TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON PLAY AS A TEACHING METHOD IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Muna A. Zand Irani

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Dr. Érica Fernández – Co-Director
Dr. Lucian A. Szlizewski – Co Director
Dr. Sujay Sabnis - Graduate School Representative

ABSTRACT

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by

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This qualitative interview study investigated teachers' perspectives on play pedagogy and the challenges of implementing play as a learning method in early childhood classes. The study collected qualitative data from four preschool teachers and two kindergarten teachers in a school in Midwest Ohio. Teachers shared their experiences through in-depth interviews. Data was analyzed and categorized into themes according to the interview questions. Findings concluded a positive perspective and understanding of play and its benefits among preschool teachers. However, there was a shift in teachers' perspectives about play at the kindergarten level. Teachers felt pressured to meet the state academic standards and prepare children for grade one. They followed traditional teacher-guided methods, reducing play and child-centered learning opportunities.

The importance of play in children's whole development is supported by a substantial amount of research (NAEYC, 2009). However, play is disappearing in early childhood classes (Bassok, 2016; Miller & Almon, 2009). Moreover, teachers' perspectives on play are changing due to the pressure to meet high academic expectations at the kindergarten level (Miller & Almon, 2009). This study conveys teachers' voices and contributes to understanding play pedagogy and how it is perceived and implemented in preschool and kindergarten classrooms.

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DEDICATION

To my daughters Izzy and Durra.

To my husband, Charles William Kelch, who supported me throughout this journey.

To all who believe in creating better opportunities for young minds.

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I want to share my gratitude with all those who supported my journey. I am grateful to God, who put me on the right path, and my parents, who taught me the value of hard work and the importance and beauty of knowledge and learning,

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The qualitative study examined how and why classrooms are becoming more teacher-guided than child-centered. Teachers are reducing playtime, which decreases learning through exploring (Nicolopoulou, 2010; Miller & Almon, 2009). They have no time to integrate play into their curriculum. Classroom practices are becoming teacher-led, limiting children's thinking, reducing social interactions, and waning play (Nilsson et al., 2018). Moreover, teachers are implementing traditional teaching methods focusing on blackboards, whiteboards, and worksheets (Miller & Almon, 2009). Schools are reducing play time at the expense of educational time. More time is spent teaching math and literacy and following direct instructions, whereas less time is offered for children-guided activities (Bassok, 2016). Such practices disengage children from real-life experiences and ignore their natural developmental phases (Wohlwend, 2007). Furthermore, focusing on academic content at an early age pressures children beyond their abilities, causing stressful conditions and aggressive behavior (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Miller & Almon, 2009).

Preschool and Kindergarten children spend more time learning test-driven curricula than exploring and learning through play (Miller & Almon, 2009). As a result, play is weakening to a more considerable extent (Brabazon, 2016). Reducing play in ECE classrooms holds multiple future consequences: it limits self-learning experiences (Ortlieb, 2010) and negatively affects children's social skills and creativity (Guirguis, 2018).

Statement of Problem

ECE research emphasizes the benefits of play in fostering children's holistic growth. Likewise, ECE theories stress the relationship between play and learning. However, play pedagogy is disappearing from ECE classrooms. In addition to uncertainty about how to link play to child development and learning (Lillard et al., 2013), there is vagueness in defining and differentiating the different types of play among ECE teachers (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

According to Pyle Danniels (2017), play pedagogy is still unclear among ECE teachers. There is vagueness in the role of adults during free play, guided play, and play-based learning. Adults' participation in play is confused between providing defined instructions versus co-playing. Additionally, recognizing play as a method to foster academic learning for children is

still undermined by many ECE teachers (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Stephen, 2010; Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2012; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019).

Moreover, research results revealed the lack of consistency in the meaning of play, the uncertainty of the degree of adults' involvement, and the vagueness of how to use play as a teaching tool. As a result, there is a wide range of views, beliefs, and confusion among ECE practitioners regarding play pedagogy (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015).

Research in this area is very critical since teachers' perspectives are reflected in their methods in the classroom (Bandura, 1977; Hegde & Cassidy, 2009; Hegde et al., 2014; Fang, 1996; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Chapman, 2016). Similarly, teachers' understanding of the learning process and play's relevance shapes their teaching methods, affecting children's natural development (Vorkapić & Katić, 2015).

Equally, there is a radical change in ECE teachers' perspectives on the importance of play and using play as a teaching method in the classroom (Almon, 2004). Although many teachers agree that play supports social skills such as sharing and collaborating. However, the reality they face in the classroom is changing their practices and influencing their views (Jung & Jin, 2015; Zhulamanova, 2020).

A study by Lynch (2015) revealed that ECE teachers face multiple classroom challenges that prevent them from implementing play as a teaching method. Some of these challenges are lack of time, lack of resources, and lack of the know-how to integrate play into the curriculum. Accordingly, play is only practiced, if any, at the end of the day as a reward for children.

Relatedly, teachers feel pressed to meet the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and perceive play as a waste of time (Gibbs, 2015; Levin, 2012). They focus on preparing the children for math and literacy tests using teacher-guided methods and less child-centered activities (Miller & Almon, 2009). Unfortunately, their awareness of the effectiveness of learning through playing is narrowing (Blom & Damico, 2019; Miller & Almon, 2009).

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

This qualitative study investigated teachers' perspectives of play as a teaching method in preschool and kindergarten. I interviewed six teachers to learn about their understanding and definitions of play, their views on the benefits of play, how they integrate play into their curriculum, and the challenges they face in implementing play as a teaching method. The

qualitative study sought live experiences and collected qualitative data about teaching through play from a small group of participants.

The leading question for this study was:

What are the teachers' perspectives on play as a teaching method in early childhood education (ECE)?

The following supporting questions were used during the interviews:

Interview Q: What do you understand by the word 'play'?

Interview Q: How do you integrate play into your schedule?

Interview Q: What are the benefits of learning through play?

Interview Q: What challenges do you face in the classroom regarding implementing play?

Significance of the Study

Teachers' perspectives on how children learn, the value of play, and play as a teaching approach are critical to enhancing children's learning experiences (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). Vygotsky stresses the role of adults in fostering children's cognitive development. He states that with the assistance of adults, play becomes the gate through which children receive their culture and understand the world (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978).

However, Ohio schools follow the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) set by the Ohio Department of Education (Ohio Department of Education, 2022). These standards focus on academic learning starting as early as preschool and kindergarten. Hence, teachers' activities focus on reading basics, phonics, numbers, and math instead of activities that meet children's needs, abilities, and interests (Miller & Almon, 2009; Guirguis, 2018; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). Furthermore, teachers' vague understanding of the importance of play in a child's world is creating a gap between the natural development of children's basic skills and their learning (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Likewise, the growing demand for academic achievement at the early stages of school is pressing children to perform beyond their natural abilities and limiting their creativity (Elkind, 2008). In addition, schools are reducing play-related activities by limiting playtime and recess

time in their daily schedule. According to Almon (2004), play-based activities are essential and directly related to children's health. Further, studies found that high academic demand at an early age increases children's anxiety, unhappiness, and obesity (Ghorpade, 2022).

To sum up, market needs, national requirements, and school reforms demand high academic achievement. State Standards are pressuring ECE teachers to academically prepare children for grade one, neglecting children's natural needs, abilities, interests, and development. Top-down policies driven by social and economic changes led to challenges in the education system. They are mostly pressuring teachers to change their methods and reduce free play. New ECE teaching methods limit children's creativity, innovation, and healthy development (Guirguis, 2018). Although the literature supports learning through playing (Almon, 2004), the transformation in early childhood learning pedagogy marginalizes the vital role of play in children's growth (Ciolan, 2013). Teachers are reducing play-based activities and promoting traditional teaching methods (Brandon, 2002; Hemphill, 2006; Ohanian, 2002; Wohlwend, 2007).

Accordingly, a clearer understanding of teachers' perspectives on play-based learning is needed to close the gap between ECE classroom practices and the proper practices that support children's development (Ciolan, 2013). This problem of practice prompted the study of teachers' perspectives on teaching through play in early childhood years. According to Bandura (1977), our actions reflect our beliefs. Therefore, to understand the actions and methods used in the classroom, we need to understand teachers' views and beliefs on play as a teaching method and the challenges they face in implementing play.

This qualitative interview study aimed to increase awareness of play pedagogy at the ECE levels and hoped to contribute to understanding play in ECE classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

This qualitative interview study hinges on a constructivist theoretical perspective, which supports learning through experimenting. Moreover, the framework of the study is based on the Social Cognitive Learning Theory by Albert Bandura (1977).

According to Bandura's theory in 1977, children learn through various ways, including social interaction and hands-on activities. They acquire knowledge and new behaviors by observing, remembering, and imitating others. They can learn socially and culturally. They learn at home from their caregivers, siblings, and family, then at school from their peers and teachers.

Bandura's theory argues that children can reach certain goals on their own. They are in a continuous state of observing and learning new skills and behaviors. Learning becomes the result of a cognitive process within a social context when the child observes, extracts information, makes decisions, and interacts. As a result, children's social context, home, classroom, and what is offered to them influence their behaviors, learning, and cognitive development (Bandura, 2021).

Relatedly, play is heavily related to the social cognitive behavior of children. Play is a social behavior that allows children to interact with the environment and each other and exchange knowledge (Dewey,1923). In the classroom, children acquire social cognitive skills through play. They interact, observe, and learn according to their psychological states. They watch the behavior of teachers and peers, imitate, and learn (Bandura, 2021; Hammer, 2011). They learn through performance, accomplishments, experiences, and verbal instructions. Bandura (1977) explains that learning happens in a social context. Therefore, teachers play a significant role in children's learning by creating positive experiences and interesting learning opportunities. Moreover, Bandura stresses the importance of motivation in encouraging behavior. Thus, when teachers work with children according to their abilities and motivate them, children are more likely to learn better and thrive (Bandura, 1977).

Therefore, applying play as a teaching method in the classroom contributes to children's cognitive development by facilitating social interaction and cultural interchange.

My Positionality

During my twenty-five years as a kindergarten to third-grade teacher, I developed three curricula that support learning through play. I implemented play-based learning to teach two languages, Arabic and English, math, science, art, and social studies. I maintained an engaging classroom environment where children could practice hands-on activities and real-life experiences and learn through playing. I also facilitated several workshops for teachers and principals that focused on childhood development and teaching strategies to encourage free play in the classroom. I also planned play-based activities that focused on exploring and experimenting. I introduced new areas in the classroom that relate learning to everyday life through play. Till today, I have constantly searched for new ways to enhance playtime and support children's social and cognitive skills.

Today, I see myself as an advocate for children's right to play. K-3 children are being pushed to learn traditionally, nailed to their chairs for long periods, learn abstract information, and do worksheets (Brabazon, 2016). Instead, they could explore, interact with materials, wonder, use their imagination, and flourish naturally, as they should at this age (Almon, 2004). Consequently, the main drive of my study was to explore how teachers perceive play in early childhood classrooms and explore the challenges that hinder them from implementing play.

Limitations of this Research

The study was limited to a small number of teachers in a small school in Ohio. It required collecting qualitative data through face-to-face interviews. However, focusing on a few teachers allowed for an in-depth investigation. Moreover, there was a diversity of the context, which brought uniqueness to this qualitative interview study. Participants varied in their years of experience, the programs they apply in the classrooms: Montessori and traditional, and the teaching levels: preschool and kindergarten. This diversity enriched the data and improved the findings.

Organization of the Study

The study was divided into five chapters. The first chapter introduced the importance of play, the challenges in ECE classrooms regarding play, and the effect of the problem on future generations. I also added a description of the theoretical framework, key terms, and my positionality. Chapter two provided a literature review of previous studies and professional research relevant to my topic. In chapter three, I explained the research methodology, theoretical framework, data collection methods, and related ethical and consent procedures. Chapter four included the study findings and interpretation. Chapter five presented the conclusions, implications, and recommendations for further research.

Definitions and Key Concepts

CCSS: Common Core State Standards

PBL: Play-based learning

ECE: Early childhood education ages from zero to 6 years

ELA: English Language Arts

MKO: More Knowledgeable Other

ODE: Ohio Department of Education

ZPD: Zone of Proximal Development

Keywords: teachers' perspectives, early childhood education, play, play pedagogy, learning, classroom practices, teachers' methods, child development, early school years, preschool, kindergarten, free play,

Summary, Conclusion, Introduction to Chapter 2

To conclude, teachers' practices may be replacing the role of play in early years classrooms and leaning towards more questionable practices. Teachers appear to be drifting away from the suitable methods that meet children's natural development and learning capabilities (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Hughes, 2021). Accordingly, this emergent urgent problem requires immediate attention from scholars and ECE researchers. This qualitative interview investigated how teachers perceive and apply play in early childhood education as a contribution to the existing literature.

The following chapter reviewed a diverse and comprehensive literature that has brought together the inconsistencies in teachers' beliefs regarding play pedagogy and the barriers they face based on recent studies. I also presented profound theories that support play in early childhood development.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter presented the importance of play in children's growth and a brief preview of the problem in early childhood education (ECE) classrooms. Then, it extensively reviewed the literature-related research on theories in learning. I focused on definitions and types of play and the importance of play in children's learning and development. I also highlighted pretend play and the role of play in creativity and imagination. The literature also presented the role of play in literacy, math, science learning, higher thinking skills, problem-solving, STEM, and school readiness.

The second part focused on play-based learning and its importance in ECE classrooms. It included three examples of Play-based learning approaches and related literature for planning play-based activities.

The last part discussed teachers' perspectives on play, the effect of school reform on play pedagogy, and the challenges that hinder the implementation of play in ECE classrooms.

Play is a Child's World

Early childhood is essential in shaping a child's life (National Scientific Council of the Developing Child, 2007). Leading studies emphasize the effect of early years on children's academic, emotional, and social development (Dewey, 1923; Piaget,1954; Vygotsky,1967). At an early age, children learn through physical and mental engagement (Dewey, 1923). They explore, interact with their environment, and engage with their surroundings. According to Piaget (1962), children construct new knowledge and build on previous experiences through active play.

Constructivists and progressive theorists such as Froebel, Vygotsky, Piaget, and Dewey stressed the importance of play in children's lives. Play promotes children's emotional, mental, physical, and intellectual growth (Guirguis, 2018). Additionally, early childhood education research emphasizes the significant role of play in children's learning and its impact on their academic progress in later years of schooling (Lynch, 2015; Ali et al., 2018).

Play is the norm in the children's world; they move, observe, and explore (Dewey, 1923; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1967). It is fundamental in their daily life; it enhances their adaptation, mounts positive self-esteem, improves self-regulation, and builds their social skills (Ortlieb, 2010). Play fosters social, emotional, and cognitive skills and expands their imagination (Copple & Bredekamp, 2006; Prager et al., 2016; NAEYC, 2009; Guirguis, 2018).

Additionally, play allows flexibility for children to work according to their abilities and learning styles (Weisberg et al., 2013). They experiment using their senses to discover the world at their own pace (Montessori, 1967). During play, children build their fine and gross motor skills (Armstrong, 2006) and improve their linguistic abilities (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). Likewise, play allows them to expand their knowledge and extend their academic learning by building on previous experiences (Piaget, 1962; Weisberg et al., 2013). Scholars such as Froebel described play as an inner natural act that brings happiness and joy (Provenzo, 2009).

However, play is gradually fading from early childhood classrooms (Miller & Almon, 2009). According to Wong & Logan (2016), "play is under threat" (p. 8). Based on various research in ECE, preschool and kindergarten classrooms are under pressure to meet academic standards. As a result, academics are replacing play (Miller & Almon, 2009). Early childhood classrooms face vast challenges that affect the value of play in supporting children's social and learning development (Ciolan, 2013). Miller & Almon (2009) explain that the mandated academic standards are one of the main reasons behind less play in early childhood classrooms, especially in preschool and kindergarten.

A decade ago, school reform caused a significant change in early childhood education, shifting from play-based curricula to academic learning (Guirguis, 2018). These reforms focus on the market needs instead of the children's needs and developmental stages. As a result, schools became pressed to prepare generations of workers to serve the economy and market needs (Wong & Logan, 2016). Moreover, many schools started to introduce academic learning as early as preschool and kindergarten (Stipek, 2005). Early childhood classes follow strict curricula to meet state learning expectations and perform assessments (Guirguis, 2018). Teachers are pressed to follow education policies to prepare children for a competitive economic world (Miller & Almon, 2009). They must meet the Common Core State Standards for literacy, language, arts, and math (Ciolan, 2013). Thus, teachers focus on academic development and less on activities that are fun, child-centered, and exploratory (Bassok, 2016). Children spend their day following teachers' instructions and less time playing (Miller & Almon, 2009).

This study investigated teachers' perspectives on play in preschool and kindergarten classrooms. How teachers perceive play in the ECE, their definitions, and the obstacles to implementing play as a teaching method in their classrooms. The study collected qualitative data from ECE teachers regarding play in relation to learning.

According to Dewey (1923), teaching and learning are interconnected. Moreover, teachers' perspectives influence their way of teaching and their methods in the classroom (Bandura, 1977; Vorkapić & Katić, 2015). Therefore, to improve teaching methods in the classroom, we need to understand how children learn and develop.

The following part briefly explained brain development and reviewed theories of how children learn and construct knowledge and the impact of play on their development.

Brain Development and Play

Neurologists discover a vital link between brain activities and physical activities. They revealed that hands-on activities stimulate human brains (Wilson, 1999). The brain processes information from the senses, organizes it, and stores it in long-term memory (Malik et al., 2012). According to Piaget's cognitive theory, these brain functions are assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1954). As children start to move, walk, run, and jump at an early age, they stimulate multiple areas in the brain. Similarly, they think and plan when manipulating objects with their hands and engaging in hands-on activities (Wilson, 1999). During these activities and play, their brains form new nerve connections and develop cognitive skills. Likewise, children learn to grab things, eat, put on their clothes and shoes, open and close closets, doors, drawers, and carry items (Jacobi, 2004). All these actions are hands-on experiments that stimulate the brain and then become regular habits. Children are constantly experimenting physically and forming associations. Consequently, physical actions and hands-on activities stimulate the brain to learn (Healy, 2000).

Theories in Learning

According to Woolfolk et al. (2013), the learning theories vastly contributed to the understanding of the social and psychological development of children. Additionally, these theories provide educators with knowledge about how children learn. Consequently, improving classroom teaching methods (Woolfolk et al., 2013).

Jean Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory

Children understand the world around them through exploring and experimenting. According to Piaget's cognitive theory, children construct knowledge and categorize it into schemas. Then, they use these schemas to filter new knowledge and connect it to past experiences. They learn through playing with objects and other activities. They are curious and

self-motivated. They continuously construct knowledge by discovering the world around them, investigating, exploring, and experimenting (Piaget, 1954).

Based on Piaget's theory of learning (Piaget, 1962), children's cognitive thinking starts developing in infancy and continues with time. They build knowledge through four stages: concrete to abstract, physical and sensory to forming symbols, and then later, creating their interpretations. The four stages follow a precise order:

1- Sensorimotor stage (0-2 years old): Children grow physically and use their senses to explore the world and learn.

2- Preoperational stage (2-7 years old): They grow physically and cognitively. They are free to move, walk, climb low steps, and control their body parts to a certain extent. They start using their imagination; they play, pretending to eat and sleep. Gradually, they develop linguistic, social, and emotional skills.

   At preschool, ages 3-4, they start interacting with other children and adults. During this phase, they are progressing towards understanding abstract representations. They start making mental descriptions of past events and identities. They develop a sense of quantity and classify items according to similarities and differences. They also use objects in their pretend play and give them symbolic meanings; for example, a block becomes a vehicle, and a stuffed animal becomes a pet. They spend most of their time in pretend play (Singer & Singer, 2009). At this stage, they develop problem-solving skills and can analyze situations through one dimension.

3- Concrete operational stage (7 -11 years old): Their cognitive skills become more advanced. They start understanding other views and solve problems. They improve their understanding of time, quantity, simple math operations, and the space around them. Also, they can follow directions and find locations.

4- Abstract thinking or the formal operational stage (11 years old and onwards): Children's reasoning skills develop, their imagination expands, and they can draw conclusions from results.

During these phases, children's brain gathers information, stores it in a schema, and constantly seeks equilibrium by rearranging it into categories. During play, children learn by assimilating and accommodating knowledge or information (Piaget, 1962). They construct new knowledge and link it to preexisting information. For example, if they see a baseball and say

'ba,' this information will be stored in the brain's memory in a schema. Then they see a basketball or a balloon, use the same information, and say 'ba.' Gradually, they will start differentiating between a baseball and a balloon and update the information in the schema.

Children rely on repetition. Their brain processes the new information and reinforces it (Sensorimotor stage). As their cognitive skills develop, they start imitating animals, pretending to be superheroes, or pretending to be someone else, such as a mom, dad, sister, baby, or dog. They start acting, pretending they are cooking, driving a bus, or having a party. These activities promote their social skills and their learning (Piaget, 1973)

To conclude, children are active learners driven by their curiosity to explore. They construct schemas and cognitive patterns about the world around them (Piaget, 1962). Therefore, their interaction with the world around them is vital for their cognitive development (Piaget, 1962).

Lev Vygotsky's Social Developmental Theory

The importance of play in children's development was also emphasized in Lev Vygotsky's theory (1967). As a constructive psychologist, Vygotsky agrees with Piaget that children learn through experimenting. He emphasizes the essential role of play in the learning process and building cognitive, social, and emotional skills in early childhood. However, Vygotsky adds that social and cultural contexts contribute to children's learning. He believes children are active explorers who construct knowledge through social interactions with adults. These early interactions in the child's life occur spontaneously and naturally through free play. Vygotsky emphasizes the role of adults in children's learning. He argues that a more experienced adult scaffolds the child's learning by guiding and supporting them. With the help of adults and peers, children can achieve a higher level of skills and understanding (Vygotsky, 1967). This led to his theory's key concept: the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

ZPD is the area between what the child can achieve on their own and what they can achieve with the guidance of a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) (Vygotsky, 1967). For example, children develop their linguistic skills and learn new vocabulary by interacting with an MKO, such as parents, older siblings, caregivers, and teachers. Therefore, they construct higher knowledge through social interactions and guided play (Vygotsky, 1967). Other tasks that the child cannot perform, even with an adult's help, will be outside the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1967). Both theorists agree that children develop their cognitive skills

through free play, experimenting, exploring, and discovering, whether independently or guided by an adult.

Another profound concept in Vygotsky's theory is his belief that children's imagination unfolds their artistic creativity and inventive abilities. He states that human thinking is based on imagination and leads to creativity. This interrelation between imagination and reality is seen in the child's free play (Vygotsky,1987). Free play with no instructions nor defined outcomes allows children to create situations using their imagination and make new meanings for the objects they are using. Play enhances their imagination, exploration, and understanding (Vygotsky,1987). The importance of imagination and play in children's learning and understanding was also echoed in several research (Nilsson et al., 2018).

According to Nicolopoulou et al. (2015), children initiate play and create their own stories in an imaginative play world. Soon after, they continuously make rules to master their practice (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). Kravtsov & Kravtsova (2012) describe playing as two procedures that happen simultaneously: the 'outside play' and the 'in play.' The 'outside play' is the objects and materials children work with, and the 'in play' is the imaginary ideas that occur in the child's mind. Children move between their fantasy world and the real world, using imagination to understand reality (Fleer, 2011). For example, a block could become a vehicle, an animal, or a piece of furniture.

Based on these perspectives, Nilsson et al. (2018) introduce a new interpretation of Vygotsky's theory about play, imagination, and creativity. While the common understanding of play in early childhood pedagogy places play as a method *for* learning, the authors argue that play and learning are united in one process- play *is* learning. The authors build their arguments on studies that took place in Nordic countries. They believe that learning in early childhood education should be an outcome of play and exploration, not an outcome of instructional teaching. They suggest a new holistic term, the "playing-exploring child," based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and his perspective on play. Nilsson et al. (2018) state that learning happens when children find meaning during their imaginary play and explore real materials. Learning becomes the outcome of play and children's activities.

Similarly, Bonawitz et al. (2011) noticed that children instinctively initiate play by exploring new toys and finding their uses and properties. They develop problem-solving skills during play and improve their logical thinking. When faced with a challenge, children do not

follow one linear way of thinking; instead, they try various ways to find solutions. Additionally, researchers found that play at the early childhood level sets the foundation for mathematical, spatial awareness, and scientific understanding that supports their learning in later years (Caldera et al., 1999; Hirsch-Pasek et al., 2009; Wolfgang et al., 2001).

Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Similarly, the role of adults in children's learning was the center of Albert Bandura's social learning theory. Bandura explains that children learn by observing, modeling, and imitating the people around them (Bandura, 2021; Hammer, 2011). They acquire new information and learn new behaviors by observing their parents, teachers, peers, and others (Hammer, 2011). They also learn by listening to instructions, watching videos and movies, or playing video games. However, children's learning is influenced by their attention, motivation, attitudes, and emotions (Hammer, 2011). Bandura's social learning theory highlights the role of adults, mentors, and educators in shaping children's behaviors and social skills.

Moreover, Bandura's theory suggests that learning occurs while observing the social behaviors of others. He adds that children are observant and learn by imitating their elders in real situations. They can also learn from fictional stories and movies and following instructions.

In conclusion, children construct knowledge by interacting with the world; they need teaching methods that encourage active engagement and freedom of choice (Hiesh-Pasek et al., 2009). Awareness of these issues is essential when preparing classroom activities. Adult-child cooperative play expands the child's potential when adults ask open-ended questions, motivate the child, and add challenging and engaging activities (Weisberg et al., 2013).

The Definition of Free Play

"Play is a flowing spring of creativity within every human being and is essential for a healthy, happy childhood" (Almon, 2004, p.85).

Play intertwines with work, activities, exploring, and learning (Hughes, 2021). Therefore, researchers vary in their definition of play based on their perspectives, criteria, and types of play (Miller & Almon, 2009). According to Brown (2009), the founder of the National Institute for Play, play is spontaneous, random, and aimless. In the child's world, play is as important as food and sleep (Brown, 2009). Vygotsky (1978) describes play as a desired activity that involves imagination. Armstrong (2006) defines play as "a dynamic, ever-changing process that is multisensory, interactive, creative, and imaginative" (p. 73). The NAEYC (2009) states that:

"from infancy, children act on the world around them for the pleasure of seeing what happens; for example, repeatedly dropping a spoon on the floor or pulling the cat's tail" (p. 15). Feeney et al. (2013) describe play as an active action that is naturally motivated, free-chosen, and pleasurable. Play happens when children are free from adult control (NAEYC, 2009). Hewes (2006) adds that play has existed since the beginning of time with all human beings, regardless of where or who they are. It is a meaningful and engaging experience.

Although there are numerous definitions of play, however, there are common themes that describe play, such as joyful, spontaneous, occurs naturally, self-chosen, flexible, engaging, constructive, active, creative, and imaginative (Almon, 2004; Copple & Bredekamp, 2006; Hewes, 2006; Hiesh-Pasek et al., 2009).

According to Hughes (2021), researchers agreed on five essential characteristics to describe activities as play:

1- Play is intrinsically motivated: children naturally desire to explore and understand the world.

2- Play is freely chosen: children make their own decisions and rules during free play. They choose what and how to play. However, adults can support them by supplying different materials to explore and inspire their creativity (Lillard, 2017).

3- Play is pleasurable: the fine line between a child's work and play is the emotional state. Play must be pleasurable and fun; otherwise, it becomes work (Nell & Drew, 2013).

4- Play is symbolic: it involves a make-believe element (Greene, 2000; Vygotsky, 1987).

5- Play must be actively engaging for players: children play for hours in their world, experimenting and imagining, forgetting about time or hunger.

These characteristics are applied to different types of play, including random, physical movement, playing with objects, pretend play, symbolic play, sensory social within a group, expressive play, associative, and constructive play (Anderson-McNamee & Bailey, 2010).

Types of Play

Researchers concluded that different types of play are age-related (Anderson-McNamee & Bailey, 2010). Children develop their imagination, social, and emotional skills and construct more knowledge through play (Vygotsky, 1978). They play alone, with peers, or with adults.

Table 1 summarizes the age-related types of play according to Anderson-McNamee & Bailey (2010):

Table 1

Types of Play

Type of play	Age	Characteristics
Unoccupied play	first three months of the child's life	random physical movements
Solitary play	between 3-18 months	children play on their own, watch the world around them, and grab objects
Parallel play	18 months to 2 years	children play individually with other children, with no interactions. They start to play pretend by doing actions directed at themselves, such as pretending to eat or sleep.
Motor-Physical Play	Two years onwards	developing gross motor skills through physical play and exercise, learning to take turns, winning, and losing
Fantasy or Pretend Play	Two years onwards	children start using their imagination and experimenting with toys and objects. They use language to express their ideas and feelings.
Onlooker play	during toddlers' years (3 -6 years)	children watch others, learn the language, construct, make connections, and relate to others
Social play	Three years	children start to socialize, learn how to play with other children, negotiate, and share toys
Expressive Play	3 to 4 years	any type of play where children express their feelings, pounding, drawing, dancing, playing with dolls or stuffed animals, showing compassion, anger, and other feelings
Associative play	3 to 4 years	they play with other children and socialize; this play is called 'loosely organized play.' They start to share toys and solve simple problems.

Constructive Play	from infancy to later	any type of play that includes exploring objects and using the senses. Children start gaining confidence, feeling of accomplishment, and building new concepts.
Cooperative play	Four years Some researchers consider earlier age	children engage in group play, have a defined goal, choose a leader, and agree to rules. They start learning social and communication skills.

The Importance of Play in Children's Learning and Development

Children are naturally active and curious (Dewey, 1923). Their ample abilities, needs, and curiosity start in infancy (Provenzo, 2009). Their first interactions with their parents or caregivers are the foundation for social play. Infants interact through facial expressions, making sounds, or hand gestures. Later, children's social and interactive skills become more mature. They start exploring objects using their senses (NAEYC, 2009). Their knowledge expands through daily experiences, playing with objects, and interacting with peers and adults (Vygotsky, 1967). As they grow, they construct knowledge and form interpretations by exploring the world around them (Piaget, 1954). They learn by experimenting, reflecting, and finding rationale (Dewey, 1923). They find a meaningful perception based on contextual experiences (Dewey, 1923). They enjoy playing with pets, exploring materials, grabbing and dropping toys, and repeating frequently (NAEYC, 2009). They reach out to others, showing them their toys, sharing, and building their social skills.

Later at school, they continue to learn through play (Piaget, 2073). Children experiment with materials, building towers using blocks, throwing balls, playing with dolls and stuffed animals, and pretending to be a character from a story or a movie (NAEYC, 2009). As they mature, they experience more complicated social situations. They learn to make friends (Singer & Singer, 2009), seek peers' acceptance, and cooperate (Doyle & Connolly, 1989). Play expands children's thinking and abilities (Vygotsky, 1978). Play is the child's vehicle for learning and advancing.

Pretend Play

Many studies focused on pretend play and its effect on children from an early age (Singer & Singer, 2009). Around 18 months old, children start pretending and doing actions related to themselves, such as eating or sleeping. During the second year of their life, they start focusing on themselves as independent individuals (Piaget, 1962). At preschool age, they engage in pretend play. They create characters and make-believe situations. For example, they play various characters or people's occupations, such as a fireman, a vet, a mom, or a grandpa. They also play fictional characters, such as Spiderman, a princess, and so on. They reflect on stories they heard or their own stories and events that happened in their lives. They start recognizing their feelings and the feelings of others (Taylor & Carlson, 1997; Lillard, 2017). They work within a team or a group, develop empathy toward others, and learn how to deal with them (Singer & Singer, 2009).

Pretend play takes children to different places; they learn about other cultures and visit other times. They talk, use language, express themselves, and explain what they want, improving their linguistic abilities. They communicate their ideas and improve their narrative and comprehension skills (Trionfi & Reese, 2009). Studies showed higher literacy readiness in children engaged in pretend play at preschool (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). They had better reading and writing abilities and more explicit speech (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). Also, children in kindergarten who engage in pretend play develop better verbal ability and analytical skills (Trionfi & Reese, 2009). They easily recall story events, differentiate between fictional and non-fictional stories, and have better reasoning (Dansky, 1980).

In addition, pretend play supports self-regulation and problem-solving. It reduces stress and increases joy, which fosters academic achievement and self-confidence (Diamond & Lee, 2011). Van Oers & Duijkers (2013) recommend adding a designed drama area in the classroom, such as a kitchen or sitting room area, with relevant labeling and prints, to enhance linguistic skills.

The Role of Play in Creativity and Imagination

According to Greene (2000), play enhances children's imagination and creativity. During free play, children expand their imagination and unfold their artistic creativity and inventive abilities (Greene, 2000; Vygotsky, 1987). Greene (2000) adds that imagination in the child's mind is always connected to some reality. Therefore, they create their own stories in an imaginative play world. Likewise, Duckworth (2006) believes children do more intellectual work

through imaginative play. According to Duckworth (2006), “the having of wonderful ideas” is the core of intelligence.

Kravtsov & Kravtsova (2012) explain that children use their imagination during play. They convert objects to serve a symbolic scenario or a situation. They imitate their grown-ups or characters they saw on the screen or read in a story. They imitate actions, sounds, movements, and expressions. Through play, they learn what is meaningful and useful to them according to their needs and interests (Fisher et al., 2011). They continuously construct knowledge and acquire information while exploring and interacting with their surroundings (Piaget, 1973).

The Role of Play in Literacy

Play positively affects children’s linguistic development and enhances vocabulary acquisition and literacy learning (Lillard et al., 2013; Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). Children engage in simple language during play at a younger age (18 months-3 years). They begin to express their thoughts, emotions, and needs in kindergarten and later grades. Their language skills develop as they engage in games and pretend play (Spivak & Howes, 2011; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). They start forming rules and creating stories during play (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). They engage in dialogues during pretend play, acting a story, or creating a situation. They communicate and discuss their roles, imitating real or fictional characters they are familiar with. Children also discuss the setting for their play and name the objects and materials they intend to use. For example, a box becomes a castle, a block becomes a jet plane, and so forth. Through play, children communicate, express their feelings, and solve problems (Almon, 2004).

Furthermore, neurological studies revealed that play expands children’s working memory and helps them gain higher-order thinking skills (Whitebread et al., 2009).

The Role of Play in Math and Science

Children engage in play and explore how toys work as early as two years old (Bonawitz et al., 2011). Their curiosity drives them to look further into things (Trundle & Saçkes, 2015). At preschool, they start classifying objects and recognizing patterns while playing with shapes and building blocks (Shaklee et al., 2008). As children play and explore with blocks and shapes, they develop critical thinking and expand their visual and spatial concepts (Clements & Sarama, 2020). These skills prepare their brains for higher mathematical operations in upper grades (Clements & Sarama, 2020). A longitudinal study revealed a positive relationship between

building blocks play at preschool and math performance in junior high and high school (Wolfgang et al., 2001).

Similarly, children are natural scientists eager to try things. They ask questions and are not afraid to fail and re-try (Piaget, 1954). Research revealed that children experimenting with different materials better understand scientific concepts, have higher problem-solving skills, and use improved language to explain their projects (Clements & Sarama, 2020).

Thus, it is important to include hands-on activities in the classroom to allow children to experiment and explore. Malaguzzi (1996) suggests that applying real-life activities to daily experiences is more effective and interesting for children. For example, teachers could include a science context and different materials for children to explore. Some examples are mirrors, magnets, a balance scale, sand, clay, and activities as simple as pouring water from one container to another- this activity is used in the Montessori method- or throwing a ball (Trundle & Saçkes, 2015). These activities teach children core concepts and processes such as sequencing, effects, actions, and reactions. Core concepts are the foundation for building higher-order thinking and expanding knowledge for later school years (Trundle & Saçkes, 2015). Moreover, when children engage in real-life activities, they are highly motivated to learn and enjoy positive emotions. They construct knowledge, communicate, and cooperate (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009).

According to Piaget (1973), when children experiment independently, they understand more; they invent, discover, and construct the knowledge that remains with them. During play, learning is active; language, science, and math intertwine. Children converse, count, and experiment. Therefore, their fundamental cognitive skills are developing socially, linguistically, mathematically, and physically simultaneously (Piaget,1973).

Higher Thinking Skills and Problem-Solving Skills

During play, children symbolically use objects. For example, they imagine the climber as a pirate ship or a castle. They mentally translate information into codes and symbols, preparing their brains for higher thinking skills. Codes are the foundation of language, math, and science, similar to using letters in language, numbers in math, and symbols in science (Singer & Singer, 2009). Moreover, group play enhances problem-solving skills (Dansky, 1980). Children who play games set rules and goals, assign roles, and use objects. They plan, communicate, collaborate, innovate, and solve conflicts. They learn to negotiate, defend their rights, and express their desires (Dansky, 1980).

Moreover, play prepares essential skills for the modern world. Children develop skills such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creative innovation, confidence, and content knowledge. According to Hirsch-Pasek et al. (2009), these are the "6 Cs" skills needed in the 21st century for a successful global economic workforce. Consequently, free play sets the platform for children to build these skills.

Equally important, researchers noticed that children form hypotheses while exploring and experimenting. They explore an object's function and nature, then use their imagination to use the object differently. For example, they wear a piece of cloth and pretend they are heroes, a stuffed animal becomes their baby or pet, and a building block becomes a vehicle or a food item (Hughes, 2021). They are persistent; they keep trying and repeating until they succeed. They use different ideas, innovating combinations to manipulate objects, and practice various creative ways to solve problems (Hirsch-Pasek et al., 2009).

Playing Prepares for STEM.

Besides children's cognitive, social, emotional, and academic growth, research shows that children build STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) skills through playing and experimenting (White, 2012). For example, during play, children practice mathematical skills; they count, classify, explore patterns and shapes, arrange objects in order, and notice different measurements (White, 2012). They also practice scientific skills by asking questions, observing, and comparing. Accordingly, free play enhances cognitive skills early, laying the basis for mathematical and scientific concepts (White, 2012).

Physical Benefits of Play

Play improves children's gross and fine motor skills. During play, they learn to live a healthy life and build strength. They train their muscles and strengthen their bones (Gunter et al., 2008). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014), children should do physical activities for at least one hour daily.

Play and School Readiness

Findings reveal that play and play-based learning at preschools, kindergartens to third grade prepares children for future school grades and higher academic learning (Bronson & Bronson, 2001). This results in improving school readiness (Mathieson & Banerjee, 2010). In addition, children who engage in play in preschool and kindergarten will likely achieve higher academic outcomes in later years (Whitebread et al., 2009). According to Miller & Almon

(2009), play is essential for the whole child's development and provides them with rich learning experiences. Play enhances children's social skills, helps them acquire new knowledge, and allows them to practice solving complex problems (NAEYC, 2009). They learn best through experimenting and hands-on activities (Feeney et al., 2013).

Moreover, several studies found that play helps children control their feelings and cope with their emotions (Christiano & Russ, 1996). Play improves self-regulation, communication, and reasoning (NAEYC, 2009). Through play, children discover their interests and what they are good at (Christiano & Russ, 1996).

Play-Based Learning Versus Free Play

According to Weisberg et al. (2013), free play is voluntary, freely chosen, joyful, and aimless. This type is exclusively child-directed, with no adult involvement or guidance (Miller & Almon, 2009; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). Differently, other scholars argue that play depends on children's previous experiences and adults' influence. Therefore, it is not utterly 'free' but adult-guided (Brooker, 2011; Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2012; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). A third perspective of play understands it as a base for learning, hence known as play-based learning. It is an opportunity to introduce academic concepts while children are engaged in activities (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015; Weisberg et al., 2013; Weisberg et al., 2013). Learning through play, guided play, or play-based learning share the same definition and are used interchangeably in research.

Play-based learning is free play in improved and prepared activities that focus on learning outcomes (Weisberg et al., 2016). It aims to increase children's engagement and enrich academic learning (Weisberg et al., 2016, 2013). Therefore, it requires adult guidance to scaffold learning for children to develop new skills, as explained in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978).

Play-based learning balances the adults' role in teaching and child-centered learning (Wood, 2009). It involves adult planning, teachers' support, and prepared interactive activities (Weisberg et al., 2016). Teachers facilitate children's play by preparing the setting, adding materials, participating as co-players, and interacting with the child (Fisher et al., 2011; Weisberg et al., 2013).

Play-based learning offers a variety of resources for children to choose from and explore (Fisher et al., 2011). Children engage in age-appropriate activities that meet their developmental needs and interests. Therefore, they lead their learning and have the freedom to choose (Fisher et

al., 2011). The adults' role is to keep the children engaged and scaffold their knowledge. Adults' role is to plan, collaborate, and engage in activities (Fisher et al., 2011). They join in play and follow the children's lead without directing them; they ask open-ended questions and encourage children to explore (Weisberg et al., 2013).

This type of play should not be confused with imposing learning, where the teacher gives direct instructions (Bonawitz et al., 2011). Instead, it combines free choice and planned activities with various resources (Fisher et al., 2011).

According to a study by Weisberg et al. (2016), children exceeded adults' expectations during guided play by creating new ways to play with toys. The authors explain that the freedom to experiment with materials allows for deeper learning as children use their imagination and become creative beyond limits. Weisberg et al. (2016) concluded that guided play offers more opportunities for children to discover, understand how things work, and explore, unlike instructional teaching, which narrows children's thinking and creativity. Moreover, play-based learning gives children a sense of achievement as they discover the world around them, which enhances their self-confidence and boosts their love for learning (Whitebread et al., 2009).

In conclusion, adults' support for play-based learning allowed higher quality learning and proved more effective than directed instructional learning in Pre-K and kindergarten classrooms (Weisberg et al., 2016).

The Importance of Play-Based Learning in ECE Classroom

Early years influence children's emotional, social, linguistic, and physical development (Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2010). Therefore, early childhood educators focus on what happens in preschool and kindergarten. Research shows the importance of play in the classroom (Lindsey, 2016). Play, in general, and the play-based approach foster children's imagination, enhance their creativity, and facilitate knowledge construction (Whitebread et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, play-based activities allow children to guide their learning according to appropriate development stages (Weisberg et al., 2013). They explore and experiment with materials that relate to real life (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Additionally, play-based learning offers opportunities that stimulate children's minds and actions. As a result, children feel comfortable moving around, using their senses, exploring, and asking questions (Weisberg et al., 2013). Play-based learning contrasts with direct instruction teaching approaches that focus on

one learning goal and expect every child to achieve it simultaneously, neglecting their natural development (Bonawitz et al., 2011).

Play-based learning encourages children to engage in doing, getting involved, staying active, and collaborating. It optimizes their creativity and motivation, improves their social skills, and increases self-regulation. These skills are essential for better academic achievements in later grades (Lillard, 2017).

Examples of Play-Based Approaches in ECE

The Montessori Method

"The study of a child's psychological development must be bound up with the study of his hand's activities. Those children who have been able to work with their hands make headway in their development." Maria Montessori,1967 (p.152)

The Montessori method is one example of play-based learning. It focuses on self-directed learning and hands-on activities (Meinke, 2019). The Montessori approach provides children with sensory-based materials to choose from and construct knowledge (Montessori, 1967). These materials are appropriate for preparing children for math, language, science, music, and social skills. The Montessori method is about movement, hands-on activities, and object exploration. It aims to facilitate advanced cognitive and psychological development. It offers safety, regularity, predictability in the daily schedule, and harmony in the classroom (Montessori, 1967). Children can choose according to their interests and abilities (Montessori, 1967).

The teacher's role is to maintain a well-organized classroom. Teachers arrange the materials according to children's interests and development. They provide safety, regularity, and a clear, predictable daily schedule. They demonstrate how to handle the materials and offer options for using them. Everything is labeled and accessible for children (Lillard, 2017). Children move freely, work independently or within a group, and explore with their hands and senses (Montessori, 1967). As a result, Montessori children retain information effortlessly, show higher social skills, and have faster problem-solving skills (Lillard, 2017).

Reggio Emilia Approach

"Learning and teaching should not stand on opposite banks and just watch the river flow by; instead, they should embark together on a journey down the water. Through an active, reciprocal exchange, teaching can strengthen learning and how to learn."
Loris Malaguzzi,1996

The Reggio Emilia approach is centered around children's interests (Edwards, 2011). The philosophy behind this approach is based on the belief that children have endless potential to construct knowledge. According to Malaguzzi, the father of Reggio Emilia's approach, children can learn in a hundred ways or languages (Edwards, 2011). They have a hundred ways of thinking, imagining, and inventing. They use them to express themselves. The Reggio Emilia approach is inquiry-based, allowing children to explore the world around them (Arseven, 2014). It is also a project-based learning approach. Children choose a project and work together with their teacher. They hypothesize, inquire, discuss, and experiment. Children participate and learn according to their abilities. Teachers are learners; they join discussions and motivate children's interests by asking questions (Arseven, 2014). This approach considers the environment as the third teacher and emphasizes the role of families and communities in children's learning. Moreover, Reggio children are seen as self-sufficient individuals who can contribute to society and culture and support their rights (Arseven, 2014).

The Narrative Learning Approach

Play-based narrative learning in early childhood is an educational approach that promotes play and creative activities for children. It supports the development of their cognitive, social, emotional, and linguistic skills (Goodson et al., 2010). This approach stems from the narrative learning method that uses storytelling for teaching and learning (Clark & Rossiter, 2008).

In general, children enjoy listening to stories. Stories open the horizon for learning about social situations and life experiences. Additionally, storytelling improves linguistic and communication skills and promotes cross-cultural understanding. It also exposes children to basic mathematics and science concepts (Goodson et al., 2010; Rahiem, 2021). Storytelling is part of human nature to process life experiences and shape our understanding of our place in the world (Goodson et al., 2010). Consequently, the narrative learning method hinges on learning about various cultures of various times using books, stories, puppets, and pretend play. It is rooted in Dewey's constructivist and reflection perspectives (Clark & Rossiter, 2008).

The narrative learning approach is a good example of the principle of the zone of proximal development. Teachers and children join in activities in a narrative context to make meaning of abstract concepts (Clark & Rossiter, 2008). This adult-child interaction advances children's readiness to learn, make sense of the new knowledge, and relate it to previous experiences (Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2010).

This approach encourages children to participate and be creative in imaginative play. It is a stimulating, creative approach that integrates different areas of learning and accepts all possible interpretations (Rahiem, 2021). The narrative learning method connects learning, expands children's thinking, and allows for posing questions and wondering. Furthermore, the method encourages engagement and motivation by reflecting on stories and making meanings of life (Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2010).

The Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and narrative learning approaches are constructive, progressive education methods where children learn through play and cooperate with their teachers.

Planning Play-Based Activities

Play-based learning requires planning and consideration (Morrow & Rand, 1991). It involves awareness, knowledge, and proficiency (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). In addition, teachers should have clear goals and plenty of room for children's interests, imagination, and creativity. According to Moe (2019), child-centeredness and embracing the child's developmental aspects (social, emotional, sensual, intellectual, and spiritual) are the primary focus when developing teaching methods and classroom activities.

Moe (2019) suggests these considerations when planning play-based activities:

- Preparing activities that relate to real life and nature
- Diversity in the activities and materials
- Freedom of choice
- Less supervision and guidance, more facilitation and encouragement
- Building warm, loving, and caring relations with the children and building trust
- Preparing a safe environment

Play-based activities aim to provide opportunities for children to learn independently and according to their abilities. Therefore, activities should vary in complexity to keep the children interested. According to Branscombe et al. (2013), activities should be inspiring, meaningful, and realistic. They should be enjoyable and exciting.

Teachers should be aware of the children's backgrounds when planning classroom activities. According to Pyle & Danniels (2017), children's learning styles and habits vary. They come from various backgrounds and cultures. They need activities that relate to their life and time to adjust to the classroom environment.

Such activities provide opportunities for children to play naturally. They meet children where they are, stimulate their creativity, and allow them to express their thoughts (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Also, play-based learning provides time, space, and materials for children to construct meaningful knowledge and develop higher thinking skills (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

Teachers' Perspectives on Play in Early Childhood Classrooms

Teachers' beliefs and perspectives are reflected in their teaching methods and classroom practices (Vorkapić & Katić, 2015; Chapman, 2016). Moreover, their perspectives on play directly affect children since play is proven to be related to children's whole development (Hughes, 2021).

Furthermore, play influences teachers' behavior in the classroom. According to Singer (2013), teachers who appreciate play are more creative in solving problems and are willing to try new ideas that meet children's curiosity. In addition, such teachers create a positive and interesting classroom environment that supports the child's development (Pinchover, 2017). In addition, teachers' involvement in play builds trustful relationships with the children and provides a sense of security, which is much needed at an early age in school (Canaslan-Akyar & Sevimli-Celik, 2022).

Nevertheless, studies show no clear or shared definition of play among teachers (Zhulamanova & Raisor, 2020). Results indicate that teachers hold diverse views and beliefs about the meaning of play and how to integrate it into the curriculum (Bennett et al., 1997; Bergen, 2014; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Zhulamanova & Raisor, 2020). Research also shows that teachers have a vague distinction between free play, guided play, and play-based learning in addition to their role in the classroom during the different types of play (Nicolopoulou, 2010).

Likewise, teachers' definitions of play vary according to their experiences and beliefs (Lewis, 2014). Their views came from previous experiences as students in school and college and how they practiced play (Zhulamanova & Raisor, 2020). Mostly, they associate play with social and physical activities more than cognitive skills (Zhulamanova & Raisor, 2020).

A study by Rothlein et al. (1987) revealed that ECE teachers saw play as a fun way for children to develop physical and social skills. Sixty teachers participated in a quantitative study. They answered questions about defining play and how they applied and encouraged play in their classroom. Teachers' definitions of play focused on physical activities, mainly free play, and outdoor play, such as running, climbing, swinging, and sliding. They did not see play as a method that could be integrated into the curriculum to promote learning or introduce academic

concepts. Results of the study also showed that most teachers were concerned about the lack of time because of the academic load; therefore, they used play as a reward for children who finished their work.

More recent studies on teachers' perspectives show that most teachers believe play is essential to children's holistic growth, including social and cognitive development and school readiness (Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Vorkapić & Katić, 2015). However, they worried about implementing free play or play-based learning in the classrooms. Differently, other early childhood education professionals doubt the effectiveness of play-based learning. They find no connection between play and learning (Walsh & Gardner, 2006). Many ECE teachers developed negative beliefs about implementing play (Lynch, 2015). In primary grades, teachers consider play in the classroom to be distracting and unacceptable behavior (Barnett, 2018). They are pressured to meet academic goals; therefore, they consider play unproductive, meaningless, lenient, and careless (Pinchover, 2017).

According to a qualitative meta-synthesis by Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019), ECE teachers differ in their views on play and learning. The study analyzed 62 qualitative studies from 24 different countries. It examined how ECE teachers receive play-based learning in international contexts. The study highlighted factors influencing teachers' views, such as language and culture. Additionally, it drew attention to the different interrelated aspects of play recognized by teachers. For example, the types and aims of play, the role of teachers during participating in play, and the purpose of play-based learning.

Findings revealed that play is considered important for learning. However, there is uncertainty among ECE teachers about the definition of play. There is no universal definition for play since play itself carries multiple characteristics. Some teachers looked at play through a functional perspective, symbolic and rule-governed lens (Vorkapić & Katić, 2015). Other teachers defined play based on behavior types, such as physical, exercise, and rough-and-tumble play. Others mentioned using objects and involving purpose-made toys. A few discussed pretend and socio-dramatic play (Smith, 2005).

The study also revealed that teachers are still determining how and when to integrate play-based learning into the curriculum (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). The authors concluded that teachers need to be clearer about their roles in play-based learning. They revealed that teachers are the authority giving instructions in schools that follow traditional teaching curricula

and focus on teacher-led activities. On the other hand, the teachers' role in schools that apply child-led activities is to supervise (Wu et al., 2018). Few teachers believed their role is facilitating play by providing different materials for children to choose from and joining in play as partners.

Furthermore, teachers' interpretation of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) in their teaching methods is inconsistent, according to Martlew et al. (2011). They use play as a structured, goal-oriented activity to instruct children on what to do (Pinchover, 2017). However, studies revealed that too much guidance often deprives the child of the freedom of choice and spontaneous playing (Martlew et al., 2011). As a result, children's creativity declines as they rely on the teacher to guide them on how to play (Martlew et al., 2011).

Accordingly, teachers' understanding of the purpose of play-based pedagogy and how children construct knowledge is still unclear and needs further investigation.

The Effect of Policies on the Use of Play in the Classroom

Although teachers and early childhood educators know the importance of play, many are pressured to teach in traditional ways to meet the State standards and tests (Lynch, 2015). Prompted by the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001- No Child Left Behind, grades 3-8 students must pass annual standardized reading and mathematics tests (Lillard, 2017).

Likewise, education policies regarding kindergarten readiness mandate public school districts and community schools in Ohio to perform Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA-R) (Ohio Department of Education, 2022). Similar assessments are used in 40 other states. Schools must rate children's readiness for school and measure their skills and knowledge. Teachers are asked to collect observational data and assess children by November first of each academic year. Moreover, children are assessed at the beginning, middle, and end of the year to measure their achievement and growth in math, reading, language usage, and science through Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) (Ohio Department of Education, 2022).

According to Lillard (2017), these assessments are set by politicians and are rarely based on research. They create a burden on teachers and children to achieve high scores. As a result, teachers are narrowing learning and following instructional curricula that align with specific academic areas (Lillard, 2017). They teach to the test, and children learn superficially (Lillard, 2017). Subsequently, ECE classrooms focus on tests and neglect children's development aspects.

A study by Bassok et al. (2016) comparing teachers' methods in public kindergartens over twelve years revealed a noticeable change in practices in the classroom. Teachers' methods gradually shifted from child-centered developmentally appropriate activities towards direct instruction and traditional teaching. ECE teachers focus on test preparation and teaching literacy and math. Whereas playtime, music, art, and experimental activities are declining (Bassok et al., 2016). Furthermore, teachers direct all classroom activities, inhibiting children's independent choices. Classroom activities became heavily dependent on worksheets and workbooks, limiting children to sitting at their desks for long periods. The study also explored the change in teachers' beliefs regarding play pedagogy and school readiness. Results revealed that teachers' beliefs favored academic teaching more than play and play-based activities that foster children's natural learning and developmental abilities (Bassok et al., 2016).

Challenges in ECE Classrooms that Hinder Implementing Play-Based Learning

According to Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) meta-synthesis study, the main barriers to implementing play-based learning are the following (p.787)

1) Policy mandates and curricular concerns
2) Parental attitudes and beliefs
3) Teacher education and qualifications
4) Learning expectations
5) Structural challenges
6) Children's characters

Top-down policies and curricular expectations were the main concerns identified by teachers (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Teachers felt pressured by the high academic learning expectations in preschool and kindergarten classrooms and struggled to include play in their curricula (Lynch, 2015).

Studies also revealed that teachers' knowledge of play pedagogy is limited to one form of play: free play (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Cheng, 2001; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). They lack knowledge of other types of play or how to connect learning to real-life experiences (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). They lack training in alternative teaching methods and need more professional development. Teachers also reported having difficulty implementing an inquiry-based constructivist approach or planning project-based activities (Fung & Cheng, 2012). Even when implementing new approaches, there were

superficial changes in programs and no radical changes in the traditional teaching philosophy (Lillard, 2017). As a result, classrooms are lacking training, innovation, and creativity.

Parental expectations and views about play formed additional pressure on teachers. Many parents did not value the importance of play and demanded worksheets and homework (Fung & Cheng, 2012; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019).

Other barriers to play were related to large classroom sizes, understaffing, funding, and resources. Finally, some studies mentioned barriers related to the children themselves, such as language barriers and physical and emotional needs.

Summary

Classrooms are becoming more teacher-guided instead of child-centered. Teachers are reducing playtime, which decreases learning through exploring (Nicolopoulou, 2010; Miller & Almon, 2009;). They need more time to add play to their curriculum. Classroom practices are becoming teacher-led, limiting children's thinking, reducing social interactions, and waning play (Nilsson et al., 2018). Moreover, teachers are implementing traditional teaching methods focusing on blackboards, whiteboards, and worksheets (Miller & Almon, 2009). Schools are reducing play time at the expense of educational time. More time is spent teaching math and literacy and following direct instructions, whereas less time is offered for children-guided activities (Bassok, 2016). Such practices disengage children from real-life experiences and ignore their natural developmental phases (Wohlwend, 2007). Furthermore, focusing on academic content at an early age pushes children beyond their abilities, causing stressful conditions and aggressive behavior (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Miller & Almon, 2009).

Preschool and Kindergarten children spend more time learning test-driven curricula than learning through play (Miller & Almon, 2009). As a result, play is weakening to a more considerable extent (Brabazon, 2016). Researchers warned that reducing play in ECE classrooms holds multiple future consequences. It limits self-learning experiences (Ortlieb, 2010) and negatively affects children’s social skills and creativity (Guirguis, 2018).

Chapter 3: Methodology and Theoretical Frame

Introduction

Research Design and Justification

Deciding on the methodology was a primary step in conducting the research design (Hatch, 2002). The methodology was guided by the tenets and the main objective of the study (Hatch, 2002). Furthermore, it described the type of data needed and the method used to collect data (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Consequently, I knew that my methodology depended on the research topic and theoretical framework to structure the study (Hatch, 2002).

Qualitative Interview Study

I felt that my study required a deep investigation of the early childhood teachers' experiences in their classrooms. It required collecting thorough information to gain insight into the participants' beliefs and reveal the layers of the studied issue. Therefore, a qualitative interview methodology was the most appropriate approach. The nature of the study and the study's main question guided me to choose the relevant approach to collect the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

A qualitative interview approach helped me focus on the *how* and the *why* behind the issue being studied (Butin, 2010). Moreover, it allowed for a deeper and richer understanding of the teachers' perspectives on play pedagogy at the ECE.

I focused on a small number of participants. Yin (2014) states that focusing on a small number of participants results in high-quality results. He states that a quality study captures meaningful details and multiple perspectives and can yield unique findings when interpreted by the researcher (Yin, 2014). Accordingly, reporting the findings shows the reader the details and various perspectives of the study (Yin, 2014).

Accordingly, this study maintained a qualitative form, collecting multiple views on the study's issue (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Sitorus, 2012). I conducted face-to-face interviews to investigate various social realities and collect numerous perspectives from participants. The qualitative interviews allowed me to gather real stories from participants and converse with them in their natural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Additionally, qualitative data revealed the participants' experience and how they understood play pedagogy (Butin, 2010). The data collected presented broad and various viewpoints from participants. According to Creswell & Creswell (2022), collecting qualitative

data allows for a wider exploration of the topic under study and flexibility in sharing various perspectives from the participants. Consequently, this leads to a comprehensive understanding of the research question. Data was interpreted to find patterns in behavior and reach a holistic understanding of the matter (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Theoretical Frame

The philosophical approach of the study determined the theoretical frame. The theory supporting the study provided me with an analytical framework and helped me explain the rationale behind the interpretation of data (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

This qualitative interview study was based on Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which connects learning to social behavior (Bandura, 1977). Bandura's theory focuses on how individuals learn (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 2021). He believes that learning happens through observing others and imitating them. He explains that learning is an inner self-action. Individuals are responsible for their learning and take agency of it when they interact with their surroundings. Their mental, physical, and psychological states influence how they receive and perceive what they observe. In other words, we observe, intake information and process it, form ideas, and then put them into action when needed. Bandura introduced the social factor in the learning process. He also stressed individuals' internal and mental factors while learning from their context: how we feel and what we think play a role in what we learn.

According to Bandura (1977), individuals influence their surroundings and get influenced by them. His famous experiment, 'Bobo doll,' showed that children could imitate behavior they observed, regardless of stimuli. In other words, learned behavior is an internal process, not only a stimulated behavior, as understood in behaviorism (MacBlain, 2021). Accordingly, Bandura puts the child in the center of learning, able to acquire new knowledge by observing and imitating behavior from a social context (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 2021). Bandura's theory explains that learning is a social cognitive process influenced by internal and external factors. At an early age, children learn by observing others around them and imitating their actions. They are not isolated from their surroundings; on the contrary, they continuously observe what is happening around them and imitate what they observe (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 2021).

According to Bandura's theory, learning happens within a social context through natural steps. Children learn when they watch others' behaviors. They deliberate what they see, store the information, and later imitate it. Bandura explains the learning process as follows:

1. Attention: a behavior, action, or event that captures the child's attention. Generally, children are attentive to those close to them, like parents, siblings, family members, and caregivers. Later, they pay attention to their teachers and peers.
2. Retention: Children identify and remember the new behavior or action. They build new knowledge to the concepts they already stored in their brain. Children form new patterns of behavior and store them for future use in similar situations. Retaining information and building on previous knowledge were also mentioned by Vygotsky (1967) in the theory of ZPD: Zone of Proximal Development.
3. Reproduction: repeating or imitating the behavior according to the child's abilities. At a young age, children imitate sounds, simple movements from adults around them, media they view, or animals and pets they observe.
4. Motivation: An internal or external motive that encourages the child to repeat the behavior. Also, encouragement and punishment affect the child's motivation to repeat what they learned. For example, when the teacher encourages sharing toys and awards that behavior, other children will also imitate the behavior.

Bandura's social learning theory argues that children construct knowledge through various experiences, verbal persuasion, performance, and physiological states (Bandura, 1977). Their learning is based on their physical and emotional experiences and interactions with their surroundings. They observe other children and imitate their teachers.

Similarly, as children engage in free play, they practice their social skills and acquire new ones. They are socially active, communicating, playing with each other, agreeing and disagreeing on the rules of the games (Hughes, 2021). They adapt to each other's needs and exchange knowledge. During role-playing, they imitate characters from their environment, such as family members, adults they know (Vygotsky, 1978), or characters from stories or movies they watched (Guirguis, 2018). They thoroughly observe their surroundings (Dewey, 1923). They observe their teachers' and other children's behavior. For example, one child starts making funny noises or clapping, and the others imitate. During play, children are free to choose and make decisions. They own their learning.

Bandura also stressed the importance of self-efficacy in children's learning. Children are driven by their interests and abilities when they are free to choose an activity. They try because

they believe they can. They achieve better results when they indulge in an activity. As a result, they gain confidence and high inner motivation to continue learning.

The theoretical frame was used to understand how social learning was applied in the ECE classrooms through play.

Data Collection and Analysis

I conducted face-to-face interviews with the participants to collect qualitative data. I used an inquisitive method, inquiring and asking questions. These talks were essential to understand their points of view and perspectives and share their experiences (Maxwell, 2013). I asked open-ended questions during the interviews and followed up with more specific questions to capture all the details. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with the participants' permission (Hatch, 2002). Data was categorized into common themes and given codes. The data collected depended heavily on the participants' experiences. All data was protected under pseudonyms in protected files on my laptop.

The data analysis process and interpretations went hand in hand with data collection. The concept was absent at the beginning of the study. However, as the data built up, it revealed new details, leading me to develop a better meaning. According to Hatch (2002), initial data analyses guide the researcher to focus on upcoming data collection to gain more depth. In qualitative research, data are cumulative, slowly revealing one aspect after another, providing a better understanding and new perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). My initial memos were important to me in reflecting on intuitive thinking and shaping my interpretations (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). These memos were essential to reveal any assumptions and biases.

The data collected was deconstructed and reconstructed. To create codes, I looked for details, topics, main ideas, patterns, and relationships (Glaser, 2002; Hatch, 2002). Data was categorized and coded to find patterns and meanings (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The categories represented the different perspectives of the interview questions and supported the findings. Consequently, this proves research validity (Patton, 2002).

According to (Creswell & Creswell, 2022), identifying the main themes in a study is the window through which the researcher represents their findings. Themes are pulled together to find the whole meaning and describe the study. Accordingly, I conducted inductive qualitative analyses by seeking patterns from the data collected (Yin, 2014). I categorized related data into

themes to capture the participants' experiences (Patton, 2002). The data collected was interpreted to create meaning and generate conceptual ideas (Hatch, 2002).

My background and perspective on education guided my interpretation of the data. As a childhood educator for twenty-five years, my experience writing several early childhood teaching curricula supported my reasoning in interpreting the data. In addition, my job as a teacher in Ohio kindergarten classrooms for the past couple of years allowed me to notice the change in methods implemented in preschool and kindergarten. I was interested in investigating teachers' perspectives on how and why ECE methods are changing and why play pedagogy is fading. Findings were analyzed according to common themes.

Using a study that focused on qualitative data facilitated the exploration of a social aspect and how the participants brought meaning to the studied issue (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). It is flexible in its design and unique in its findings (Maxwell, 2013).

According to Meloy (2001): "Doing qualitative research for one's thesis requires a conscious, internal awareness within the external structural, political, and human context of higher education because the dissertation is the focus of intense personal interaction and ambiguity around such tasks … as choosing an area of interest." (p. xiii)

The Research Question

The leading question for this study was:

What are the teachers' perspectives on play as a teaching method in ECE?

The following interview questions were used to answer the main question:

Interview Questions

Interview Q: What do you understand by the word 'play'?

Interview Q: How do you integrate play into your schedule?

Interview Q: What are the benefits of Learning through Play?

Interview Q: What challenges do you face in the classroom regarding implementing play?

Location, Setting, and Participants

The study took place in a Midwest private school in Ohio. I have worked at this school since the pandemic in 2020. This allowed me to have easier access to the participants. According to Hatch (2002), looking for a research project that is manageable in time, feasible, and convenient in context is important. I collected data from five different classrooms.

The past three years witnessed a change in methods used in the classrooms and a high turnover of teachers, especially in 2020 due to COVID-19. However, this school was a perfect fit for my study for the following reasons:

1. The school has four preschool classrooms and one kindergarten classroom.
2. Two programs are used in the preschool: the traditional and the Montessori.
3. The kindergarten system also combines traditional methods and project-based learning.
4. The school is a STEM-designated school.
5. There is a wide range of diversity in the teachers' education and professional training

Children's ages range between three to five years old in preschool and five to six years old in kindergarten. Occasionally, there are few students for grade one, combined with the kindergarteners in one classroom.

Each classroom has one lead teacher, one assistant, and one floater. Teachers varied in their education and years of experience. I focused on a few participants to get a deeper understanding (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Six teachers showed a willingness to participate.

The following table shows the participants' distribution:

Table 2

Participants' Distribution

Classroom	Traditional 1	Traditional 2	Montessori 1	Montessori 2	Kindergarten
Program/methods	Traditional	Traditional	Montessori	Mixed	Mixed
Participating Teachers	1	1	1	1	2

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were my priority before I started collecting any data. I followed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) instructions and completed all the required forms.

After being granted permission to conduct the study from the principal, who also owns the school, I started to collect data. I approached the preschool and kindergarten teachers individually and explained the nature of my study. The teachers were helpful and showed interest in volunteering. Six teachers volunteered to participate: two teachers from the traditional program at the preschool level, two teachers from the Montessori program at the preschool classrooms, and two teachers from kindergarten. Participating teachers signed consent forms before conducting the interviews.

Participation was voluntary. Participants were aware that they could withdraw anytime during the research. I explained the study's nature, purpose, benefits, duration, and procedures to them and obtained their consent. All forms and information were in an understandable language. Participants' involvement increased the general awareness of play pedagogy and helped expand their knowledge.

All interview data and my notes were saved in a hidden folder on my laptop under a protected password to ensure privacy and confidentiality (Hatch, 2002). Moreover, teachers' identities and real names were not used; they were kept confidential. I used pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants. This will protect the participants when the results are published. The teachers also signed consent letters (Appendix 2) to understand their rights and the nature of the study.

I collected demographic information from participants: age, highest level of education, educational training, and years of experience in ECE. I was watchful, responsive to the participants' privacy, and respected their preferences. I avoided questions that could risk their jobs and positions in the school. I respected their time and did not interrupt the teaching process.

Data Analyses

This qualitative interview study focused on teachers who shared their perspectives on play. It collected details about a life situation (Riessman, 2008; Creswell & Creswell, 2022). These details derive from participants' positionality and experiences and the specifics of the setting and context (Suter, 2011). According to Fraenkel et al. (2012), the researcher wants to extract the meanings of these details by interpreting patterns and arranging them chronologically. In addition, as a researcher, I was looking for the uniqueness of each participant's input to enrich my interpretation of the data (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Participants shared their perspectives and

realistic classroom experiences. Data was coded according to their input and categorized into themes. Finally, findings were interpreted based on the theoretical frame driving this study.

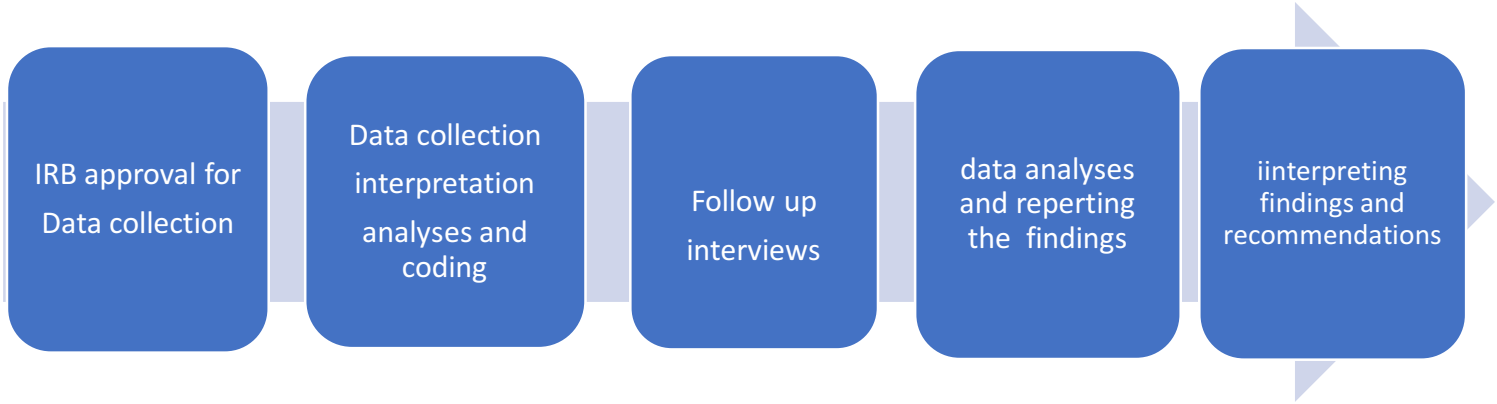
Data Collection and Timeline

After obtaining IRB approval at Miami University in Ohio, I sought permission from the site (Appendix 1). I started phase one of data collection. The data collection lasted for six weeks. During these weeks, I conducted face-to-face interviews.

Then, I started phase 2: transcribing, organizing the data, finding themes, and coding. Some follow-up interviews were needed to clarify the participants' perspectives and elucidate the meaning. Finally, phase four was data analysis and interpretation of the findings.

The following figure shows the timeline of the study:

Figure 1. *Timeline*



Summary

ECE classrooms have witnessed tremendous changes in the past few years. Many top-down policies and reforms changed teachers' methods and beliefs regarding the importance of play. This research investigated play pedagogy in ECE classrooms from the teachers' perspective.

The study focused on a small number of teachers. To collect qualitative data through interviews. The teachers voluntarily participated in answering four questions about play. Qualitative data was collected from the participants about their experiences and perspectives on play. The main areas discussed were teachers' definition of play and its benefits, using play as a

teaching method, and the challenges they face in the classroom regarding implementing play. During the interviews, I was clear about my objectives and allowed the participants to share their views and stories comfortably (Hatch, 2002). Choosing a qualitative interview study allowed me to collect in-depth data, gain more knowledge, and find details on the social and behavioral situations related to play in the classroom.

My study allowed for a better understanding of teachers' perspectives on play by investigating how they apply theory to practice. Was the social learning theory put into practice or not? Moreover, if it was not, then why? What were the obstacles against learning through play as a part of the social learning theory?

Chapter 4: Findings and Interpretations

Introduction

In chapter four, I presented the participants' demographics and reported the data findings narratively. Then, I showed how data was organized into themes and presented the interpretation of the findings. According to Creswell & Creswell (2022), a report of the findings is one of the components of the study research design. They also recommended including the objectives, field procedures, and interview questions.

The main question of the study was:

What are the teachers' perspectives on play as a teaching method in (ECE)?

I used a qualitative interview approach and focused on a small group of teachers who shared their perspectives and life experiences in the classroom. I interpreted the findings based on my knowledge of ECE theories and my experience with learning through play as a method in the classroom. I referred to the literature in chapter two and linked my interpretation to the theoretical framework in chapters one and three (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Re-Statement of the Research Problem

Play has been proven to be essential for children's mental, physical, emotional, and cognitive development (Dewey, 1923; Vygotsky, 1967; Piaget, 1962; Bandura, 1977; NAEYC, 2009). Moreover, these skills significantly impact the children's academic progress in higher grades (Lynch, 2015; Ali et al., 2018). However, today's ECE classrooms are facing remarkable challenges. Teachers are pressured to follow school reforms and meet high academic state standards. They teach test-driven curricula irrelevant to ECE learning theories and incompatible with children's natural learning abilities (Miller & Almon, 2009). Subsequently, teachers in ECE classrooms are reducing free choice and play time in their daily routines. Their methods change from play-based to traditional paper-and-pencil learning (Guirguis, 2018). Moreover, teachers' perspective on play as an important teaching and learning pedagogy is weakening as the pressure continues in the ECE classrooms (Lynch, 2015).

To approach this problem, I conducted a qualitative interview study to investigate teachers' perspectives on play in early childhood classrooms.

After I completed the interviews, I read the teachers' input and organized the data into four areas. I looked for similar keywords and related sentences in each area. I tried to capture the meaning and the impressions behind the stories. Slowly, the themes emerged, and I was able to

categorize them under the four areas. The first area was to understand teachers' definition of play, the second area was the practices and strategies that teachers use to implement play in their classroom, the third area was teachers' perceptions of the role of play and its benefits, and finally, I investigated on the barriers that hinder implementing play.

The following section presented the setting, participants, and ethical protocols. For confidentiality, teachers were given pseudonyms.

Participants Demographics

Six teachers volunteered to participate in interviews: two from the traditional preschool program, two from the Montessori program, and two teachers from the kindergarten level. All participants were ECE teachers with more than one year of experience. They were the main source of data. Participants varied in their educational and professional levels. After explaining the study's nature and objectives, each teacher received a consent letter to read and sign. I clarified that the participants had the right not to answer questions and could withdraw at any time. I also assured them that the information they shared would be only used for study purposes under pseudonyms and that all data would be kept in my laptop under password protection.

The interview time was varied between 45 to 60 minutes. According to the teachers' schedule and convenience, some interviews were over a few days. Teachers showed enthusiasm to participate in the study. They generously shared their knowledge, understanding, and perspectives on play and play-based learning. They shared their experiences in applying different activities and methods in their classrooms. They also revealed the challenges they face in the classroom, particularly barriers regarding implementing play as a teaching method.

In the following section, I summarized the participants' demographic information and the findings using a narrative method. The narrative description tells the participants' lived experiences and their stories as data (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). It reveals details about the real meaning of the actions and events of the participants in their social context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). A narrative presentation delivers details and uncovers the layers of the issue being studied.

Participant 1: Amanda

Amanda is twenty years old and has been teaching for three years. She finished high school and worked as an assistant teacher in the preschool classroom. She was excited to be part of my study. She shared her views about play-based learning and the barriers she faces. We met

at the library on a Saturday. During the meeting, she showed great love and care for her children and her work. She believes each child is unique and has their approach to learning. Therefore, she focused on their interests and planned multiple activities to meet the children's needs.

Amanda advocates play as a learning method and considers it essential for children's natural social, emotional, and academic development. She comprehensively described her experience in facilitating play in the classroom. She also emphasized the value of free choice in supporting children's needs and interests. As well as the importance of integrating plenty of art and handcrafts into the daily routine.

Participant 2: Vera

Vera is a preschool lead teacher. She is in her early fifties and has fifteen years of teaching experience. She is a trained nurse with a Child Development Associate (CDA) certification. She is also trained in the Montessori method. We met in her classroom during children's naptime. During the interview, she showed great knowledge of the best early childhood teaching methods, especially learning through play and the Montessori approach. She also provided plentiful details about her experience in preschool. She expressed concerns about the pressure facing preschoolers to prepare them for kindergarten's academic standards. One of her concerns was the shift she noticed in children's behavior after being isolated during COVID-19 and how it affected their play and social interaction.

Participant 3: Miss H

Miss H, as her professor used to call her, is in her early thirties and has an experience of six years in the ECE. She holds a master's degree in special education and has training in ECE and the Montessori method. She is the lead teacher of the Montessori program in the preschool classroom. We did several interviews due to her busy schedule. Our interviews were between fifteen and twenty minutes over three days. During the interviews, she provided helpful information about the preschool program and what is offered in the classroom to prepare children for the kindergarten program. Her teaching philosophy is giving the child freedom of choice. She also prepared projects for them based on their inquiries and interests. She believes children learn best when creating something rather than just memorizing information. However, she added that implementing learning through play alone is not enough to meet the required academic standards.

Participant 4: Sara

Sara is a preschool lead teacher. She is in her late thirties and has ten years of teaching at the ECE level. She has a bachelor's degree in psychology. We met after her working hours at the library in the school. Sara was pleased to talk about her beliefs and educational philosophy. She appreciated how research adds to the overall knowledge. During the interview, Sara spoke knowledgeably about her teaching experience. She mentioned that free play is essential for children at an early age. It allows them to develop socially. She added that teachers should focus more on children's social and communication skills. She believes that supporting children to learn how to find solutions is a priority and satisfies their curiosity.

Participant 5: Julie

Julie is a kindergarten assistant teacher. She is in her mid-twenties. She has been teaching at the kindergarten for the past five years. She graduated from Miami University in Ohio with a bachelor's in Middle Childhood Education. She was happy to share her experience and showed comfort and confidence during the interview. We met in the playground during recess. She provided clear and precise information about the definition of play and its benefits.

Julie also shared detailed stories about the activities she initiated in the classroom. She supports exploring and learning through play. However, she faces pressure from the administration regarding meeting academic standards. Accordingly, she highlighted the challenges of top-down decisions.

Participant 6: Jacky

Jacky is a kindergarten lead teacher. She is in her mid-forties. She has a bachelor's degree in communication and has taught for eleven years. Jacky showed a positive attitude and shared helpful information during the interview. We met after her working hours in her classroom. She believes in traditional learning because this is how it is done in public schools. She follows Ohio standards and teaches through pen and paper. Jacky believes that play is inadequate for learning. Moreover, she mentioned the academic pressure she feels to prepare kindergarten students for grade one.

The following table provides the demographics of the participants:

Table 3

Teachers' Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Education	Teaching years at ECE	ECE training	The preferred method in the classroom	Classroom level And role
Amanda	20	High School	3	Self-learning	Learning through play	Preschool Assistant teacher
Vera	51	Vocational training Nursing	15	Montessori	Montessori Encourage play	Preschool Lead teacher
Miss H	33	M.A in Special Education	6	Montessori	Mixed methods: Inquiry-based Projects and traditional	Preschool Lead teacher
Sara	38	B.A in psychology	10		Learning through play	Preschool Lead teacher
Julie	24	B.A in Middle Childhood Education	5		Inquiry-based students centered and learning through play	Kindergarten Assistant teacher
Jacky	45	B.A in Communication	11		Traditional	Kindergarten Lead teacher

The next section in chapter four presents the findings in a narrative description form (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

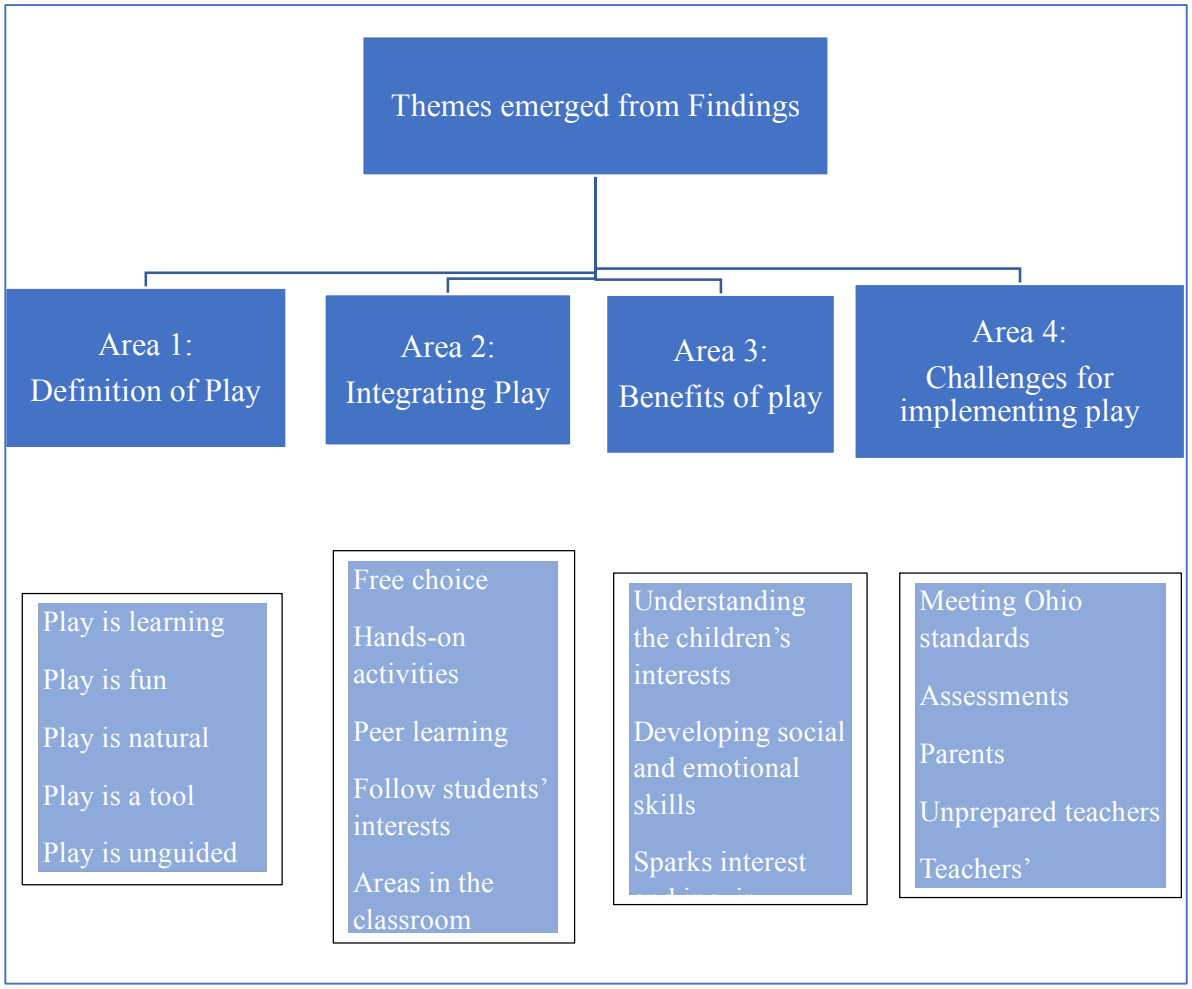
Data, Findings, and Themes Overview

Data was coded and organized into categories. These categories represent the major themes (Yin, 2014). During the interviews, the participants shared many stories about their experiences in the classroom. After each interview, I revised the data and reflected on the four interview questions. Identifying the themes was a basic step to extract the participants' perspectives and experiences. The themes were related to the interview questions' replies. After completing the data collection, I familiarized myself with it and highlighted each area's frequent

and common words and phrases. I examined the meanings and the descriptions in the participants' replies. Then, I looked for patterns in the participants' understanding of play pedagogy and related them to the study's main question. Some data was irrelevant to the study and, therefore, was untaken. According to Guest et al. (2014), applied thematic analyses are the most sufficient approach for qualitative data generated from in-depth interviews. The authors also emphasize the term 'applied' since data was collected based on the participants' life experiences.

The following figure is a thematic map that summarizes the four main areas of the study and the emerging themes based on the participants' perspectives.

Figure 2 *Themes Emerged from Findings*



Area 1: Definition of Play

The first interview question investigated the teachers' definition of play. These themes emerged according to the data collected:

- Play is learning,
- Play is natural
- Play is a tool
- Play is fun
- Play is student-centered, with no teacher interference

According to Amanda, *play is learning*. She stated: "Kids play in different corners of the classroom during free choice." To her, free choice and play are the same. "This is how they learn; they count toys, learn the shapes, sound out the names of things. They have conversations, discuss their actions, and ask questions." She added:

> Play is fun and gives children enjoyment. Play, for me, is learning, and it should be fun; it helps kids learn and makes them happy. I want them to enjoy being at school and enjoy their time; whatever they are doing, they are playing, so if they struggle to clean up, I make it sound fun, I make a game of it, and it works.

Finally, Amanda stressed that she does not interfere with their choices. She explained:

> During free choice, you come over and say hi; I do not pressure; I sit quietly with them. I back off and wait; some have bad days, and some are more open. If they are frustrated to get something, they work through it and eventually get it. I let them try and try before I say anything.

Vera's definition of play included expressions, imagination, creativity, and learning. For her, "play is natural; you cannot take away play from them. We sit on the carpet, and they listen to me, but after fifteen minutes, they start fidgeting; they are bored and want to play away from instructions and constrictions." She added: "Play is a tool that facilitates children's learning and supports their natural development."

Vera added that: "Play is a need." She shared with the following:

> The year after the lockdown, things changed; it was different. We had many kids with high anxiety and big emotions. Lots of crying. I noticed that kids do not know how to

express themselves or work with other kids. We had behavioral issues and managing emotions. That is why I allow plenty of time for play. It is their time to feel safe, relax, and do what they like; only then they will love coming to school and learning.

Miss H defined play as follows:" Play is unstructured; it is giving the children much freedom of choice, and it has to be fun, it is not guided, with less direct desired outcomes, nothing specific, not a specific outcome." Miss H added:

> If a child is playing a math game such as matching unfix cubes to number cards, that is play; if I ask the child to match the correct number of unifix cubes to the number on the card, that is not playing because I set a defined outcome. They need to play to get familiar with stuff, explore, and satisfy their curiosity, and then I come in with whatever outcomes I want them to reach. So, play and guided play complete each other; children need free play to explore and guided play to learn. Learning through play for me is guided play or play project-based learning with a clear outcome that I want to reach.

When asked about her definition of play, Sara said:

> Play is being active and having fun; play is learning, communicating, and developing socially and emotionally. Play is giving them plenty of time and materials and enhancing their imagination. Play is exploring and trying, even if it is something simple like playing with play dough; they are exploring different things, using cutters to make shapes, and talking about their 'pretend cookies' or 'trees.' Play is very important; it opens their horizon to discover and learn new things.

Additionally, Julie from the kindergarten classroom said: "Play is when a child is in charge, doing an activity freely without a teacher's guidance; it is completely student-centered and student-guided, and there is no teacher guidance." She added: "Play is learning, and learning should be centered around kids to help them satisfy their curiosity." Julie said: "When they are playing outside on the climber, they pretend it is a pirates' ship or a castle, and they are superheroes, princesses, or pets. They imitate characters we read about. They are having fun."

Jacky, a lead teacher at the kindergarten, defined play as:

> Play is not having a structured curriculum; kids are free to do what their minds tell them. Like playing outside during recess, they play with the ball, run, and do their thing but still need supervision; I encourage them to share, keep their hands to themselves, and take turns.

Jacky added:

> We do not play much in the classroom except for rainy days during indoor recess. Otherwise, kindergarten, for me as a teacher, is a foundation year preparing the kids for grade one. I want them to love school and have fun learning, so I give them small breaks to color or a minute to talk, or I pull up a song on the screen so they move a little bit.

Area 2: Practices in the Classroom to Integrate Play

The second interview question investigated the teachers' practices of integrating play. These themes emerged according to the data collected:

- Free Choice
- Hands-on activities
- Peer learning
- Follow students' interests
- Areas in the classroom
- Games
- Projects
- Paper and pencil

Amanda shared her views on the methods she uses by saying:

> My role is to observe, and I try to understand how kids think, what they like, and what interests them. Then, based on that, I plan my lessons. I choose books and stories based on their interests, like dinosaurs, space, and trucks. Some children are interested in insects and bugs, so I plan hands-on activities that go with what they like. If they are interested in something, they enjoy learning about it, they ask questions, and some have the funniest answers, but I accept all their comments and participation.
>
> Amanda stated:
>
> I do not do worksheets; I do art. I focus on gross and fine motor through playing games and doing handcrafts. The classroom themes follow the kids' interests. Some themes might be the same, like back-to-school, Halloween, and the seasons, but still, we follow

what they like. I added mini furniture pieces, farm animals, cars, and wooden blocks to the doll house to encourage them to play. We have a shelf of tray work; they are only toys for children to play with. We call it tray work; although they have toys, because parents want their children to do work and not play all the time.

Amanda also added:

I love to create games for fine motor skills; I put stuff in boxes for them to explore and prepare the tray works, which, in reality, are toys and games. In one of the corners of the classroom, we have a sensorial bin filled with expired dry rice and beans. I throw toys in it for them to find and put 3D shapes. One child shows interest and starts playing in the bin, and then five more kids want to do the same. They learn from each other. I keep changing the toys according to the theme we are working on, bugs, for example, or plastic alphabets and numbers.

Vera from the preschool class mentioned that she integrates play all day:

All day long, I encourage them to investigate inside the classroom and outdoors; I give them crazy ideas, like let's dig the lost treasure for the dogs on our planet. We also have practical life stuff on the shelves: a jug and cups for pouring, small bowls and spoons, beans, and a funnel; those are real materials, and they love them. We also have a drama area for role-play.

Vera stressed the importance of a playful classroom environment:

As a preschool teacher, I encourage play by providing ideas for pretend play, like we are in the forest, the ocean, or at a restaurant. It doesn't have to be fancy with many toys; anything could work. We color on an empty box and turn it into a boat or a school bus; we hide under the desk, pretend it is a tent in the woods, and imagine what we can hear and see. I stimulate their senses.

Vera shared with me an interesting activity. She explained:

Last weekend, I asked them to collect dry leaves from their backyards; we got two big bags, counted ten leaves, and sorted them by shape, size, and color, and that was a game and a math lesson. I took the leaves outside, and the kids started to walk on them and listen to the sound. One child was shy at first, and then he joined his friends. I encouraged them, and then I joined them. Some kids take their time to do something, but when they see other kids playing, they join, and sometimes they need encouragement, so I step in. I

> also used the leaves for art; we traced them, painted them, and printed them. We read a poem about autumn leaves, and that was language. Then we acted like leaves falling on the ground. There are many ways to integrate play in the classroom and connect it to math and language while having fun.

Miss H follows the Montessori method and considers it a learning-through-play method:

> My role is to facilitate their learning; the Montessori method depends on modeling, so when I present a new lesson, I bring the work to the carpet in front of the children and slowly start to demonstrate. For example, when I first introduce the Montessori Pink Tower from the sensorial material, I place a mat on the floor and ring the bell, and the children know that it is carpet time. I take apart the cubes one at a time in slow motion; then, I start building the tower again. I do not say anything; they all stay quiet and observe. Then, I encourage them to take turns playing with it. They usually follow the same process. The pink tower develops their fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination and prepares them for math. It teaches them to be organized and patient. Sometimes, one child is building, and others are watching.

Miss H explained that all Montessori methods require the teacher to model how to use them at least once. She added:

> The Montessori classroom is a very organized environment where kids learn according to their abilities. Everything is displayed at the kids' level. They are free to choose any work from the shelves; they play with it and return it. Sometimes, they sit and watch other kids. They feel proud of themselves when they finish a task. They are happy knowing they can do things.

Miss H added that even in the Montessori classroom, they use worksheets and workbooks to meet the required standards. “Preschool is fun, more relaxed than kindergarten, but we sit with the kids, one-to-one, and write with them, trace their names, recite the alphabet, their sounds, and the numbers. These are standards that we must meet.”

As for Sara, she integrates long periods of free choice in the morning and after nap time. She explained:

A long time of free choice in the morning gets them involved and gives them time to finish what they do. It also gives me time to sit with them and talk. I ask about what they like and what they don’t. I ask them what they are playing with and then ask if I can play too; I play along and try to

make conversation. I use that time to emphasize words we are learning, and the alphabet sounds like, this is a block; block starts with b."

Sara added: "Socially, kids are aware of what they do; they decide on the rules of their game, and when they disagree, I try to encourage them to solve their problems without me interfering."

Sara also noticed:

> They have very interesting conversations; one child comes up with an idea, and they agree and start playing. I see almost the same group of kids playing together in the same play area, like the building blocks area; they return every day to continue their game or start again. They do the same thing: build roads and ramps and play with the cars on the blocks. It is interesting how they repeat the same game again and again. Other kids sit and observe before they join. I try to encourage them.

Julie, a kindergarten teacher, explained that she involves the children in the classroom decisions.

> I give them the agency to own their learning. I start a discussion about a subject, take feedback from the children, and then give a chance for the advanced children to lead. I break them into groups, red, blue, and green, and assign them tasks. For example, if we decide on building a store, one group draws the design, one group decides what to sell, and one group decides what we need. Then, we meet again on the carpet and discuss what we did. We all work together on a project, but this is only 30 to 40 minutes daily, usually by the end of the day.

She also said:

> I try to make time for play; I know it is important for them socially and emotionally, but I have a curriculum that I need to follow. They must learn sight and family words like 'at, an, on,'..etc. They also have to master the numbers and the addition and subtraction concepts. I also introduce some science and social studies. So, there is a lot to teach, and it takes a creative teacher to teach all that through play. I try many things to get them involved and interested. I also play short videos and songs. I give them the choice to improve the lesson and take the lead.

The other kindergarten teacher, Jacky, leaned toward traditional teaching and did not include free choice during her day. She noted that things were different during her early years in teaching at the kindergarten:

> Things have changed now; we are doing much more. Most children are ready for more than just learning the colors or the shapes; they know more. They are exposed to iPads and computers at home, watch animated videos and series, and talk about the characters, missions, robots, and heroes that go to the rescue. They learn a lot from what they watch. They come to the kindergarten with information, and we must meet their level; otherwise, they will be bored. I think they are ready for work.

She declared: "Play is during recess; I might sing a song now or then, but there is no time; kindergarten is a preparation for grade one; they have to learn to sit for longer periods and do work; they have to learn to read, write, subtract and add, social studies and science stuff too."

She also added:

> As a teacher, I need structured teaching. I need clear methods and standards to follow. Preparing for grade one is a pressure, but I do not know how to integrate play within the curriculum. I cannot teach through play. Play is not for learning. It helps them socially, but not to learn what is expected from them. I wish they could play more and interact socially, but this will not work; play will not prepare them for the public school system. We have high expectations to meet and assessments like the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) and Measure Academic Progress (MAPS. The KRA assessment is done one to one. I have to make time for each child to assess them. These are state standards from the Ohio Department of Education (ODE). I need time to assess them and teach them; it is overwhelming.

She said: "I have to prepare them for grade one. When my son was in grade one in public school, they did worksheets all the time; every day, he returned home with at least five to six worksheets. They only had free play time during recess."

Area 3: Benefits of Learning through Play

The third interview question investigated the teachers' perspectives on the benefits of play. These themes emerged according to the data collected:

- Understanding the children's interests

- Developing social and emotional skills
- Sparks interest and inquiry
- Academic benefits

Amanda explained:

> Play allows me to get to know the children's interests and needs. She stated: 'There are differences between kids; each has a different understanding, so my approach differs with each child; one child likes role play, others like music, some like to talk, some do not. Play shows me their characters and helps me understand their needs.

Amanda also added that play encourages thinking and develops problem-solving skills. She mentioned:

> I noticed that kids recognize each other's feelings during play, being gentle or hard with something or someone. They set their own rules and change them to accommodate other children. Play is also important for them; they learn from each other. For me, free choice and play are the same terms because playing is learning.

Academically, Amanda said:" Play helps their cognitive skills when they count. I hide toys around the room with pictures and words and ask them to go around and find them, then we sit and read them this game is to enhance their vocabulary."

Vera shared some concerns about children who joined her classroom after COVID-19. She said:

> COVID kids have difficulty playing together; I think the lockdown has affected their social skills and imagination; they probably did not see other children to play with. Maybe their parents did not play with them either. They need to play; play helps them learn social skills and connect to other children; it helps them express themselves and their feelings.

Vera agreed with Amanda that children connect, relate to somebody through play, and build social skills. She added: "Play allows them to live in another world, sparks their imagination, and helps them be creative."

Academically, she added, "They need a clear mind for academics, so play gives them that."

From her perspective, Miss H said that through play, children could learn to share and work as a team:

> During play, they learn how to share Legos and blocks, build together, and play within a team. What happens during play is cooperation, learning social skills, and ownership. During play, they use language they plan; sometimes, some kids tell other kids what to say, like you need to say sorry, please, that was nice, or good job. They repeat what they hear from me and glance at me, making sure I hear them. I smile back, happy to know they are paying attention to what I say. Play gives them time and opportunity to express themselves and carry on conversations; there is no script during play, but they use language.

Sara finds play essential for developing emotional and social skills and building relationships:

> Play helps kids understand their feelings and thoughts; kids find themselves through play, discover their personality, and find what they like and dislike. They start recognizing classroom rules like respecting others, taking turns, and that other kids' opinions matter. They start recognizing other kids' feelings.

She added:

> Play helps them explore and expands their imagination. Play also has an academic benefit; they learn math when playing with blocks and Lego and count how many they need, especially if they are building towers. I usually count with them or ask them if they think this is more than ten or twenty; then we count, and I write the number on a sticky note, and they stick it on their tower. Also, in the drama area, we read a story and try to make a play out of it, imitating the characters and what they were doing; some kids repeat full, short sentences they heard from the story.

Julie also emphasized that play is essential for building social interaction and can be a learning tool:

> At the beginning of the year, we played running a store, and they loved to play it almost twice or more per week. They always have something new to add; we create a section for produce, dairy, deli, cosmetics, and bakery. They draw the products and put prices on them. Another group pretends to be the shoppers; we sit on the carpet and write a shopping list, simple words like milk, bread, apples… etc. I give them fake money, a 5-dollar bill, five ones, and a bag, and they walk around the room going from one section to another, reading the prices, shopping, and paying. They love the game. They learn to

socialize, to be polite, and to ask nicely. They learn math using money, counting, and how much they spend. They learn language by writing shopping lists and spelling words and letters. We talk about making good choices and choosing healthy food. And that is science. I tell them we can buy some candy but not too much, and they laugh. We learn about caring for our bodies because they buy cosmetics, toothbrushes, shampoo, and soap. They also relate to real life and learn some responsibility.

She added:" The best part is they own it, they give the store a name, they take turns being the workers at the store, and the cashier."

Similarly, Jacky noted that play builds social skills and allows for physical development: "During recess, children are playing; they interact socially and do physical activity when they run and play soccer."

Area 4: Challenges to Implement Play as a Learning Method

The fourth interview question investigated the teachers' perspectives on the challenges of play. These themes emerged according to the data collected:

- Meeting Ohio standards
- Assessments
- Parents
- Unprepared teachers
- Teachers' understanding of play
- Administration
- Methods in public schools

Amanda was concerned about the parents' opinions. She stated:

Some parents do not want to hear that their children are playing all day; they ask us to teach them, and some even ask for homework sheets. It is hard to convince them that playing is more important than writing and reading at this age. So that is why we have tray work. We tell the parents that we do work, and we play. We also explain to the parents that playing is learning; some agree, others don't.

On the other hand, Vera expressed her frustration about teachers' understanding of play. According to her: "I am not sure that teachers understand the importance of play for children's social and emotional well-being and growth. You can relate play to academics, but not all teachers understand how." She added:

> I think there should be a degree for play; some teachers do not know the importance of play in preschool, feel lost with no specific guidelines on integrating play in the classroom, and think free play is only during recess. We need more training on play.

Vera also shared that parents create another barrier to play:

> I see kids who do not play at home; some parents see school as pencil and paper**;** I do not. We always have a tray of blank and printed papers; they can grab it to color and scribble, but I do not do the traditional worksheets.

Miss H mentioned that she must prepare preschoolers for kindergarten: "Depending on their age, I teach them writing, word formation, letters, numbers, 1–10, quantity, they have to recognize letters sounds, the months of the year, and the days of the week. I must prepare them for kindergarten and many struggles." She added that:

> The play-based curriculum will be hard to implement because it does not have defined goals; you can teach math during play, but this is not the goal of play. For certain concepts, you must introduce academics first. Play reinforces academic concepts, but it is not the method; they can learn from play, but not everything. You cannot play all day. Yet, the project-based curriculum has defined goals: children can learn multiple topics by creating something.

She also mentioned the lack of resources, teachers' training, and difficulty replacing broken toys. On the other hand, Sara mentioned the parents as the primary barrier. She said:

> Parents do not understand the importance of play and do not know how to spend quality time with their kids; they give them iPads to play with. I ask my kids what they do on weekends, and they say nothing. I am sure they did something, but they can't remember because it was not interesting enough. They rarely mention that they did something with their family. When parents pick up their kids, they ask about worksheets or what they learned today; not many parents ask if their kids had a good day or fun.

She also said that once during orientation, as she explained the daily schedule, one parent commented that there was too much time for free choice and no learning; he said: "I send my child to school to learn their alphabets and letters and get ready for higher grades, not to play."

> Julie's biggest challenge is meeting the Ohio standards. She said:
>
> It is challenging to balance academic-focused learning and learning through play. By the end of the year, they are expected to read and recognize almost a hundred sight words,

> blending sounds, and vowels besides the assessments. The pressure is on the teachers more than the students. We also face challenges with children's behavior, especially after COVID. Some children are okay, but others are struggling, and they influence others. We are not prepared to deal with these situations; on top of meeting the state's academic expectations, it is just too much pressure.

She also expressed her concerns regarding preparing children for life and not only for the next grade. She added:

> I do not like the idea that getting ready for the next grade is the only goal for a teacher, and the students are not learning anything valuable if we are only preparing them for the next grade. There are many skills that they have to learn for life, not only for the next grade; it is not the priority, in my opinion.

On the other hand, Jackie was concerned about meeting the Ohio standards and believed that the best way to reach them was through paper and pen.

> I use pen and paper; this is how public schools teach; they are still traditional schooling. It is hard for me as a teacher to do learning through play. It is hard to put yourself in the play set of mind, especially as a teacher; you must do all the other assessments like KRA, MAPS, and DIBELS. We have to assess each week to make sure kindergarteners meet the standards, and if they don't we have to use resources. Each child needs a minimum of one hour of assessment; I pull them individually, and I assess 3 to 4 kids in the morning and the same in the afternoon; it takes a few days every week to finish the assessments because I have other things to do. It does stress me, but I try to find a balance. There is no play; we forget how we play; we must prepare them for grade one. Sometimes, I use recess time to work with kids who did not finish their worksheets.

Summary of the Findings

The following table summarizes the participant's perspectives on play according to four themes:

Table 4

Participants' Perspectives on Play

Participants	Definition	Practices	Benefits of play	Challenges
Amanda Preschool	Play is learning. It happens during free-choice Play is fun, No teacher interference	Art, hands-on activities, promote motor skills Student-centered activities Free choice diversity Themes based on the children's interests Play areas Games	Relate to students Develop problem-solving skills Social skills Empathy, Organization Set rules Peer learning Learn language and math, Fine motor skills	Parents' false understanding of the benefits of play Parents' high academic expectations of the school
Vera Preschool	Play is natural Play is a need Play is a learning tool that Spikes their imagination, expression, creation.	Play all day, investigate, Encouragement, imagination, pretend play	Social and emotional development: Learn, explore, use their senses, ask, count, art, communicate	Teachers' understanding of play. Lack of teachers' training, Parents' understanding of the importance of play
Miss H Preschool	Play is unstructured, fun, no specific outcomes, exploring, free choice, no specific outcomes.	Montessori, learn through play	Organize, self-dependent, take turns, social skills, self-efficacy hand-eye coordination, patience	High expectations to prepare children for higher grades, teaching math and language at preschool is a pressure.

			peer learning	
Sara Preschool	Exploring, being active, fun, Play is learning, communicating, imagination Actively involved in doing something with a goal	Long periods of play Integrate learning into real-life experiences	Building relations Conversation Communication social skills, peer learning, organize, respect, share, expand their imagination	Parents' false understanding of the benefits of play Parents' high academic expectations of the school
Julie Kindergarten	No guidance, child in charge, student-guided, student-centered, fun	Project-based learning, songs, free choice time	Interaction, Social and emotional development, play is a learning tool	Ohio Standards
Jacky Kindergarten	Play is not a structured curriculum Free to do what children want	Outdoor recess, songs	Social skills and physical development	High expectations Required assessments. Ohio Standards

The Four Areas of the Findings

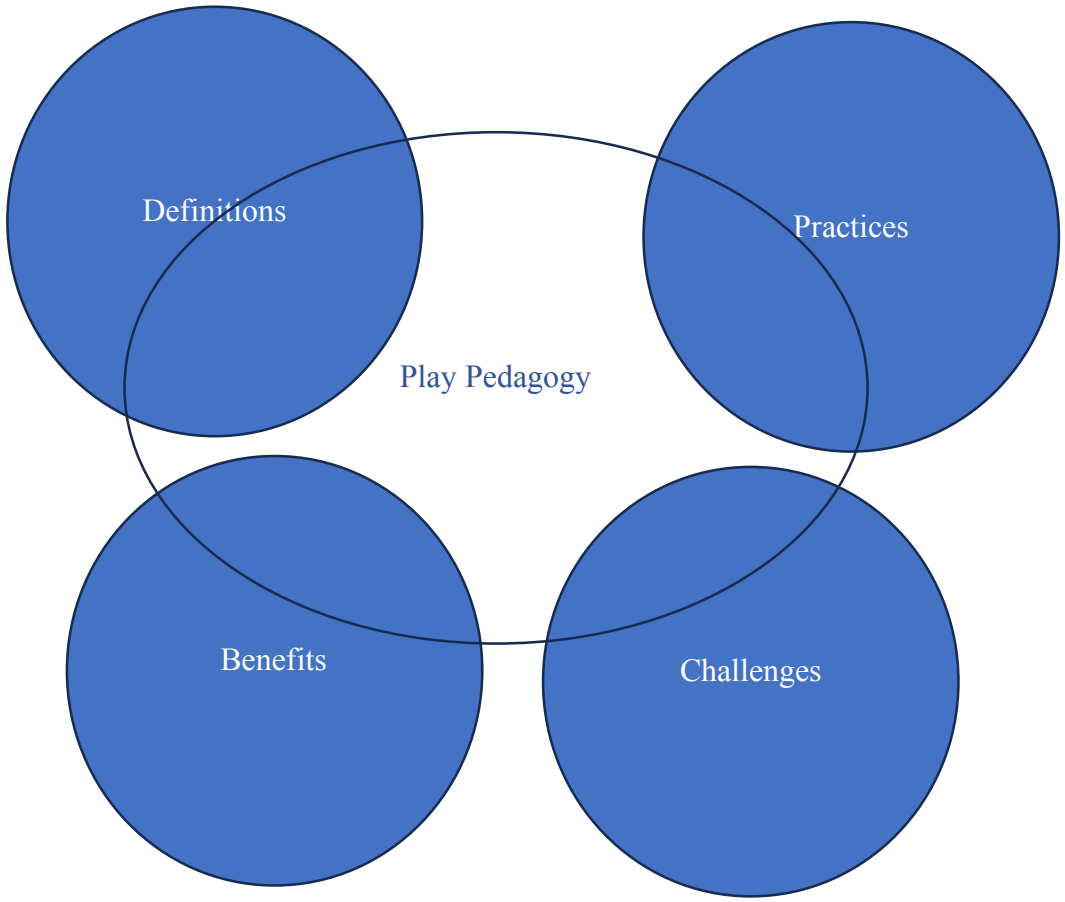
The following part describes the connections between the themes, the main question, and the purposes of the study. It related the emerging themes to the literature review in chapter two and analyzed the themes based on Bandura's social learning theory.

The study's findings considered four areas related to teachers' perspectives on play pedagogy:

- Definitions of play,
- Benefits of play,
- How play is integrated into their curriculum,
- Barriers and challenges when implementing play in ECE classrooms

Figure 3 shows the relation between these areas and play pedagogy.

Figure 3 *The Four Areas of the Findings*

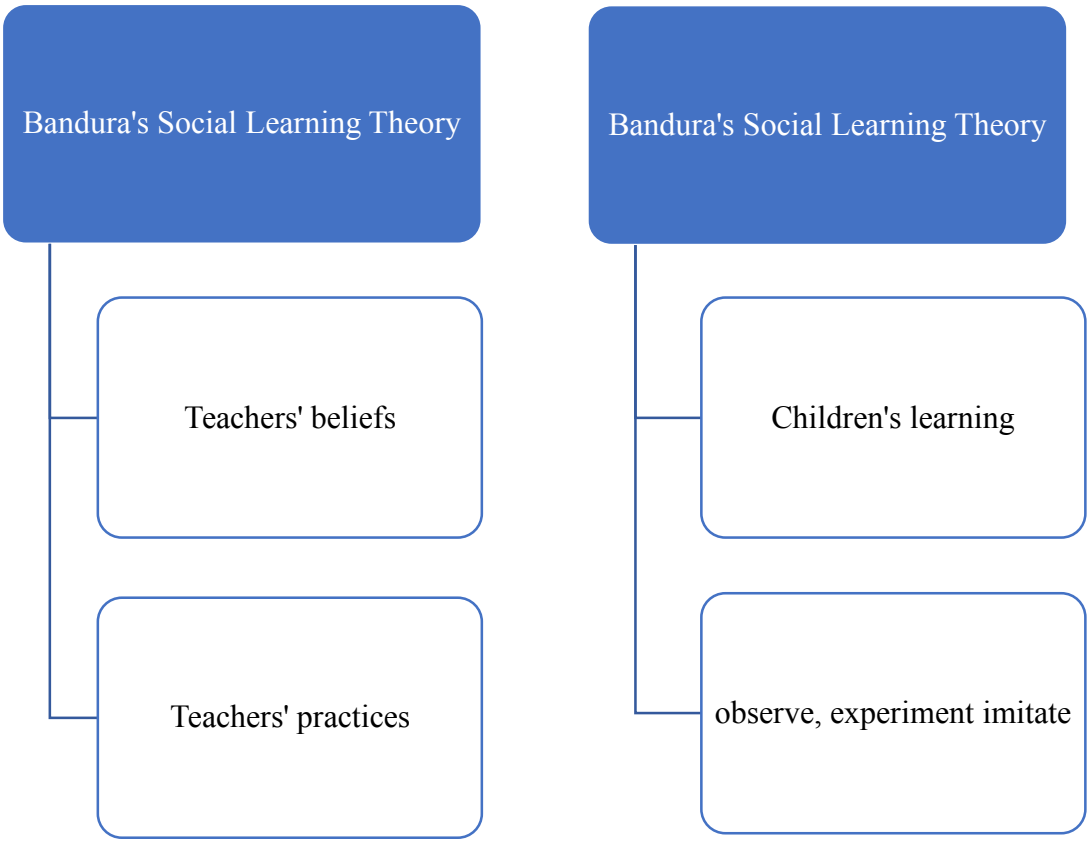


Employing Bandura's Social Learning Theory

The social learning theory was the frame of my study. It guided me to find the connection between theory and research-based practices. Moreover, the interpretation of the data depended on Bandura's theory to explain and connect the elements of this study: I employed the theory to explain teachers' beliefs and practices on one hand and children's learning on the other.

The following figure summarizes the study's theoretical framework for teachers' perspectives and children's learning.

Figure 4 *Teachers' Perspectives and Children' Learning through Bandura's Social Learning Theory*



Interpretation of the Data

According to Bandura (1977), individuals' beliefs influence their practices. Accordingly, teachers' perspectives on play are reflected in their practices and classroom methods. The interview questions focused on four areas that served the main question. Findings showed a wide spectrum of different views and realities in the classrooms.

Data was interpreted in two sections: data from interviewing the preschool teachers and data from interviewing the kindergarten teachers. It was necessary to make this differentiation between the two levels, preschool and kindergarten, as explained in the section below.

Preschool Teachers' Perspectives: Interpretations and Discussion

The first area to investigate teachers' perspectives on play was to ask about their definition of play and their opinions based on their professional experience and knowledge. This question was important to capture their first impressions about play pedagogy. The emerging themes were along these lines: play is learning, play is fun, it is natural, it is a learning tool, and it is unguided. These findings align with Hughes's (2021) findings of the essential characteristics of play.

Three out of four teachers at the preschool level supported play and showed knowledge of the play pedagogy. These teachers also understood what children need at these early stages of their lives. They shared similar definitions for play, such as play is natural, it is a need, and play is learning. In addition, they appreciated the significant role of play in children's development. Their views were compatible with the ECE theories that highlight the role of play in children's whole development (Dewey, 1923; Piaget,1962; Vygotsky, 1967; Bandura, 1977).

Preschool teachers put the child's interests and abilities at the center of the learning process, mirroring Bandura's social learning theory (Bandura,1977). They modeled play and behavior to impact children's development. They motivated children by providing encouragement and accommodation for individual personalities and interests. Preschool teachers also joined children in play to open communication channels. They studied their children's needs and abilities so they could help them thrive. They reflected Bandura's views on the importance of understanding the children's personalities and the effect of the classroom environment on their learning.

Regarding teachers' methods in the classroom, data from preschool teachers revealed consistency in integrating play into the classroom routine. They understood their role as facilitators guiding the learning process. They provided the appropriate context and learning methods to support children's learning. They provided ample time during the day for free choice and self-guided play. They enriched the classroom environment with active areas for play, such as adding a block area, drama area, and sensorial activity area. Preschool teachers provided various child-guided activities and applied project-based learning. Children constructed their own knowledge and advanced their skills. They experienced different materials, observed, and conversed with their peers. Children were the owners of their learning, following their interests

and learning at their own pace. The social learning theory by Bandura highlighted the importance of social interactions to the whole development of children (1977).

Findings also showed that preschool teachers integrate academics into play. They planned play experiences and activities that immersed math, language skills, and science concepts, relating knowledge to life experiences. These results align with Whitebread et al. (2009), that play in preschool and kindergarten prepares for higher academic achievements in the following school years.

They enhanced children's imagination and creativity through role-play, arts, and crafts. Children learned according to their abilities and natural development. These teachers strongly believed that play supports children's development and is the most appropriate method for learning in early childhood. Their views echoed Bandura's social learning theory that supports the development of children's social and cognitive skills. They brought theory into practice.

One of four teachers at the preschool level expressed that she must prepare children for kindergarten. She follows the Montessori method, all hands-on, child-centered activities that recognize children's different abilities and allow them to follow their interests. However, she mentioned that she must prepare children for kindergarten. She is pressured to teach them the alphabet and numbers, although most children struggle to learn them. Studies warned of this early academic pressure against children's natural development (Guirguis, 2018). Set standards and rigid academic goals ignore individuals' different styles of learning. They assume one standard could fit all, contrasting children's learning abilities and pushing them beyond their natural development.

When addressing teachers' beliefs on the benefits of play, the participants agreed that play supported social and emotional skills, such as communication, collaboration, decision-making, empathy, respect, sharing, and solving problems. They believed that better learning happens through play experiences. Play connects children to their interests and fosters their skills.

Additionally, preschool teachers believed that play supported learning, such as language development, mental engagement, and problem-solving skills. They believed that play sparks children's imagination, creativity, and interests. These findings are in line with the theories of Dewey (1923), Piaget (1962), and Vygotsky (1967), who recognize the role of play in children's learning and constructing new knowledge.

Preschool teachers shared their concerns and challenges for implementing play as a learning method. One of these challenges was parents' beliefs on play and their expectations for their children. Parents underestimate the role of play in their children's lives. They focused on academic achievements and neglected social and emotional development. Similarly, one preschool teacher complained about the pressure to prepare children academically for kindergarten.

One teacher highlighted the change in children's behavior after the COVID lockdown. She noticed a dramatic change in children's social behaviors and interactions. She also mentioned a lack of imagination and creativity. In her opinion, many children did not have many social interactions during the lockdown. As a result, they are facing some social and emotional challenges at preschool. Social interactions are the heart of the social learning theory. Social and emotional skills are important for children's academic learning in later years.

Kindergarten Teachers' Perspectives: Interpretations and Discussion

One of the two teachers at the kindergarten believed that play is the norm in the child's world and recognized the importance of learning through play. She believes that at an early age, teachers should prepare children for life, not only for the next grade. Therefore, she supports their social and emotional development as well as their academic ones. Her views showed understanding and compatibility with the leading theories of childhood development and learning of Dewey (1923), Piaget (1962), Vygotsky (1967), and Bandura (1977).

Her belief that children should have the agency to own their learning was reflected in her teaching methods in class. She implemented project-based learning, where children work together on a topic of their interest, inquiring, searching, experimenting, and relating learning to the real world in a dynamic interaction (Dewey, 1923). Inquiry-based learning was encouraged by several ECE learning theorists, such as Malaguzzi (1996) and Maria Montessori (1967). It also allows for observational and peer learning, as mentioned in Bandura's social learning theory (1977). She felt that project-based learning and hands-on activities meet children where they are and keep them interested.

However, she revealed that she is pressured to meet the Ohio Learning Standards and assess the children using paper and pencil. She felt it was a frustrating method that limits children's thinking and lessens their creativity. Miller & Almon (2009) warned of similar limitations when following the traditional curriculum teaching.

The other kindergarten teacher recognized play as a free activity. She felt that play is fun but cannot be related to learning. The benefits of play, in her opinion, are narrowed to social and physical skills development. She believed that learning through play does not support higher academics. She also expressed a lack of confidence in teaching through projects or implementing learning through play. She felt such methods did not meet state educational goals for grade one. She also felt she lacked the proper training for integrating learning through play into their curriculum. She mentioned that it takes creative teachers to teach through play.

These findings align with Lynch's study (2015) that teachers believed play has no academic purpose and there was no time for play. Findings from other studies by Fung & Cheng (2012), Cheng (2001), and Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) also reported that teachers were uncertain about how and when to implement play as a learning method.

She also felt required to follow a structured curriculum to meet state standards. Her priority was meeting the academic standards and preparing children for grade one. She felt that the traditional methods were the most appropriate to teach. She reduced play time and child-centered activities. She viewed play as an action with a lesser academic and learning purpose, in contrast to the social learning theory. Her methods were limited to worksheets and direct instructions. Studies by Bassok (2016) and Miller & Almon (2009) revealed similar beliefs among kindergarten and grade one teachers.

Conclusion

The themes in teachers' perspectives, methods, and challenges changed across preschool and kindergarten levels. Findings indicated inconsistency in the teaching methods applied in ECE classrooms. Methods varied according to teachers' perspectives and were notably related to their beliefs on play. Findings showed that methods in the classroom extended from play all day, child-guided activities, enriching the classroom environment with active areas, and project-based learning to merely playing during recess. These findings aligned with the literature that teachers' beliefs about play and how to implement it into the curriculum were varied (Bennett et al., 1997; Bergen, 2014; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Zhulamanova & Raisor, 2020).

Play pedagogy became less important in kindergarten, mainly due to educational policies. Kindergarten teachers felt that meeting academic expectations hindered them from implementing play in the classroom. Their primary goal was to meet the state standards. School policies mandate teachers to meet pre-set academic standards and perform rigid assessments. These

policies are detached from the classroom reality and ECE developmental theories. They are focusing on academics at an early age, absenting children's natural development, needs, and abilities. Consequently, this caused a shift in methods and teachers' perspectives.

Chapter 5 Implementations

At the core of the educational system stands the teachers. They are the models and the inspiration in our children's lives. Their perspectives and knowledge on ECE learning theories and pedagogies are reflected in their methods, profoundly impacting children's development and shaping their future.

This qualitative interview study explored the perspectives of six teachers on play as a powerful pedagogy in early childhood learning. The main question of the study was:
What are the teachers' perspectives on play as a teaching method in ECE?

Chapter Five presents a summary of the problem, its implications, recommendations for further research, and a final statement.

Summary and Conclusion

According to Bandura's social learning theory (1977), children are social learners; they learn from their surroundings by observing others and imitating behaviors. They are active, curious, and observant. Their teachers and classroom environment impact their achievements. When children own the agency of their learning, they gain high self-efficacy, positively impacting their academic performance (Bandura, 1977). Accordingly, teachers take a different role. Teachers become facilitators; they partner up with children in their learning journey. They motivate, provide opportunities, and follow the children's interests and abilities. According to Bandura (1977), teachers' motivation and encouragement stimulate children's self-efficacy and positively impact their academic achievement.

Unfortunately, teaching methods in kindergarten classrooms are becoming more instructional and teacher-guided, narrowing children's opportunities to learn at their own pace and follow their interests and abilities. Teachers are pressured to meet state standards. Therefore, their perspectives on play are changing. Top-down policies and school reforms are pressuring teachers to put high academic standards at the center of learning. Instead of meeting the children's abilities and following their interests, teachers must apply test-driven curricula, meet high expectations, and follow school reforms (Miller & Almon, 2009; Guirguis, 2018). Moreover, these preset standards do not consider children's individual needs and abilities. They neglect children's interests, ignore their different learning styles, and overlook diversity.

Learning through play addresses children's abilities and provides ample time for them to achieve progress at their own pace. Contrary to set standards that are one size fits all. Moreover,

top-down policies ask teachers to reach certain goals within a limited time regardless of children's natural progress and academic development. As a result, it creates pressure on both the teacher and the child. However, with the proper planning and training, play-based learning can be implemented to accomplish academic achievements.

Therefore, there is a need to hear ECE teachers' voices, understand their views, and expose the challenges they face in order for educational leaders to make better decisions.

Implications

Firstly, the results of this study revealed inconsistency in teachers' methods in the ECE classrooms. Preschool teachers who understood children's development implemented play-based learning and provided child-centered activities. They focused on the children's natural development and followed their needs and abilities. They planned according to the children's interests. They acknowledged play as a learning tool and recognized the importance of child-guided activities and student-centered learning. However, kindergarten teachers facing pressure to prepare their students for grade one followed more strict methods, leaving no room for natural development and play-based learning.

Secondly, this study revealed that teachers need more training on implementing play in the classroom and how to use it to meet academic standards. Moreover, ECE teachers need support to stay abreast of everything new in the ECE field and policy changes. Accordingly, it is important to provide constant professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their knowledge, improve their skills, and upgrade their classroom methods. Training in the ECE classroom should focus on more than one area: training to enhance ECE teachers' awareness of the importance of play and the most efficient learning theories. Also, teachers should be educated on children's development, social and emotional needs, and diverse learning styles. Another area of training would be improving methods in the classroom, such as practical teaching strategies, tools that link learning to play, gaming, interactive activities, child-led activities, and project-based learning techniques.

Additionally, I suggest embracing a new motto in the ECE: Learning Together. Learning is an evolving process that blossoms in the hands of educators. Therefore, there is a need to open collaboration channels between teachers to exchange knowledge and expertise. Teachers could upscale their knowledge simply by sharing their classroom experiences. Collectively, education will rise, and better decisions will be made for the good of new generations.

Thirdly, teachers voiced doubts regarding the effectiveness of assessments at early ages and following a set curriculum. Children are struggling because they are required to meet standards beyond their natural abilities. State standards are causing pressure, while ECE theories teach us to help children expand in all aspects, socially and emotionally. ECE theories advocate motivating children's creativity and imagination. They encourage self-efficacy and prepare for school, in contrast to what state standards are causing.

Accordingly, there is a gap between top-down policies, teachers' methods, and children's natural development. This study aims to convey teachers' voices and attract policymakers' attention to understand what is needed in the ECE classroom, not what is needed for the market. Teachers are vital stakeholders when it comes to making educational decisions and policies. Their input is essential to develop appropriate learning pedagogies in the ECE classrooms.

In addition, practical strategies are required to improve teaching methods in the ECE, such as teachers' training on the appropriate classroom approaches and learning strategies to support children's developmental needs. Equally important is spreading awareness about children's developmental needs and appropriate learning, especially after the COVID lockdown.

Recommendations

The theoretical framework and constructive perspective throughout this study ensure a common ground for further research concerning play pedagogy in the ECE.

Based on the findings of this study, numerous areas still need to be explored and researched. Future research on teachers' perspectives and methods can be done on a wider scale to include higher-grade teachers (one, two, and three). Moreover, research can measure the academic progress of children who received traditional teaching at kindergarten to meet the standards and their academic progress in later grades. Such research is essential, especially now after COVID-19. Research is also needed to measure the benefits of the kindergarten readiness assessments and their impact on children's self-efficacy.

Furthermore, narrowing the gap between theory and practice requires a better understanding of ECE learning theories that support children's natural learning abilities and diversity, on the one hand. It also requires theorists to understand the obstacles hindering the application of theory on real ground. Therefore, more research is needed to distinguish the most effective pedagogy, how to implement it, and what hinders the implementation of better methods in the ECE classroom.

Final Statement

There is an increased need to understand play pedagogy at the early childhood educational level. Teachers' understanding of the importance of play and how to implement play as a learning tool is fading and unclear. Leading early childhood research stresses the importance of play in children's lives. Constructivist and progressive theorists such as Dewey (1923), Piaget (1962), Vygotsky (1967), and Bandura (1977) emphasized the importance of play in children's cognitive and social development at an early age. Play is a powerful learning tool that links knowledge to daily life, enhances problem-solving skills, and teaches collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creative innovation, confidence, and content knowledge (Hirsch-Pasek et al., 2009).

In closing, teachers play an essential role in providing professional learning for children, generation after generation. Their voices represent the challenges that prevent them from putting the correct theory in place. I emphasize the role of play-based curriculum in children's development and learning. I also hope that Common Core State Standards align with ECE-leading learning theories to achieve an appropriate holistic developmental learning approach in early childhood classrooms. I also encourage teachers to share their input and voice their challenges and concerns to move forward and build a better future for our children.

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