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**Teachers' Roles in Play-Based Learning in Tanzanian Public Pre-Primary Units: A
Qualitative Case Study**

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Abstract

Purpose: The study examined the teachers' roles in play-based learning in Tanzanian public pre-primary units

Methodology: The study adopted a qualitative case study design. The study recruited 18 participants through purposive sampling across eight public schools: 10 pre-primary teachers and eight head teachers. Selection criteria included direct involvement in, or relevant knowledge of, PBL. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations and, where appropriate, post-observation interviews. The data were analysed thematically.

Findings: The findings identified six interrelated roles: facilitator, co-player, observer, controller, mediator, and director. These roles demonstrate that teachers' participation in play-based learning extends beyond the conventional distinction between teacher-directed and child-directed play. The study concludes that the pedagogical value of teacher involvement lies not simply in whether teachers intervene, but in how, when, and why they intervene. Facilitation, co-playing, observation, and responsive mediation can support children's participation and learning, whereas control and direction, although necessary in particular circumstances, may constrain children's agency when applied excessively.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Through Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Rogoff's theory of guided participation, teacher participation is therefore understood as a dynamic process through which curricular intentions, children's agency, safety, and social participation are continuously negotiated. Teacher education and continuing professional development should strengthen teachers' practical competence in facilitating, participating, observing, mediating, regulating, and directing play, with particular emphasis on determining when to intervene, provide scaffolding, or withdraw. Curriculum guidance should support teachers to maintain meaningful learning purposes while allowing children opportunities to select roles, negotiate rules, develop play scenarios, experiment, and contribute their own ideas. Schools and education authorities should also encourage the use of culturally meaningful play, including traditional games, songs, dances, stories, and role-play, as locally relevant resources for learning. In addition, teacher preparation should equip teachers with practical strategies for managing conflict, behaviour, and safety while preserving children's opportunities for independent social participation.

Keywords: Teachers' Roles, Play-Based Learning, Public Pre-Primary Units

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INTRODUCTION

Play is widely recognised as a fundamental context for young children's learning and development because it provides opportunities for exploration, interaction, problem-solving, communication, and meaning-making (Yogman et al., 2018). In early childhood education, play extends beyond recreation to provide a pedagogical context through which children can develop cognitive, social, emotional, language, and practical competencies (Fleer, 2015; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Play-based learning (PBL), therefore, requires more than providing children with opportunities to play; it involves creating learning environments in which children can actively engage with people, materials, and ideas while connecting play experiences with meaningful learning opportunities (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003). Within this process, teachers have an important pedagogical role because the educational value of play is influenced not only by children's engagement but also by how teachers organise the environment, observe children's activities, participate in play, provide support, and respond to emerging needs (Wood, 2014; Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

A central issue in PBL concerns the extent and nature of teacher involvement. Child-initiated play emphasises children's autonomy, choice, exploration, and decision-making, whereas guided play recognises the teacher's responsibility to intentionally organise learning environments, introduce appropriate materials, pose questions, scaffold children's thinking, and connect play experiences with curricular purposes (Vygotsky, 1978; Weisberg et al., 2016; Zosh et al., 2018). Consequently, effective teacher participation cannot be understood simply as either intervention or non-intervention. Teachers may observe from a distance, participate as co-players, facilitate activities, provide scaffolding, mediate social interactions, regulate behaviour, or direct activities towards particular learning objectives (Weisberg et al., 2016). The pedagogical challenge is to provide sufficient guidance to support learning without unnecessarily displacing children's agency, initiative, and opportunities for independent exploration.

Research increasingly suggests that teacher participation in PBL is multidimensional. Teachers can prepare materials and learning environments, observe children's engagement, participate in play, provide guidance, extend children's thinking, and intervene when assistance is required (Fleer, 2015; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Weisberg et al., 2016). These forms of participation represent different degrees of adult influence, ranging from indirect environmental support to direct participation and instructional guidance (Hassinger-Das et al., 2017). Importantly, teachers may move between these positions depending on children's needs, the nature of the activity, classroom interactions, and intended learning outcomes (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978; Zosh et al., 2018). However, excessive direction may reduce opportunities for children to make choices, initiate activities, negotiate meanings, and solve problems independently. Understanding how teachers negotiate these different forms of involvement is therefore important for explaining how PBL is actually constructed in classroom practice.

This issue is particularly important in Tanzania, where PBL forms part of the broader emphasis on child-centred, activity-based, and participatory approaches to early childhood education. Tanzanian policy and curriculum frameworks promote active participation and developmentally appropriate learning experiences; however, translating these principles into everyday classroom practice can be challenging. Existing evidence identifies constraints including inadequate teaching and learning materials, large class sizes, limited professional preparation, and tensions between

child-centred approaches and established teacher-directed practices (Ministry of Education Science and Technology [MoEST], 2016; Mtahabwa & Rao, 2010; UNESCO, 2022). These conditions may influence not only whether teachers implement PBL but also how they position themselves while children are engaged in play. These implementation challenges are also evident in the staffing conditions of public pre-primary education. Tanzanian pre-primary curriculum guidance stipulates a teacher–child ratio of 1:25 and emphasises child-centred, play-based and flexible teaching (MoEST, 2016). However, empirical evidence indicates that actual classroom ratios can be substantially higher. Earlier studies of public pre-primary schools reported ratios of approximately 1:48–1:50 in urban areas and 1:82–1:98 in rural areas, highlighting the staffing pressures some teachers face (Mtahabwa & Rao, 2010; Kejo, 2017; Shukia & Marobo, 2022). More recent national education statistics also reveal substantial regional variation in pupil–teacher ratios in government pre-primary education, with some districts reporting ratios well above 1:50. Under these conditions, a single teacher may struggle to provide sustained individualised guidance, observe children's play closely, manage social interactions and preserve opportunities for child choice and independent exploration. The issue, therefore, is not simply whether teachers endorse child-centred play, but how they negotiate its pedagogical demands in classrooms where staffing, materials, space and other resources may constrain the forms of participation envisaged in national curriculum guidance.

Tanzania's early childhood education policy and curriculum frameworks promote child-centred, activity-based and participatory approaches, with play expected to provide meaningful opportunities for children to explore, interact, solve problems and learn. However, teachers in public pre-primary classrooms may find these expectations difficult to implement because of large groups of children, inadequate teaching and learning materials, limited classroom space and varying levels of professional preparation. Reports indicate that teacher–child ratios in some public pre-primary settings exceed 1:50 and, in certain cases, reach 1:70. These conditions may hinder teachers' ability to provide sustained guidance, monitor participation, manage behaviour and ensure safety while preserving opportunities for choice, initiative and independent exploration. The challenge, therefore, lies not simply in the policy commitment to play-based learning, but in the practical negotiation required to translate child-centred policy expectations into classroom practice under constrained conditions.

Although previous research has examined teachers' facilitation, participation, observation, guidance, and intervention in play-based learning, limited attention has been paid to how these forms of involvement are combined and negotiated within the same classroom. In particular, little is known about how teachers shift between roles in response to children's needs and social interactions, safety concerns, curricular expectations, and the practical conditions of public pre-primary classrooms. This gap matters because categorizing teacher involvement as either teacher-directed or child-directed overlooks the fluidity of classroom practice and fails to explain how curricular intentionality is balanced with children's agency. This study addresses this gap by examining the roles enacted by pre-primary teachers during play-based learning and how shifts among facilitation, co-playing, observation, control, mediation, and direction are negotiated in everyday classroom activities.

The study may benefit several groups. Pre-primary teachers and teacher educators may gain a clearer understanding of how teachers can use different forms of participation responsively, rather than treating play-based learning as either unrestricted child-led play or direct teacher instruction. Curriculum developers and education policymakers, particularly those responsible for early childhood education, may use the findings to consider how policy expectations for child-centred play can be supported within the practical conditions of public pre-primary classrooms. School leaders and education authorities may also draw on evidence about the practical conditions that shape the implementation of play-based learning. Finally, early childhood education researchers may use the study's contextually grounded account of teachers' shifting roles to investigate play-based learning further across regions and educational settings in Tanzania.

Accordingly, this study examined how pre-primary teachers enact and negotiate their roles during PBL in selected public pre-primary units in Tanzania's Tanga Region. Specifically, the study examined the roles played by pre-primary teachers during PBL and how these roles reflect negotiations between teacher guidance, children's agency, and the achievement of learning objectives. Drawing on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Rogoff's theory of guided participation, the study conceptualises teacher involvement as a socially mediated and contextually responsive practice. By examining teachers' enacted roles in Tanzanian public pre-primary classrooms, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of PBL implementation and highlights the importance of balancing curricular intentionality, children's agency, social participation, and classroom realities.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and Rogoff's theory of guided participation. The two perspectives are complementary, while providing distinct analytical lenses for understanding teachers' roles during play-based learning (PBL). Vygotsky's SCT conceptualises learning and development as socially mediated processes in which children develop through interaction with more knowledgeable others. Rogoff's theory of guided participation extends this perspective by emphasising children's participation in shared, culturally organised activities with more experienced members of their communities. Together, the theories provide a useful basis for examining teachers not simply as instructors, but as social participants who organise, support, observe, regulate, mediate, and extend children's engagement during play.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory views learning and development as processes that are fundamentally mediated through social interaction. A central concept relevant to this study is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the difference between what children can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with appropriate assistance from a more knowledgeable other. Within PBL, this perspective positions the teacher as a potential mediator who can extend children's participation through modelling, questioning, prompting, explanation, and other forms of temporary support.

The theory is particularly relevant to understanding the facilitator, co-player, and mediator roles identified in this study. When teachers organise play opportunities, participate alongside children, model activities, respond to difficulties, or provide appropriate assistance, they can create socially

mediated opportunities through which children extend their knowledge and skills. The theory therefore provides a basis for understanding teacher involvement as a potential means of supporting children's learning through interaction rather than merely transmitting knowledge.

However, SCT does not imply that every form of teacher intervention constitutes effective scaffolding. Productive assistance should be responsive to children's developing competence and should support children in assuming increasing responsibility for the activity. Excessive or overly directive intervention may instead reduce opportunities for children to make choices, initiate activities, and solve problems independently. This distinction is important for interpreting the controller and director roles, because teacher involvement may either support children's participation or constrain their agency depending on its purpose, timing, and degree.

Rogoff's Theory of Guided Participation

Rogoff's (2003) theory of guided participation complements Vygotsky's perspective by shifting attention from assistance provided by an individual adult towards participation in shared and culturally organised activities. From this perspective, learning develops as children participate with more experienced members of their communities in meaningful activities, with responsibility and understanding gradually developing through interaction.

Guided participation is particularly relevant to PBL because play provides opportunities for teachers and children to engage jointly in activities, negotiate meanings, solve problems, and develop shared understandings. Teachers may participate directly as co-players, organise activities as facilitators or directors, observe children's engagement, or intervene as mediators when difficulties arise. Importantly, guided participation does not require teachers to control every aspect of an activity; rather, effective participation involves adapting adult support to children's developing competence and the demands of the activity.

Rogoff's emphasis on culturally organised participation is particularly relevant to the Tanzanian context. Children's play can draw on familiar social and cultural practices, including traditional games, dances, stories, songs, and role-play. In such activities, teachers may model culturally meaningful practices while children observe, participate, reproduce, and adapt what they encounter. The teacher therefore functions simultaneously as a participant, cultural model, and guide.

Analytical Application of the Theories

The two theoretical perspectives were used as complementary interpretive lenses rather than as predetermined categories for coding the data. Vygotsky's concepts of social mediation, ZPD, and scaffolding were used to examine how teachers provided assistance that extended children's participation and learning. Rogoff's concept of guided participation was used to examine how teachers and children engaged jointly in meaningful and culturally organised play activities.

The six teacher roles emerging from the data were therefore interpreted through these theoretical perspectives. The facilitator and co-player roles were primarily considered in relation to scaffolding, social mediation, and guided participation. The observer role was interpreted in relation to teachers' monitoring of children's participation and their decisions about when intervention was necessary. The mediator role was understood as involving social and relational mediation, particularly when children experienced conflict or difficulty. The controller and

director roles were examined in relation to adult regulation and instructional guidance, with attention to whether such involvement supported participation or constrained children's agency.

Although Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and Rogoff's theory of guided participation offer robust frameworks for understanding socially mediated and participatory learning, applying these theories in high-density, resource-constrained Tanzanian public pre-primary classrooms requires attention to teachers' management of collective, rather than exclusively individualised, scaffolding. In these settings, teachers may organise groups, model activities for several children simultaneously, monitor multiple interactions, regulate participation and intervene selectively when particular difficulties arise. Scaffolding and guided participation may therefore operate through collective classroom activities rather than being confined to one-to-one teacher-child interaction. Within this context, the six emergent roles represent interconnected forms of social mediation and guided participation: the facilitator organises and extends collective participation; the co-player engages alongside children, modelling and supporting activities; the observer monitors participation and determines when intervention is necessary; the mediator helps children address social and learning difficulties; the controller regulates safety, behaviour and equitable participation; and the director establishes curricular structure and learning goals. This interpretation connects the six roles theoretically while recognising that the form, intensity and distribution of teacher support reflect the practical realities of Tanzanian public pre-primary classrooms.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine how pre-primary teachers enacted and negotiated their roles during play-based learning (PBL) in selected public pre-primary units in Handeni and Lushoto Districts, Tanga Region, Tanzania. This design was appropriate because the study sought to understand teachers' practices and the contextual conditions in which they occurred, rather than measure the frequency or effects of specific roles. It enabled an in-depth examination of teachers' participation in the natural classroom environment, considering interactions among teachers, children, play activities and learning objectives in their real-life context. Consistent with Yin's (2018) conceptualisation of case study research, teachers' roles during PBL were treated as a contemporary phenomenon inseparable from the classroom context. The bounded case comprised selected public pre-primary units in Tanga Region, with particular attention to teachers' participation, guidance, observation, regulation, mediation and direction of children's play. This approach enabled examination of both the roles teachers reported performing and their enactment during classroom activities. Handeni and Lushoto Districts were purposively selected because they contain a relatively high number of public pre-primary units and qualified pre-primary teachers, making them suitable settings for examining PBL within Tanzania's formal early childhood education system. The selected schools also offered opportunities to observe teacher-child interactions during play and gather accounts from classroom teachers and head teachers about the organisation and implementation of play-based activities.

Participants and Sampling

The study recruited 18 participants through purposive sampling across eight public schools: 10 pre-primary teachers and eight head teachers. Selection criteria included direct involvement in, or relevant knowledge of, PBL. Teachers were included because they implemented classroom activities and had first-hand experience of PBL. Head teachers contributed supervisory knowledge of classroom implementation and complementary perspectives on teaching practice. Including both groups enabled examination of teachers' roles from classroom and supervisory perspectives.

Data Collection

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations and, where appropriate, post-observation interviews. Semi-structured interviews examined teachers' and head teachers' accounts of their roles, responsibilities, pedagogical intentions and practices during PBL. Particular attention was given to how teachers organised play, participated in activities, provided guidance and support, observed children's engagement, managed interactions and linked play to intended learning outcomes. Researchers conducted non-participant observations in natural classroom settings to examine teachers' practices and interactions with children during PBL. Each observation lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. Two observations took place at each participating school on separate occasions over a four-week period between March and April 2024. Repeated observations enabled examination of whether teachers' roles remained consistent or varied across classroom occasions. Observations focused on teachers' positioning, interactions with children, forms of guidance, participation in play, responses to children's behaviour, conflict management, monitoring of engagement and direction of activities towards intended learning outcomes. Where appropriate, post-observation interviews clarified teachers' actions and the pedagogical intentions underpinning observed practices. Combining interviews with repeated observations enabled comparison between teachers' reported roles and enacted classroom practices.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. Analysis began with familiarisation with the interview transcripts, observation notes and audio recordings. Initial codes were then generated from participants' accounts and observed teacher–child interactions. These codes captured actions including organising activities, participating in play, observing children, providing assistance, managing conflicts, regulating behaviour and directing activities towards learning objectives. The codes were compared and grouped into broader patterns. Candidate themes were then reviewed against the coded extracts and the full dataset to assess their coherence and distinctiveness. The themes were subsequently defined and named to represent specific forms of teacher participation identified in the data, before being interpreted through the theoretical framework, particularly its concepts of social mediation, scaffolding and guided participation. The analysis therefore combined inductive identification of teacher roles in the empirical data with a theoretically informed interpretation of their pedagogical significance.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Credibility was strengthened through the use of multiple data sources, including interviews with teachers and head

teachers and classroom observations, which enabled comparison between reported and observed practices. Dependability was supported through the consistent use of a semi-structured interview guide and systematic procedures for recording, transcribing, and analysing the data. Confirmability was enhanced by grounding interpretations in participants' accounts and observational evidence rather than relying solely on researcher assumptions. Transferability was supported through the provision of contextual information about the participating schools, participants, and implementation of PBL.

Ethical Considerations

The Research Ethics Committee of Ruaha Catholic University (RUCU), Tanzania, granted ethical approval for the study. The relevant educational authorities and participating schools subsequently granted permission. Before providing informed consent, all participating teachers and head teachers received information about the study's purpose and procedures. Participation was voluntary, and participants could decline or withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was maintained by using participant codes rather than names in transcripts and reports. Interview and observation data were kept confidential and used solely for research purposes. Classroom observations focused on teachers' practices and teacher-child interactions relevant to PBL and did not involve the collection of children's personal information.

RESULTS

The findings revealed six interrelated roles enacted by pre-primary teachers during play-based learning (PBL): facilitator, co-player, observer, controller, mediator, and director. The roles were not mutually exclusive; rather, teachers moved between them according to the nature of the play activity, children's behaviour and needs, safety considerations, social interactions, and intended learning outcomes. Evidence from interviews and classroom observations showed that teachers combined different forms of participation within their everyday PBL practices.

Teachers as Facilitators

The findings showed that teachers assumed a facilitative role by organising play activities, preparing children for participation, providing guidance, and encouraging engagement. Teachers described organising children into groups, preparing play experiences, introducing unfamiliar games, and supporting children during familiar activities. One teacher explained: "I divide them into groups and assign them roles, for example, if they are acting, I assign them roles like you will be the mother, you will be the father, and you will be a child, that is it" (Personal communication, PPUT1 from PPU1; March 12, 2024).

Another teacher stated:

"I prepare play for them, and I also teach them a new play or guide them as a game they are familiar with" (Personal communication, PPUT4 from PPU4; March 15, 2024).

Teachers also reported encouraging participation through positive reinforcement. One participant explained that she congratulated children who performed successfully during play and paid attention to differences in children's participation and performance.

Overall, the facilitator role involved organising play opportunities, preparing children, providing guidance, and encouraging participation.

Teachers as Co-Players

Teachers also participated directly in children's play as co-players. Rather than consistently remaining outside play activities, some teachers joined children in games, dances, and other activities. One teacher explained: "I am with them all the time, and I play with them like a child" (Personal communication, PPUT1 from PPU1; March 12, 2024).

Similarly, another participant stated:

"Really, I play with them; I do not leave them even once" (Personal communication, PPUT2 from PPU2; March 13, 2024).

Co-playing was also evident in culturally familiar activities. One teacher described participating in traditional dance while demonstrating how children could dress, tie the khanga, and perform the dance:

"For a game like a traditional dance, I also play the dance with them. I show them how to dress, how to tie the khanga, and how to start dancing while I instruct them on how the dance should be played. So, I play with them" (Personal communication, PPUT4 from PPU4; March 15, 2024).

These accounts indicate that teachers sometimes became active participants in children's play while simultaneously demonstrating or explaining aspects of the activity.

Teachers as Observers

Observation constituted another important teacher role. Teachers reported monitoring children's participation and behaviour while allowing them to engage in play. One participant explained:

"I sit on the sidelines to see how they play" (Personal communication, PPUT6 from PPU5; March 19, 2024).

Another teacher described remaining an observer when children played independently:

"When they are playing by themselves, I am the general observer. You know, when you have children at this early age, you will find that some do what you order, but others do not, so I will make sure that each child does what he was ordered to do" (Personal communication, PPUT7 from PPU6; March 20, 2024).

The findings therefore show that teachers used observation to monitor children's participation and behaviour, including whether children followed instructions associated with the activity. Observation was particularly evident when teachers were not directly participating in the play.

Teachers as Controllers

Teachers also assumed a controlling role, particularly in relation to safety, behaviour, conflict, and equitable participation. Participants explained that close supervision was necessary because children could quarrel, fight, behave aggressively, or dominate other children during play.

One teacher explained:

"I know these children, if I let them go without close supervision, they will end up with quarrels, fighting each other, which is very risky" (Personal communication, PPUT10 from PPU8; March 22, 2024).

Another participant stated:

“Children have different behaviours; some are passive, while others are aggressive. Therefore, without controlling them during play, they will fight with each other, or some children will dominate the play without involving their fellow children. Thus, I also make sure that they are under my control as an adult when they play” (Personal communication, PPUT9 from PPU7; March 21, 2024).

These accounts indicate that teachers perceived control as necessary for maintaining safety, regulating behaviour, preventing conflict, and ensuring that children participated without being dominated by their peers.

Teachers as Mediators

The findings further showed that teachers acted as mediators when children experienced conflict, emotional distress, disagreement, or difficulties during play. Teachers described calming children, listening to their concerns, separating children when necessary, providing assistance, and facilitating dialogue.

One teacher explained:

“When a child experienced difficulty completing a particular task, the teacher discussed the difficulty with the child and provided assistance to help the child achieve the intended goal” (Personal communication, PPUT1 from PPU1; March 12, 2024).

Teachers also described responding to interpersonal conflict through listening and negotiation. One participant stated:

“Other children become highly emotional as a result of conflicts with peers. If I encounter such a situation, I must ensure that I calm the child; sometimes I take him or her to where I sit. Sometimes I ask a child what happened and give him time to explain the situation as I listen. I can also separate them based on the nature of the problem or facilitate negotiations and dialogue to help them maintain their friendship and love” (Personal communication, PPUT10 from PPU8, March 22, 2024).

The findings also revealed instances in which teachers physically intervened to stop aggressive behaviour.

Thus, the mediator role involved responding to children's difficulties and interpersonal problems through assistance, emotional support, listening, separation, negotiation, and dialogue.

Teachers as Directors

The sixth role identified was that of director. In this role, teachers exercised greater control over the organisation and intended outcomes of play by assigning roles, structuring activities, and specifying learning objectives.

One teacher explained:

“I divide children into moderate-sized groups and assign them roles. For example, if they are acting on a particular event or style, I assign them roles to act out during imaginative play, such as being the mother, the father, and a child; that is it” (Personal communication, PPUT1 from PPU1; March 12, 2024).

Another participant described explicitly directing play towards predetermined learning objectives:

“I also give them the objective of play so that while playing they could be focusing on achieving that goal. For that matter, I have to ensure that they meet the goal” (Personal communication, PPUT4 from PPU4; March 15, 2024).

The findings therefore show that the director role involved assigning roles, structuring activities, establishing learning objectives, and monitoring children's participation towards achieving intended outcomes.

Summary of Findings

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that teachers enacted multiple and overlapping roles during PBL. Facilitation involved organising and supporting children's participation; co-playing involved direct participation in activities; observation involved monitoring children's engagement and behaviour; control addressed safety and behavioural regulation; mediation involved responding to difficulties and interpersonal conflicts; and direction involved structuring play around predetermined roles and learning objectives. The six roles therefore represent different forms and degrees of teacher participation rather than six isolated or mutually exclusive practices.

Discussion

The study found that pre-primary teachers enacted six interrelated roles during play-based learning (PBL): facilitator, co-player, observer, controller, mediator, and director. Rather than remaining within one role, teachers shifted between these positions according to children's needs, the nature of the play activity, classroom interactions, safety concerns, and intended learning objectives. This finding suggests that teacher participation in PBL is better understood as a dynamic repertoire of pedagogical participation than as a fixed role. The significance of this finding lies in showing that the implementation of PBL involves continuous negotiation between teacher guidance, children's agency, curricular intentions, and the practical demands of classroom life.

Teacher Participation as Flexible Scaffolding

The facilitator, co-player, and observer roles demonstrate that teachers adopted different levels of involvement during children's play. As facilitators, teachers organised activities, prepared children for participation, provided guidance, and encouraged engagement. As co-players, they sometimes joined children directly in games and cultural activities, while as observers they monitored children's participation without necessarily becoming directly involved. These findings suggest that teachers did not understand PBL as requiring either complete teacher withdrawal or continuous direct instruction. Instead, their participation varied according to the circumstances surrounding the activity.

This finding is consistent with Pyle and Danniels's (2017) conceptualisation of PBL as a continuum in which teachers occupy different positions in relation to children's play. It also

corresponds with research distinguishing free play, teacher-directed play, and mutually directed forms of play (Pyle et al., 2017). The present study extends this understanding by demonstrating that these different forms of participation can occur within the same classroom and may change during the course of everyday play. The teacher may begin by organising an activity, participate alongside children, withdraw to observe, and intervene again when support is required.

From a Vygotskian perspective, such variation can be understood as social mediation. Teachers may extend children's participation by modelling, questioning, prompting, explaining, or providing assistance when children encounter difficulties. However, the findings also caution against treating every form of teacher involvement as scaffolding. Assistance becomes pedagogically meaningful when it responds to children's needs and enables them to participate more independently. Where teachers take over children's decision-making or prescribe every aspect of the activity, the opportunity for children to exercise agency may be reduced. This interpretation is consistent with the literature on guided play, which emphasises the combination of adult learning intentions with children's active participation and choice (Weisberg et al., 2016; Zosh et al., 2018).

The finding has an important implication for teacher preparation in Tanzania. PBL should not be presented to teachers as either a situation in which they remain passive observers or one in which they control the entire activity. Rather, teachers need professional knowledge to judge when to organise, participate, observe, support, and withdraw. Such judgement is particularly important in public pre-primary classrooms where children's needs, interactions, and levels of engagement may vary considerably within a single activity.

Co-Playing as Culturally Situated Guided Participation

The co-player role provides an additional dimension to understanding teacher participation in PBL. Teachers reported joining children in games, dances, and other play activities and, in some cases, demonstrating how culturally familiar activities were performed. The traditional-dance example is particularly significant because the teacher participated alongside children while modelling how to dress, tie the khanga, and perform the dance. Thus, teacher participation was not limited to facilitating classroom activities; it also created opportunities for children to learn through engagement with culturally meaningful practices.

This finding resonates with Rogoff's (2003) theory of guided participation, which conceptualises learning as occurring through participation in shared and culturally organised activities. From this perspective, the teacher's involvement in traditional dance can be understood as joint participation in a meaningful cultural practice. Children learn not simply through receiving verbal instructions but through observing, imitating, interacting, and participating alongside a more experienced person.

The finding also extends conventional understandings of the teacher as a play partner. Co-playing in the present study involved more than simply joining children for enjoyment. Teachers simultaneously participated, modelled, demonstrated, and guided. The boundaries between playing and teaching were therefore fluid. This suggests that culturally familiar games, songs, dances, stories, and role-play can provide locally meaningful resources for PBL without requiring teachers to depend exclusively on commercially produced materials.

In the Tanzanian context, this has practical significance. Teachers can draw on children's existing cultural experiences as pedagogical resources, thereby connecting formal learning with familiar forms of participation. However, teachers' participation should still leave room for children to contribute their own ideas, modify activities, and exercise choice. Guided participation is therefore most consistent with PBL when cultural modelling expands children's participation rather than replacing it.

Regulation and Mediation: Protecting Participation While Maintaining Agency

The controller and mediator roles reveal another dimension of teacher participation. Teachers reported intervening to prevent fighting, aggression, domination, and unsafe behaviour, while mediation involved calming children, listening to their concerns, separating children when necessary, providing assistance, and facilitating dialogue. These findings demonstrate that teachers' responsibilities during PBL extend beyond the promotion of learning to include maintaining the social and physical conditions necessary for children to participate safely.

The distinction between control and mediation is important. Control primarily concerned safety, behavioural boundaries, and equitable participation, whereas mediation involved responding to interpersonal difficulties and helping children manage conflict. From a sociocultural perspective, both forms of intervention can be understood in relation to children's participation in social activity. In particular, listening to children's explanations and facilitating negotiation may provide opportunities for children to develop socially mediated ways of resolving disagreements (Vygotsky, 1978) (Rogoff, 2003).

At the same time, the findings indicate that not all regulation can automatically be considered scaffolding. Teachers sometimes used immediate behavioural or physical intervention when they perceived aggression as a safety risk. Such intervention may be necessary to protect children, but it differs from forms of support that enable children to negotiate problems independently. The pedagogical significance of regulation therefore depends on its purpose, timing, and intensity.

This finding adds nuance to discussions of children's agency in PBL. Children's agency does not imply that teachers should refrain from intervening when safety is threatened or when one child consistently excludes or dominates others. Rather, agency must be considered alongside children's well-being and the teacher's responsibility to maintain an environment in which meaningful participation is possible. Where circumstances permit, teachers can use observation, questioning, listening, and facilitated negotiation; where immediate safety is at risk, more direct intervention may be justified.

For teacher education in Tanzania, this suggests the need to develop differentiated approaches to conflict management. Teachers should be prepared to distinguish between situations requiring immediate adult intervention and situations in which children can be supported to resolve disagreements themselves. Such preparation can help teachers protect children while avoiding unnecessary regulation of children's social interactions.

Curriculum Direction and the Negotiation of Children's Agency

The director role presents the clearest tension between curricular intentionality and children's agency. Teachers described assigning roles, structuring activities, and establishing predetermined learning objectives. These practices demonstrate that teachers intentionally connected play with

educational purposes rather than treating play as separate from teaching and learning. At the same time, predetermined roles, procedures, and outcomes can reduce opportunities for children to initiate, negotiate, modify, and redirect activities.

This finding is consistent with research that conceptualises PBL as involving varying degrees of adult involvement rather than a simple division between free play and teacher-directed activity (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Pyle et al., 2017). Weisberg et al. (2016) similarly argue that guided play can combine adult learning goals with children's active engagement and autonomy. The present findings support these perspectives but add a contextual dimension by showing how teachers in Tanzanian public pre-primary units negotiate curricular expectations while attempting to maintain children's participation.

The findings also provide a more critical interpretation of scaffolding. Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding supports the provision of assistance that enables children to accomplish activities beyond their current independent capabilities. However, the present findings suggest that teacher direction should not automatically be equated with scaffolding. When teachers determine roles, procedures, and expected outcomes with limited opportunities for children to make decisions, adult guidance may shift from supporting participation towards controlling it.

Rogoff's (2003) theory of guided participation provides a complementary interpretation. Learning occurs through participation in shared activities, meaning that the distribution of responsibility between teacher and child is important. Teachers may establish the broad learning purpose while allowing children to choose roles, negotiate rules, develop scenarios, experiment, and contribute their own ideas. In this way, curricular intentionality and children's agency do not have to be treated as competing purposes.

For Tanzania, this finding is particularly relevant because teachers operate within formal curriculum expectations and remain responsible for achieving intended learning outcomes. The implication is therefore not that teachers should remove learning objectives from play. Instead, teachers should learn how to translate curricular objectives into play environments that preserve opportunities for children's choice, experimentation, negotiation, and initiative.

The Dynamic Repertoire of Teacher Participation: Contribution to Knowledge

The central contribution of this study is its conceptualisation of teacher participation in PBL as a dynamic repertoire of roles. Previous literature has commonly discussed teacher involvement in terms of particular positions along a continuum, including child-directed, teacher-directed, and guided forms of play (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Pyle et al., 2017; Weisberg et al., 2016). The present findings build on this perspective by showing that teachers may move among multiple forms of participation within everyday classroom practice.

The six roles identified in the study include: facilitator, co-player, observer, controller, mediator, and director, and should therefore not be understood as isolated categories. They represent different ways through which teachers respond to changing pedagogical and contextual demands. A teacher may facilitate the organisation of an activity, participate as a co-player, withdraw to observe children's interactions, intervene as a mediator when conflict occurs, assume greater control when safety is threatened, and direct the activity when curricular objectives require greater structure. The same teacher may therefore occupy several roles within a single play episode.

This finding extends the application of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory by demonstrating that social mediation during PBL takes multiple forms, including activity organisation, shared participation, observation, assistance, social regulation, and instructional direction. It also complements Rogoff's guided participation perspective by showing that participation is negotiated within culturally and institutionally organised classroom activities.

The findings further suggest that the quality of teacher involvement cannot be determined simply by measuring how much teachers intervene. Rather, it depends on why they intervene, when they intervene, how they intervene, and how much responsibility remains with children. This provides a more nuanced way of understanding PBL implementation in Tanzanian public pre-primary classrooms. It shifts the discussion from the question of whether teachers should intervene to the more useful question of how teachers can regulate, guide, participate, and withdraw in ways that sustain children's learning and agency.

The study therefore contributes a contextually grounded perspective in which teacher participation is understood as a negotiated process shaped by children's needs, curricular expectations, safety considerations, social interactions, and classroom conditions. This perspective cautions against transferring models of PBL developed in other educational contexts without considering the institutional and practical realities within which Tanzanian teachers work.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined how pre-primary teachers enact and negotiate their roles during play-based learning in selected public pre-primary units in Tanzania's Tanga Region. The findings identified six interrelated roles: facilitator, co-player, observer, controller, mediator, and director. These roles demonstrate that teachers' participation in play-based learning extends beyond the conventional distinction between teacher-directed and child-directed play. Rather, teachers shift between different forms of participation in response to children's needs, the nature of play activities, social interactions, safety concerns, classroom demands, and intended learning outcomes. The study concludes that the pedagogical value of teacher involvement lies not simply in whether teachers intervene, but in how, when, and why they intervene. Facilitation, co-playing, observation, and responsive mediation can support children's participation and learning, whereas control and direction, although necessary in particular circumstances, may constrain children's agency when applied excessively. Through Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Rogoff's theory of guided participation, teacher participation is therefore understood as a dynamic process through which curricular intentions, children's agency, safety, and social participation are continuously negotiated. The study contributes a contextually grounded understanding of play-based learning in Tanzanian public pre-primary education by demonstrating that effective teacher participation requires a flexible repertoire of pedagogical responses.

Based on these findings, teacher education and continuing professional development should strengthen teachers' practical competence in facilitating, participating, observing, mediating, regulating, and directing play, with particular emphasis on determining when to intervene, provide scaffolding, or withdraw. Curriculum guidance should support teachers to maintain meaningful learning purposes while allowing children opportunities to select roles, negotiate rules, develop play scenarios, experiment, and contribute their own ideas. Schools and education authorities should also encourage the use of culturally meaningful play, including traditional games, songs,

dances, stories, and role-play, as locally relevant resources for learning. In addition, teacher preparation should equip teachers with practical strategies for managing conflict, behaviour, and safety while preserving children's opportunities for independent social participation. Education authorities should address contextual conditions that influence PBL implementation by providing adequate play materials, supportive classroom conditions, and opportunities for practical professional development. Future research should examine how the six teacher roles operate across different Tanzanian regions and school contexts and how shifts between these roles influence children's participation and learning.

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