known for best practice in the area.

The fundamental philosophy behind ECE developments in the country was to provide Samoan children with an education that gave them a better start in life. Samoa and other Pacific Island Countries (PICs) all have contributed immensely to ECE in their respective countries. Ministries of Education attempted to secure the best service to ensure all children at the pre-primary school age are exposed to enriched opportunities for teaching and learning. (MESC Statistical Digest, 2019).

International Context

The most powerful tool for efficacious teaching and learning is the ability to make it interesting and relevant for students (Bubikova-Moan, Næss Hjetland & Wollscheid, 2019; Johannessen, 2000; Viliamu & Esera, 2019). International studies indicated that thematic teaching enhanced students' learning. A study conducted in a middle school in Australia to explore and investigate Science as a discipline and its relationship with other subject areas identified that thematic teaching allowed children's interaction and engagement in school. Not only that, the authentic curriculum which catered for children's interests and needs allowed them to explore and experiment the world around them (Cheewaviriyanon, 2016; Venville et al. 2001). (Becker and Park 2011) in a study conducted in the United States of America investigated the effects of an integrative approach among science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) in primary and secondary schools. The four STEM subjects were integrated and the findings showed an increase in students' knowledge in Science and Math. This clearly indicated that students who took integrated science courses did well in statistics and students who attended integrated algebra course considered Math their favorite subject .

Individual, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the participants in the staffroom where there was minimal disruption. These were audio taped and each participant was interviewed for 30 minutes. The interviews took one week to transcribe and another week to translate into English.

Interviews were the main instrument used to collect data. A semi-structured interview schedule was designed for preschool teachers and the principal. The same questions were asked of the participants with differences when there were areas the participants needed to elaborate or prompting and probing was necessary. The interview schedule for preschool teachers focused on how they gained knowledge, and how they planned and implemented thematic teaching in the classroom. The interview schedule for the principal was based on her role and responsibilities in the school and the programme conducted to improve teachers' knowledge.

Information gathered from participants was categorized as emerging themes, concepts and patterns (Creswell, 2007; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013). The transcriptions were read through a number of times to glean participants' experiences and make connections. Meaningful patterns or themes that Corbin and Strauss (2015) referred to as "integrating the concepts around a core category" (p. 81) revealed the extent in which participants used and applied thematic teaching in practice. This made it possible to surmise and infer from the data to respond to the research questions. Raw data is simply raw data until the researcher synthesized and integrated the themes into a holistic entity (Miles, et al.).

Once the participants' transcriptions were completed data analysis was utilized to make comparisons of participants' explanations, descriptions and interpretations. Moustakas (1994) posited, "Reflective interpretation of the text is needed to achieve a fuller, more meaningful understanding" (p. 10). Emerging patterns and themes were categorized for coding. Predefined codes and emerging ones were sorted and cross checked for common patterns and utilized in the thematic analysis.

The mission Preschool Board granted permission to conduct the study following a meeting of the principal of the preschool and teachers. Oral consent was obtained from the participants before the written consent was signed. Participants' involvement were acknowledged. As Denzin and Lincoln, (2005) stated the "subjects agreed voluntarily to participate that is without physical or psychological coercion and their agreement was based on full and open information" (p. 144). Moreover, the researcher ensured that the participants were aware of both the nature and purpose of the research and protected the subject from harm or danger. In addition, participants were assured that the information gathered was confidential. They were also told that they were free to decline participation or withdraw from the research at any time. The researcher was aware to conduct herself in an ethical manner at all times but was also responsible to ensure the dignity and the welfare of all participants (APA Ethics Codes, 2002). As part of their involvement participants' would be given a copy of the report findings.

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