Apprising The Stakeholder's Perceptions on The Relationship Between Pretend Play and Social Development in Children with Developmental Language Disorders

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Abstract

This study was aimed to investigate the stakeholders' perceptions on the relationship between pretend play and social development in children with developmental language disorder. Three research objectives and questions were formulated for the conduct of this research. The study adopted a mixed method involving exploratory sequential design. A sample of one hundred and two (102) participants were selected for the study using a multi-stage stratified random sampling technique from the target population of the study comprised of the 96 early childhood caregivers, 03 Speech and language therapists and 03 Psychologist from the three geopolitical zones across Katsina State. The instrument for data collection was Early Child Caregivers Perception Questionnaire (ECCPQ) and semi-structured Interview protocol. The quantitative data generated from the questionnaire was analyzed using simple percentage and the qualitative data from the interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings from the research highlighted the significant impact of pretend play on children's general development. Reveals a strong consensus among participants that pretend play significantly contributes to social development in these children and also it further underscores the multifaceted benefits of pretend play for children with DLD. The study also recommended that (i) pretend play should be integrated into curriculum. (ii) Educators should be train on how to effectively facilitate pretend play (iii) Specialized interventions for children with DLD should be provided (iv) Collaborative efforts between educators, parents, and specialists is required to create a cohesive approach to integrating pretend play into children's development programs.

Keyword: *Pretend play, social development, Early Childhood, Developmental language disorder*

INTRODUCTION

Play is identified to be one of the major factors that contribute to the general development of a child. Moreover, pretend play is commonly recognized by various studies and theories of child development as the most essential factor that determines children's cognitive and social development (Vygotsky, 1978; Lillard et al., 2012). Furthermore, a study by Weisberg (2015) revealed that Pretend play facilitates processes of divergent thinking, insight, imagination, affect expression, creativity and creative problem solving. It also highlighted that when a pretend play is employed in Early childhood settings it allows children to learn solve problems and think

creatively, they cope better and improve their ability to adjust to life's situations. In addition, because play has an impact on the cognitive and affective processes important for development. conclusively, it was also found that pretend play has direct effect on a child's general development (cognitive, social, moral, physical and emotional development).

Social development involves children's ability to interact with others and regulate their own behavior. It is very closely linked to cognitive and emotional development, and together these developmental markers and milestones build the foundation for developing relationships with other people, coping with stressful situations, and many other skills. Healthy social development is vital as child enters school (Chatzipanteli & Adamakis, 2022). Additionally, Mondi et al. (2021) highlighted that between the age of three and four, a child's sense of confidence begins to develop as he or she learns to do more activities without assistance. Moreover, at this stage most children typically begin to share toys and take turns, engaging in pretend play, follow simple rules in games and might show attachment to one friend. Children's life can't be separated from play, as every child has the right to engage in play. More significantly, play is considered as an essential part of a child's development, because it supports a child to reach his full potential (Chatzipanteli & Adamakis, 2022). Buttressing this, National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2009) highlighted that play is a vital factor in helping the holistic development of children, likewise, it contributes to the aspects of cognitive, physical, social and emotional development of children (Rosli & Lin, 2018; Ali & Mahamod, 2015). The process of teaching and learning using play-based activities is a structured approach that provides students with the opportunity to learn in a meaningful and positive way, develop cooperative skills and display appropriate social behavior. However, Mondi et al. (2021) noted that play can facilitate social competence of children and increases their ability to control themselves, overcoming stress, talk about emotions, display various positive emotions such as joy and happiness.

According to Bavin et al. (2018) Language development of children is identified as a complex process resulting from the interplay between biological, cognitive and environmental factors. Typically, during the developmental process, by the age of 10–12 months, children tune in on the phonemes of their mother language and can implicitly discriminate them. by the same age, they begin to understand and utter their first words and produce deictic and representational gestures. Early word comprehension and gesture production are tightly associated and predictive of next pressive vocabulary at 24 months, at around 18 months, children reach a lexical repertoire of approximately 50 words and produce frequent gesture–word combinations; at between 20 and 24 months, they further increase their expressive vocabulary and begin to produce two-word utterances. By the age of three, they have developed a relatively rich mental lexicon and their utterances, grammatically more accurate and complex, can also be understood by people outside the familial environment (McGregor et al., 2020). Nonetheless, 11–18% of children aged between 18 and 36 months may show a significantly slowed lexical development in the absence of brain lesions, intellectual disability, or hearing impairments. These children are usually labelled late talkers or children Developmental language disorder (DLD.

Developmental language disorder (DLD) is a communication disorder that interferes with learning, understanding, and using language. These language difficulties are not explained by other

conditions, such as hearing loss or autism, or by extenuating circumstances, such as lack of exposure to language. DLD can affect a child's speaking, listening, reading, and writing. DLD has also been called specific language impairment, language delay, or developmental dysphasia. It is one of the most common developmental disorders, affecting approximately 1 in 14 children in kindergarten. The impact of DLD persists into adulthood (Sansavini et al., 2021). Substantial research asserts that pretend play has been identified to be crucial to children's cognitive, language and social skills development (McGregor et al. (2023). Buttressing the essentiality of pretend play on child's development Whitebeard, (2012) found that apart from education, it is also vital and a fundamental right for a child to play. Yet, Lillard et al (2013) among other scholars revealed that there is no existing evidence that support fundamental claims about the unique significance of pretend play on child development and they believed that in-depth research is necessary. Yet, according to Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists (2017) children with *Developmental Language Disorder (*DLD) are found to have "*difficulties in the context of normal cognitive abilities and are not primarily attributable to social, emotional, behavioral, educational, physical or sensory difficulties"*. Contrarily, other studies by McGregor et al. (2023) and Sansavini et al., (2021) revealed that social interaction between children with DLD and their peers may be difficult and this might strongly affect their social developmental process as they may experience difficulties while contributing to the relevant conversation such as jokes or storytelling.

Problem Statement

Studies indicated that, still there is an increasing emphasis on reading, writing and arithmetic as against the emphasis on play in preschool programs, especially in some African countries like Nigeria (Ogunyemi & Henning, 2020). This negative development could adversely affect the attainment of desired developmental milestones for social development of a child with DLD (McGregor et al., 2020). However, this disturbing trend prompted the conduct of this research so as to employ the findings to enhance general understandings of the role of pretend play; its aspiration and potentials. Therefore, this research is proposed to determine the stakeholders' perceptions on the relationship between pretend play and social development in children with developmental language disorder. It also hopes that the findings from this study will consequently assist in the development of appropriate indicators to measure the pretends play impact on social development among children with DLD, so as to produce detailed literature that connects pretend play and social developments of children with language developmental difficulties with relevance to developmental theories. It is also hope to be employed to serve as a blueprint that informs policy makers and practitioners in the field of ECCE.

Objective of the Study: The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Ascertain the perception of caregivers towards the effect of pretend play on general child development
2. Determine the caregivers understanding towards the relationships between pretend play and social development of children with DLD
3. Investigate the role of pretend play towards the attainment of a successful social development among children with DLD.

Research Questions: The following research questions were raised to attain the successful conduct of this research:

1. Does pretend play has effect on general child development?
2. Is there relationship between pretend play activities and social development of children with DLD?
3. What is the role of pretend play towards a successful social development attainment among children with DLD?

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed-methods research design to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from the participants in which a survey was employed to measure the perception of teachers (caregivers) on the impact of pretend play on social development of children with DLD for the avoidance of any factor that may affect the validity of the findings (Kumar, 2014).

Sample and Sampling Technique:

The target population for the study comprised of all the early childhood caregivers in Katsina state and it is made up of three senatorial zones (Funtua, Katsina and Daura) and all of them share a cultural and educational similarities. A sample one hindered and twenty (102) participants was selected for the study using a multi-stage stratified random sampling technique. **(i)** First stag**e** was stratification or division of the state into 3 Senatorial zones. (ii) Second stage was a random selection of two Local Government Area (LGA) from each Senatorial zone (2* 3= 06). Moreover, 02 ECE Centers (1 rural and 1 Urban) selected from each LGA (2* 6= 12). I.e., 12 ECE centers were selected across the state. (iii) Third stage is where the researcher randomly selected eight (08) Early Child Caregivers from each selected ECE Centers (08* 12= 96) and two specialist (01 speech and language therapist and 1 psychologist) were selected from each zone (02*3=6)

Instrumentation

The questionnaire was designed to have three sections, in which Section A is made up of respondent's background information; Section B of the questionnaire is made of up nine questions with four scale options (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree) against each statement for respondents to choose according to their perceptions (Likert, 1932)., and A brief semi-structured interview was design for the qualitative data collection from the psychologist and speech and language therapist.

Data collection

The data collection instruments designed by the researchers was titled Early Child Caregivers Perception Questionnaire (ECCPQ). Moreover, it was validated in order to ensure its sufficiency and accuracy to generate required data for the research analysis (Bell, 2010, Kumar, 2014). The data collection was conducted within the three geopolitical zones of Katsina state through the following two (2) stages: Firstly, early childhood caregivers from the selected settings across the three geopolitical zones were invited to volunteer in the research through their Head caregivers/

Head teachers. After securing their consent, the researchers proceed with the data collection using five-point likert questionnaires, which is considered as one of the most common approach for data collection (Mcleod, 2014; Kumar, 2014). A total number of 96 questionnaires was administered to 12 randomly selected schools across the three senatorial zones; however, a period of 2-weeks was allowed to fill-in the questionnaires. The entire data collection process was recorded to be successful as 93 participants out of the 96 responded to the questionnaires administered to them. Secondly, after the return of the questionnaires a total number of six participants comprising of 03 Speech and language therapists and 03 Psychologist were invited for an interview via email which contains the following information: A brief introduction about the researchers and the purpose of the study; assurance of the participant's confidentiality; and the options via which interview would be conducted (face to face or online). After securing the consent of the participants, the researchers conducted an interview with the three specialists across the geopolitical zone in order to collect in-depth information relating to the social development of children with DLD.

DATA ANALYSIS, PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS:

Having used closed-ended and Likert scale approaches in the instrument for data collection in section A and B respectively, the study employed descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) for the analysis of data collected from the study sample. Furthermore, for the analysis of data from the interviewed (qualitative data), the researcher adopted inductive thematic analysis method that involves process where coding and theme development are directed by the content of the data. The following processes were adhered to ensure accuracy in the inductive analysis (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012). (i) Read the responses one after the other severally and became familiar with what the data entails. (ii) Generated the initial codes. (iii) Identified and reviewed themes for further analysis. (iv) Comprehensive analysis made based on the various themes identified. To answer the question one and two, a step-by-step processes of data analyses were followed. Starting with sorting out the questionnaires, which revealed that, majority (93) of the participants completed the questionnaires given to them. Data from section A of the questionnaires were summarized, analyzed and presented in the frequency distribution format as shown in Table 1.1. Furthermore, data from Section B of the questionnaire was summarized based on the participant's response to each statement in the questionnaire as shown in Table 1.2, and analysis of the data was made using percentage and presented using bar chart as illustrated in figure 1.1 and 1.2. Data from the section C of the questionnaire was analyzed and presented using inductive thematic analysis approach.

Distribution of background information of the Respondents

The background information solicited and presented was about gender, age, working status of ECE setting and year of working experience among the participants. The background information was deemed necessary as the researchers wanted to ensure that all early caregivers with different background characteristics were represented in the study implying that the findings were not only for a particular group or category of respondents. Table 4.1 shows the distribution of respondents according to different attributes.

Table 4.1. Distribution of respondents according to different attributes.

Attributes	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	35	37.63%
	Female	58	62.37%
	Total	93	100%
Age	18-24 years	10	10.75%
	25-29 years	56	60.22%
	30 years above	27	29.03%
	Total	93	100%
Working status at the ECE setting	Volunteer	25	26.88%
	Member of staff	68	73.12%
	Other	00	00.00%
	Total	93	100%
Years of working in ECE setting	1-12 months	21	22.58%
	1-5 years	36	38.71%
	5-10 years	25	26.89%
	10 years above	11	11.82%
	Total	93	100%

The findings presented in the Table 1.1, reveal that majority of the participants (62.37%) are females, while the remaining 37.63% are males. It also shows that most of the participants (60.22%) fall within the age range of 25 to 29 years old, while the remaining 10.75% and 29.03% are found to have fallen within the age ranges of 18 to 24 years old and 30 years above, respectively. Similarly, the results on the working status of the participants show that majority of the participants (73.12%) are members of staff while the remaining 26.88% are those working as volunteers in the settings. Likewise, the results of the analysis of the participants' working experiences shows that, all the participants had work experiences ranging from one month to ten years, in which majority (38.71%) of them are identified to have 1 to 5 years working experience followed by 26.89% with 5-10 years of experiences in service while the remaining participants, 22.58% and 11.82% were discovered to have working experiences of between 1- 12 months and 10 years above respectively.

Table 1.2: Distribution of Participants' Response across katsina state

S/N	Statement	Response category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Pretend play has been beneficial in enhancing my students' cognitive, moral and physical development	SA	21	22.58%
		A	68	73.12%
		SD	01	1.08%
		D	03	3.22%
2	Participating in pretend play does not improve my students' communication skills	SA	04	4.30%
		A	02	2.20%
		SD	71	76.30%
		D	16	17.20%
3	Pretend play helps my students with language development disorder to express themselves better when interacting with others	SA	69	74.19%
		A	21	22.58%
		SD	00	00%
		D	03	3.23%
4	Pretend play does not facilitate critical thinking abilities among my students	SA	00	00%
		A	03	3.23%
		SD	31	33.33%
		D	59	63.44%
5	I have observed my student's demonstrating empathy or understanding of others' feelings during pretend play	SA	48	51.62%
		A	31	33.33%
		SD	02	2.15%
		D	12	12.90%
6	Pretend play encourages my students to initiate conversations with others	SA	71	76.34%
		A	20	21.51%
		SD	00	00%
		D	02	2.15%
7	Students with language development disorder participation in pretend play has had a positive effect on their confidence in social situations	SA	57	61.29%
		A	33	35.48%
		SD	01	1.08%
		D	02	2.15%
8	I believe that pretend play can serve as an effective tool for improving social skills in children with language development disorders	SA	51	54.83%
		A	39	41.94%
		SD	02	2.15%
		D	01	1.08%
9	When engaging in pretend play, my students' shows increased understanding of social roles and dynamics	SA	47	50.53%
		A	36	38.71%
		SD	03	3.23%
		D	07	7.53%
10		SA	11	11.83%
		A	08	8.60%

My students with language development disorder prefer to play alone rather than engage in pretend play with others	SD	46	49.46%
	D	28	30.11%

The analysis presented in Table 1.2, shows that a majority of the participants agreed with the statement 1, 3, 5, 6,7,8 and 9 respectively. Likewise, most of the participants were identified to have disagreed with the statements 2,4 and 10. The responses were further illustrated in the bar chart as shown in Figure .1.1 and 1.2 as follows:

Figure 1.1: Illustration of Participants' Responses According to the Statements in the Questionnaire with relevant to the research question one:
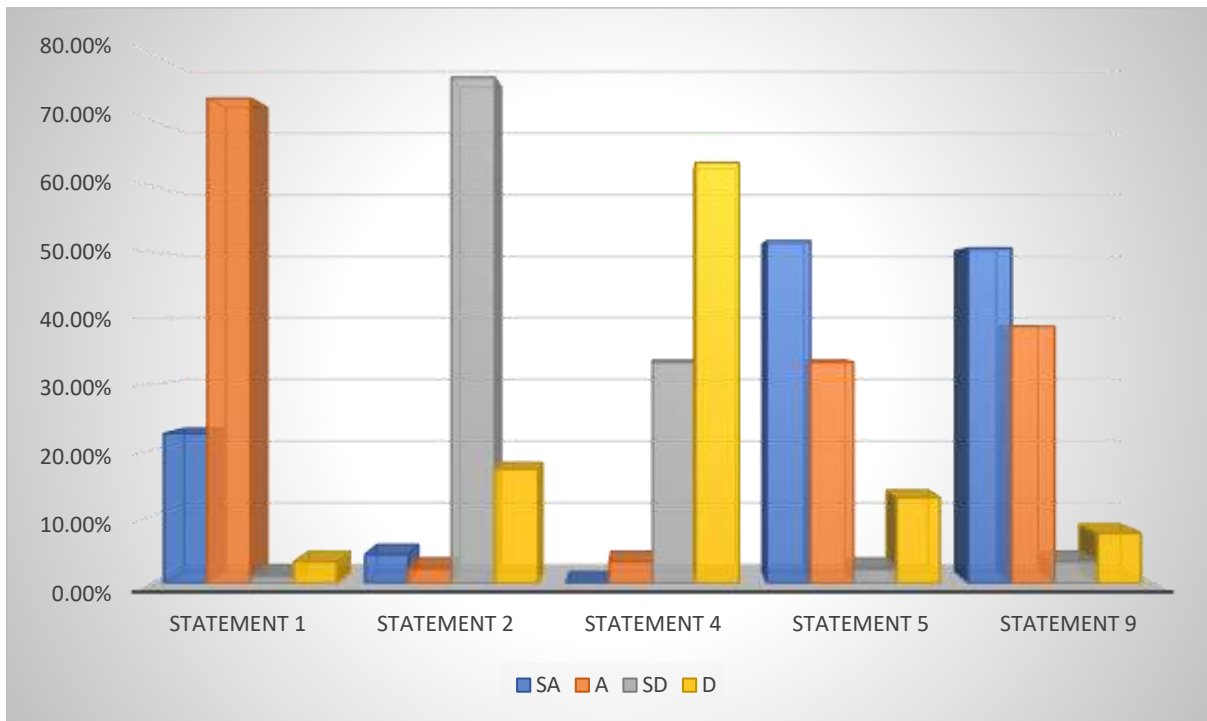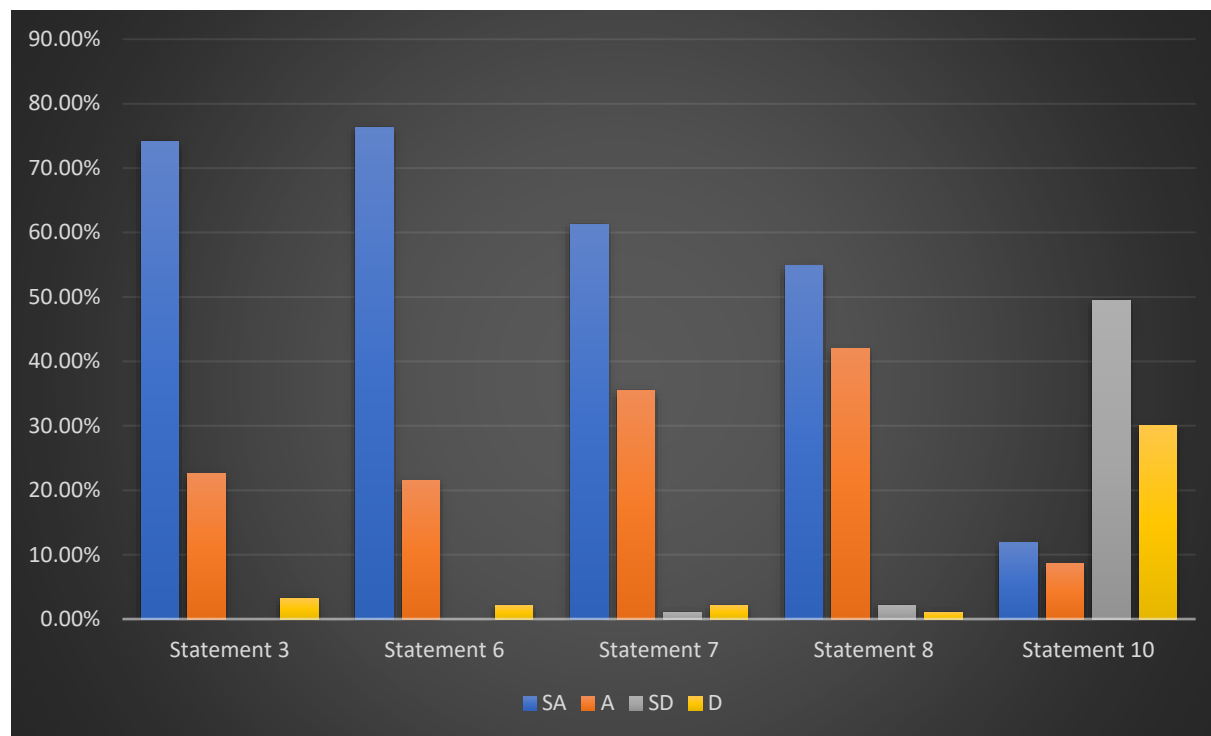
Figure 1.2: Illustration of Participants' Responses According to the Statements in the Questionnaire with relevant to the research question two:

Thematic analysis of participant response on the interview:

To analyze the data collected during the interview, all the participants responses was sorted and it was found that all the six (06) specialists participated in the interview and responded to the questions based on their various perception and experiences in relations to it. In order to familiarized with what the data collected entails, the responses were read and re-read severally, and initial code was generated which allows the researchers to came up with the following three themes for the purpose of data analysis; (1) Enhancement of Social Interaction Skills (2) Language Development and Expression (3) Emotional Understanding and Empathy.

Theme 1: Enhancement of Social Interaction Skills: Analysis from the interview conducted revealed that both professionals highlighted the role of pretend play in enhancing social interaction skills, in which the psychologist noted the structured environment that allows children to practice roles and social norms, while the speech and language therapist emphasized the importance of motivation in interactions. For example, one of the Psychologist participants stated that *"Engaging in pretend play provides a structured environment where children can practice social roles and norms. It allows them to experiment with different social scenarios, which can enhance their understanding of turn-taking, sharing, and initiating conversations. For example, when children engage in a tea party role play, they must negotiate roles, ask questions like 'Would you like milk or sugar?', and respond to their peers, which fosters vital social communication skills."* Therefore,

the casual and enjoyable nature of pretend play appears to lower the communication barrier for children with developmental language disorders, enabling them to practice essential skills like turn-taking, negotiation, and responding in conversations

Theme 2: Language Development and Expression: Some of the responses from the participants under the theme Language Development and Expression were analyzed and it turns out that responses from both professionals pointed to language development as a crucial outcome of pretend play. For example, a response from the speech and language therapist stated that *"From my experience, pretend play can significantly enhance language expression. I often encourage children to narrate their play scenarios, which fosters narrative skills and complex sentence construction. For instance, when a child pretends to be a doctor, they might use medical terminology or describe procedures, which not only enriches their vocabulary but also helps them practice using language coherently and meaningfully."*

Based on the analysis from the participant response under this them it shows that psychologist described how imagination stimulates language use, while the speech and language therapist provided concrete examples of narrative enhancement and vocabulary expansion. Both viewpoints underscore that pretend play serves as a practical context for language usage, allowing children to experiment with vocabulary and sentence structures in a meaningful way. This theme reflects the interplay between social contexts and language acquisition.

Theme 3: Emotional Understanding and Empathy: The analysis from the participants under this theme highlighted that both the psychologist and speech and language therapist recognized the potential of pretend play to nurture emotional understanding and empathy. The psychologist focused on role reversal as a means of developing perspective-taking skills, while the speech and language therapist emphasized practice in recognizing and responding to emotional cues. For instance, one of the participants (psychologist) stated that "*Engaging in pretend play helps children develop a greater awareness of emotions. By taking on various roles, they learn to see things from different perspectives, which is crucial for empathy. For example, when a child plays the role of a caregiver, they may develop an understanding of nurturing and empathy, as they learn to respond to the 'feelings' of their playmates. This role reversal promotes emotional intelligence, even in children with developmental language disorders."* Therefore, this suggests that pretend play is not only a tool for social interaction and language development but also a crucial mechanism for emotional and social cognition in children with developmental language disorders.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Research Question One: Does pretend play has effect on general child development?
To answer research question one, results from the analysis in figure .1.1 shows that majority of the participants strongly believed that pretend play has significant impact on children's development among others, the analysis from the participants response of statement 1,2,4,5 and 9 of the questionnaire revealed that pretend play can help children to develop their mental reasoning abilities, supports children's physical, emotional and moral development, it also believed to facilitates communication skills and increased understanding of social roles and dynamics.

Research Question Two: Is there relationship between pretend play activities and social development of children with DLD?

This research question can be answered based on the results of the analysis presented in figure .1.2 in which the result from the participants responses on statement 3,6,7, 8 and 10 analyzed discovered that majority of the participants are with the opinion that pretend play has a very significant relationship with social development of children identified with DLD.

Research Question Three: What is the role of pretend play towards a successful social development attainment among children with DLD?

To answer this research, question an interview was conducted with specialist and a thematic analysis of their responses reveals a cohesive understanding of the multifaceted benefits of pretend play for children with developmental language disorders. Conclusively, all the professionals agree on the importance of creating engaging and meaningful play scenarios that facilitate comprehensive social, emotional, and linguistic development, therefore, these insights highlight the necessity of integrating pretend play into interventions for children with developmental language disorders, providing a solid foundation for their overall development.

CONCLUSION

The research findings highlight the significant impact of pretend play on children's general development (mental reasoning abilities, physical, emotional, language, social and moral development). Moreover, regarding the relationship between pretend play and social development in children with developmental language disorders (DLD), the analysis reveals a strong consensus among participants that pretend play significantly contributes to social development in these children. Lastly, an interview with specialists further underscores the multifaceted benefits of pretend play for children with DLD. Experts agree on the importance of creating engaging and meaningful play scenarios to foster comprehensive social, emotional, and linguistic development, providing a solid foundation for their overall development.

RECOMMENDATION:

1. **Integrate Pretend Play into Curriculum**: Schools and early childhood education centers should incorporate pretend play activities into their daily routines to support overall child development.
2. **Training for Educators**: Provide training for teachers and caregivers on the importance of pretend play and how to effectively facilitate it to enhance children's mental, physical, emotional, and social development.
3. **Specialized Interventions for Children with DLD**: Develop targeted interventions that use pretend play to support the social, emotional, and linguistic development of children with developmental language disorders.
4. **Collaborative Efforts**: Foster collaboration between educators, parents, and specialists to create a cohesive approach to integrating pretend play into children's development programs.

5. **Ongoing Research and Evaluation**: Conduct further research to continuously evaluate the effectiveness of pretend play interventions and make necessary adjustments to improve outcomes for children.

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