Integrating Play Initiatives: Boosting Inclusion And Engagement For Children With Special Needs

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Current play-based programs in Canada have been instrumental in the social and mental development of children with different abilities, however, there's a need to further explore these programs to understand their key features leading to positive outcomes. This study aims to address this gap, employing a qualitative comparative case study approach to examine three Canadian play-based programs namely, Brock University's Children's Movement Program (CMP), Special Needs Activity Program (SNAP), and Acadia University's Sensory Motor Instructional Leadership Experience Program (SMILE). Utilizing the utilization-focused evaluation (U-FE) framework, the study was conducted in three phases. The first phase involved a comparative analysis of the three programs, the second phase involved the selection of applicable patterns and features from the programs based on inductive analysis, and the final phase was the application of the uncovered patterns to KSA centers with cultural adjustments. The study revealed patterns responsible for the successful outcomes of these programs and emphasized the importance of cultural considerations in international applications. These findings have implications for the enhancement of existing play-based programs and offer insights into the development of future interventions. **Keywords:** Intervention, program, children with different abilities, play-based, sport.

Introduction

Play is a pivotal aspect of childhood development, offering opportunities for learning, social interaction, and skill-building (Hughes, 2010). Despite its importance, children with different abilities often encounter challenges accessing inclusive play environments, experiencing difficulties in socializing and engaging in play activities (Guralnick, 1992; Schneider&Goldstein, 2008; Bullard, 2023). This can potentially impede their cognitive, social, and physical skill development (Brown&Gordon, 1987; King et al., 2003; Cook, Klein , &Chen, 2020; Patry&Horn, 2020 .(

Existing play-based programs in Canada, while effective, have room for improvement. Current challenges include limited accessibility and the need for individualized approaches that consider the unique needs and abilities of each child. This paper aims to address these issues by exploring the potential of play-based programs in fostering social inclusion and participation for children with different abilities .

The study employs a comparative case study approach, examining three play-based programs in Canada: Brock University's Children's Movement Program (CMP), Special Needs Activity Program (SNAP), and Acadia University's Sensory Motor Instructional Leadership Experience Program (SMILE). Using data collection and analysis methods, the research seeks to identify effective strategies and key contributing factors to their success.

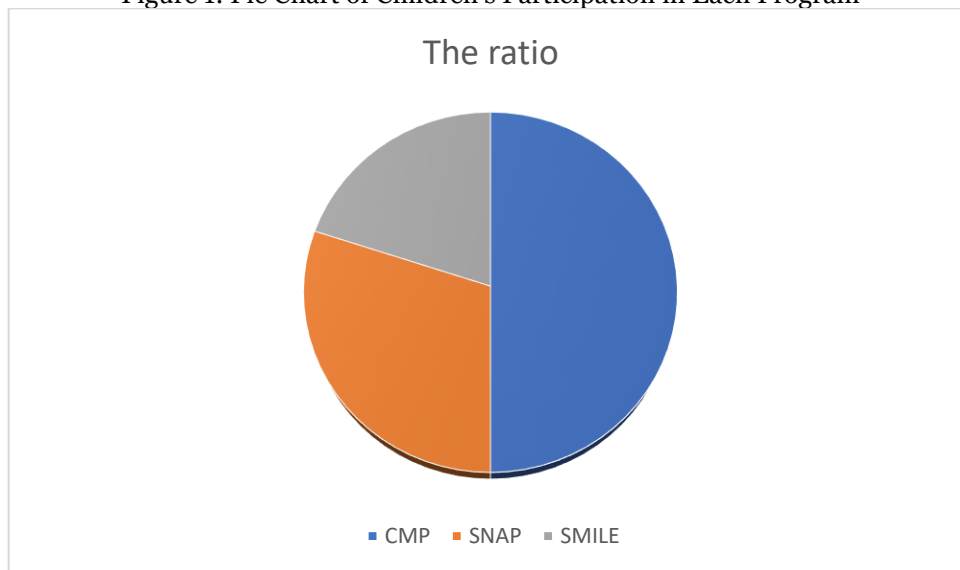Figure 1: Pie Chart of Children's Participation in Each Program

Table 1:overview of compared based programs

Program	Location	Target group	Key activities
CMP	Brock university Canada	Children with diverse abilities	Tailored physical activities groups games
SANP	Brock university Canada	Children with diverse abilities	Social needs activities individual ized play sessions
SMILE	Brock university Canada	Children with diverse abilities	Sensory motor instructional leadership activities

The findings of this research, revealing patterns and strategies contributing to the successful outcomes of these programs, have broader implications for the enhancement of current practices and theoretical underpinnings related to play-based programs. Moreover, these insights provide a foundation for adapting these programs to other cultural contexts, such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), thereby promoting social inclusion and participation through play-based interventions globally.

Literature Review

Play is a critical aspect of childhood development, offering a natural and frequent avenue for learning, social interaction, and skill-building (Hughes, 2010; Lee et al., 2018). Despite its significance, children with diverse abilities often face barriers that limit their access to play opportunities, subsequently influencing their overall development (Craig-Unkefer&Kaiser, 2002; Chang et al., 2018; DiStefano et al., 2016 .(
Children with diverse abilities often exhibit fewer social behaviors and engage in more solitary and passive play, which can hinder their cognitive, social, and physical development (Brown&Gordon, 1987; King et al., 2003; Blázquez-Ballesteros et al., 2015). As they transition into adolescence and early adulthood, their participation in play and recreational activities tends to become increasingly restricted (King et al., 2003). This highlights a pressing need to address these challenges.
Play-based programs in Canada have been developed to address these issues, emphasizing movement, physical activity, and sports, while also considering the unique interests and capabilities of individuals with limiting conditions (Doll-Tepper, et al.1996). However, there are still significant challenges in these programs, including limited accessibility and the need for individualized approaches (references needed for issues in current play-based programs).
Comparative case studies such as Brock University's Children's Movement Program (CMP), Special Needs Activity Program (SNAP), and Acadia University's Sensory Motor Instructional Leadership Experience Program (SMILE) have provided insights into the effectiveness of these programs (references needed for these case studies). These studies illustrate the importance of individualized approaches and tailored interventions in promoting social inclusion and participation among children with diverse abilities.
However, there is a clear gap in the literature regarding the adaptation of these programs to other cultural contexts, such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). This study aims to address this gap by exploring the potential of these play-based programs within KSA's cultural context. By understanding the key factors contributing to the success of these programs, researchers and practitioners can adapt and customize them to better suit specific cultural and contextual needs.
In summary, the literature underscores the significance of play in children's development and the challenges faced by children with diverse abilities in accessing play opportunities. It also shows the potential of play-

based programs in promoting social inclusion and participation. This study seeks to build upon existing research, aiming to contribute to the enhancement and adaptation of effective play-based programs in the KSA.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative comparative case study methodology to investigate three distinct play-based programs: CMP, SNAP, and SMILE. These programs were selected based on their diverse approaches and locations within Canada. Data collection methods encompassed observations, interviews with program team members, and engagement with intended users. Analysis was directed towards identifying patterns, features, and crucial factors that contributed to the success of the programs .

Figure 2: Flowchart of the Research Process

The qualitative comparative case study approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of the selected play-based programs, offering a thorough understanding of their unique characteristics and efficacy (CohenManion, 1994). This approach is particularly appropriate for capturing the complexities and subtleties of these programs, as it allows for the examination of multiple cases within their specific contexts .

Observations played a crucial role in this study. By directly observing the programs in action, firsthand insights into the activities, interactions, and dynamics within each program were gained. These observations aided in understanding the implementation of play-based strategies, the engagement of children with different abilities, and the overall atmosphere of the programs (Hughes2010).

Alongside observations, interviews with program team members were conducted to gather their perspectives and experiences. These interviews offered valuable insights into the rationale behind the design and implementation of the programs, the challenges encountered, and the strategies employed to promote children's participation and development (patton2015). The program team members, including experts and practitioners, provided invaluable expertise and contextual knowledge that enhanced the understanding of the programs .

Engagement with intended users, such as families and individuals with different abilities, was another significant aspect of the methodology. By involving these stakeholders, insights into their experiences, perceptions, and expectations regarding play-based programs were gained. This engagement assisted in identifying the specific needs and preferences of the target population and ensured that the findings and recommendations of the study were relevant and applicable to their contexts (Doll-Tepper et al., 1996)

The data collected through observations, interviews, and engagement with intended users were analyzed using qualitative analysis techniques(Denzin&Lincoln, 2011)This involved identifying patterns, themes, and key factors that contribute to the success of the play-based programs. The analysis process was iterative and involved constant comparison of data across cases to identify similarities, differences, and emerging insights (Willis, 2007).

The methodology of this study is rooted in the interpretive framework of social constructivism, which emphasizes the understanding of human experiences and perspectives (Creswell, 2013)By adopting this framework, the study aimed to uncover the subjective realities and lived experiences of the program team members, intended users, and the researcher herself. This approach acknowledged the role of the researcher's background, values, and cultural beliefs in shaping the interpretation of the data, ensuring reflexivity and transparency throughout the study (Creswell, 2013)(Patton, 2015)The researcher's experiences and perspectives shaped the interpretation of the phenomena under study (Creswell, 2013), and their past experiences have influenced their perspective and interpretation of the phenomena.

Analysis Data

The analysis of Canadian physical activity play-based programs for children with different abilities yielded several important findings, demonstrating the potential for their transferability to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Firstly, all three programs under study emphasized the importance of personalized activities that cater to the unique needs and abilities of each child. This approach ensured that children could participate to the best of their abilities, promoting an inclusive and engaging environment.

Secondly, the provision of individualized support was shown to enhance the overall experience of children with different abilities. Trained volunteers and staff members offered personalized assistance and guidance, facilitating active participation and fostering a sense of belonging among the children.

Thirdly, collaborative partnerships were found to play a significant role in these programs. Collaborations between program organizers, families, and community stakeholders created an inclusive environment that supported the social inclusion and integration of children with different abilities. This collaboration was also instrumental in addressing any barriers or challenges that emerged during the program's implementation.

Furthermore, these programs had a positive impact on the social inclusion and participation of children with different abilities. By actively engaging in these play activities with their peers, children developed social skills, built friendships, and experienced a sense of achievement .

Significantly, the programs also promoted understanding, empathy, and acceptance among typically developing children, fostering an inclusive and supportive community. The inclusive nature of the programs challenged societal stereotypes and recognized children with different abilities as valuable contributors.

This analysis suggests that the success of the play-based programs lies in their tailored activities, individualized support, and collaborative partnerships to create inclusive environments. These findings are not only applicable to the Canadian context but also hold significant potential for similar programs in other cultural contexts, such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

By incorporating these key components, policymakers and practitioners can facilitate the social inclusion and overall development of children with different abilities. It is hoped that the findings of this study will inspire future research and implementation of inclusive play-based programs that cater to the unique needs of children with different abilities.

Discussion

The discussion section provides a comprehensive interpretation of the findings from our study conducted in Canada, considering the theoretical framework of social constructivist interpretivism (Guralnick, 1992). The study's methodologies include a comparative case study of play-based programmes (CMP, SNAP, and SMILE) and an exploration of the perspectives of programme team members and intended users. The data was collected and analyzed using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, though the specifics of these methods are beyond the scope of this discussion.

The need to study the state of play-based programmes in Canada stems from observed issues in the current system, such as inconsistent application and lack of customization for diverse groups of learners. Our investigation revealed the importance of play for children with different abilities in their overall development (Craig-Unkefer&Kaiser, 2002). Play, being a natural component of childhood, can significantly impact cognitive, social, and physical skills development. Therefore, these programs are crucial for improving the functioning of children with different abilities (Brown&Gordon, 1987; Chang et al., 2018; DiStefano et al., 2016.(

One significant finding of the study is the need to adapt and customize play-based programmes to fit the cultural context of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). This requires a deep understanding of the KSA's cultural nuances, social norms, and religious values (Doll-Tepper, Dahms, Doll&von Selzam, 1996; Wu S. C., 2019). We suggest strategies for incorporating these cultural factors into play-based programmes, which would ensure their effectiveness and acceptance within the local context.

This study, however, is not without limitations. For instance, the direct applicability of findings from Canadian play-based programmes to the KSA context may vary. Therefore, we recommend further research focused on developing culturally sensitive and effective play-based programmes for the KSA. This would involve collaboration between different disciplines and stakeholders, including professionals, families, and individuals with different abilities (Doll-Tepper et al., 1996). It is also crucial to offer training and qualifications to programme staff to enhance their capabilities in delivering these interventions (King et al., 2003).

This study provides valuable insights into the state of play-based programmes in Canada and offers recommendations for their adaptation and improvement in the KSA context. Our findings have implications on both the theory and practice of play-based programmes, underscoring the need for culturally appropriate, inclusive, and effective interventions.

This investigation, rooted in the theoretical framework of social constructivist interpretivism, provides a comprehensive interpretation of the findings from a comparative case study of three play-based programs (CMP, SNAP, and SMILE) in Canada. The necessity for this exploration arose from the current challenges and issues plaguing these play-based programs. However, the specifics of the research design and data collection methods used are beyond the scope of this discussion.

The key findings of the study underscore the significance of play for children with diverse abilities, highlighting its instrumental role in cognitive, social, and physical development (Craig-Unkefer&Kaiser,

2002). A profound implication of these findings relates to the necessity of adapting these play-based programs to align with the cultural context and social norms of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). For successful adaptation, a deep understanding of the KSA's cultural nuances, religious values, and social norms is crucial (Doll-Tepper, Dahms, Doll&von Selzam, 1996; Wu S. C., 2019.(

Despite offering valuable insights, this study has some limitations. The focus was only on three play-based programs in Canada, limiting the diversity and potentially the applicability of the findings to the KSA context. Moreover, the study predominantly relies on qualitative methods and subjective perspectives, which may restrict its generalizability. Future research should address these limitations by examining a broader range of programs and employing mixed-methods approaches for a more comprehensive understanding (Schneider&Goldstein, 2008.(

The study's findings also suggest the need for further research. For instance, exploring the long-term outcomes of play-based programs in the KSA and understanding the perspectives and experiences of children, families, and community members regarding play and physical activity could provide valuable insights for program development and implementation (King et al., 2003).

This study underscores the potential benefits of play-based programs for children with diverse abilities and accentuates the need for their adaptation to the KSA's cultural context. By considering the perspectives of various stakeholders and addressing the study's limitations, future play-based programs in the KSA can be tailored to foster inclusivity, social participation, and overall well-being for children with diverse abilities. This will not only enhance the development and implementation of effective play-based programs but also promote the rights of children with different abilities to participate in play on equal terms with typically developing children.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that play-based programs, as examined through the case study of Brock University's Children's Movement Program (CMP), Special Needs Activity Program (SNAP), and Acadia University's Sensory Motor Instructional Leadership Experience Program (SMILE), are of significant importance in promoting social inclusion and participation for children with a diverse range of abilities (Craig-Unkefer&Kaiser, 2002; Hughes, 2010; Sandbank, M et al., 2020 .(

This investigation of the current challenges plaguing these Canadian programs revealed play's inherent role in children's development. Still, children with different abilities often face barriers to participating fully and naturally in play (Chang et al., 2018; Craig-Unkefer&Kaiser, 2002; DiStefano et al., 2016). These programs strive to dismantle these barriers, providing tailored activities that accommodate each child's unique needs and abilities (Guralnick, 1992).

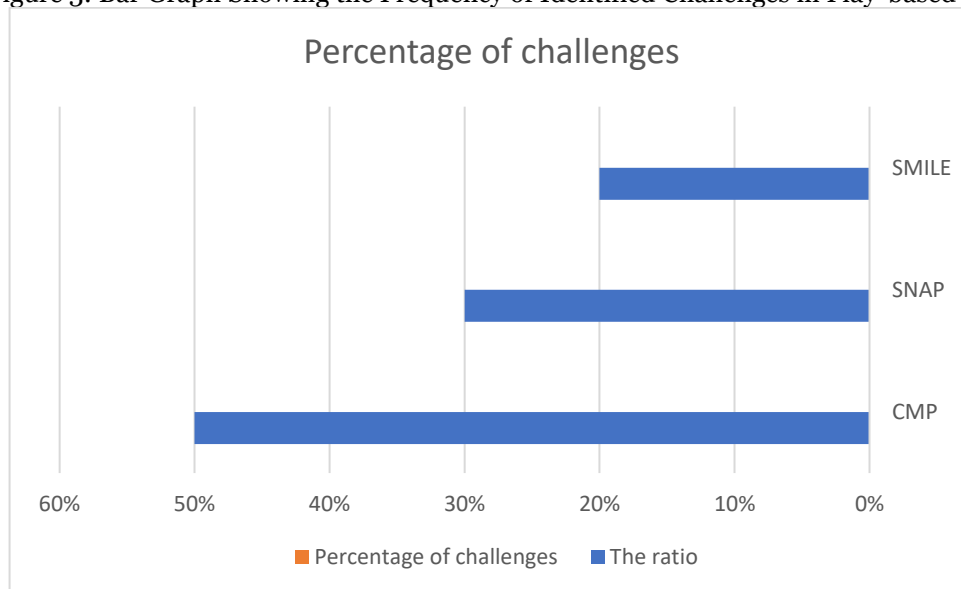look atFigure 3: Bar Graph Showing the Frequency of Identified Challenges in Play-based Programs

Table 2:identified challenges in play based programs

Challenges	Description	Impact
Accessibility	Some children face barriers due to physical or cognitive impairments	Limits participation in play based activities
Culture sensitivity	Programs may not adequately consider cultural and social norms	May reduce effectiveness in diverse cultural contexts
Availability	Limited availability or such programs in certain regions	Restricts access for many children with diverse abilities

The findings of our study, conducted via a comparative case study approach and employing qualitative data analysis methods, underscore the effectiveness of these programs. Yet, the study also highlights the need for careful consideration of cultural factors and customization of program components when implementing such programs in different socio-cultural contexts, like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Strain, Schwartz& ,Bovey, 2008; Willis, 2007.(

In conclusion, the potential of play-based programs in fostering social justice and equal opportunities for all children is clear. Yet, their full benefits can only be realized through a more profound understanding of different cultural contexts and a commitment to making these programs widely available (Hughes, 2010; Craig-Unkefer&Kaiser, 2002; Chang et al., 2018). Therefore, it is paramount for policymakers, educators, and practitioners to collaborate in establishing and supporting inclusive play environments. Further research is also welcomed to enhance the development and implementation of these programs, ensuring they empower children with different abilities to thrive and reach their full potential (Creswell, 2013; Denzin&Lincoln, 2011.(

Table 3 Recommendations for play-based programs Implementation

Cultural adaptations	Programs should be adapted to fit the cultural and social norms of the region
Collaboration	Policymakers, educators, and practitioners need to work together in establishing and supporting these programs
Further Research	More research is needed to enhance program development and implementation

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