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TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PLAY-BASED LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD
CLASSROOMS

by

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DEDICATION

This Dissertation is dedicated to God, first and foremost. He has always been my rock and blessed me beyond measure. All praise and glory go to Him.

To my students that I have taught in my early childhood classrooms. You have all shown me the importance of using play in the classroom. I have seen the spark of creativity, the thrill of imagination, and the love of learning by having fun and being kids. You have all inspired me to be a better teacher and a delegate for those young children that have not had those opportunities. Thank you for teaching me through the years.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES	vi
ABSTRACT.....	vii
CHAPTER 1. PROBLEM AND SIGNIFICANCE.....	1
Play-based Learning	2
The Disappearance of Play	3
Background of Problem.....	5
History of Kindergarten.....	6
Historical Views of Play.....	6
Developmentally Appropriate Practice	7
The Effects of National Policy on Early Childhood Education.....	8
No Child Left Behind Act	8
Common Core State Standards.....	9
Negative Effects on Childhood Development and Learning.....	9
Kindergarten Teachers’ Role and Dilemma	11
Statement of Problem	13
Significance of Study.....	14
Organization of the Study.....	16
Theoretical Framework.....	16
Social Learning Theory	16
Constructivist Learning Theory.....	17
Summary.....	19
Clarification of Terms	20
CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND RESEARCH	22
Types of Play	23
Free Play.....	23
Play-based Learning.....	23
Effects of Play on Child Development	25
International Approaches to Early Childhood Education.....	26
Effects of Removing Play in the Early Childhood Classrooms.....	28
Teacher’s Perspectives of Play in the Classroom.....	29
Foundations of the Methodology.....	30
Summary.....	30
CHAPTER 3. METHOD AND PROCEDURES.....	32
Study Overview	32
Research Questions.....	32
Research Design	33
Setting.....	33
Participants	34

Eligibility Criteria.....	35
Participant Demographics.....	36
Instrumentation.....	39
Procedure.....	40
Recruitment.....	40
Data Collection.....	41
Data Analysis.....	42
Ethical Considerations.....	43
Summary.....	44
CHAPTER 4. RESULTS.....	45
Trustworthiness.....	45
Findings.....	47
Quantitative Findings.....	47
Qualitative Findings.....	57
Barriers to the Use of Play-based Learning.....	62
Summary of the Results.....	66
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION.....	68
Results Related to the Literature.....	68
Research Question 1: Teachers’ Knowledge and Beliefs of Play-based Learning.....	69
Research Question 2: Teachers’ perceptions of their administrators’ role in the use of play-based learning in the classroom.....	71
Theory Discussion.....	71
Implications and Recommendations for the Field.....	72
Recommendations.....	72
Using More Developmentally Appropriate Practices.....	72
More Training in Play-based Learning for Educators and Administrators.....	73
Having Administrators Learn More about Best Practices for Young Children.....	73
Rigor of the Standards, Curriculums, and District/School Settings.....	74
Implications for Future Research.....	75
Variety of Schools.....	75
Different Perspectives.....	76
Limitations of the Study.....	76
Conclusion.....	77
REFERENCES.....	80
APPENDIX A. INFORMED CONSENT.....	88
APPENDIX B. SURVEY.....	89
APPENDIX C. INTRODUCTION OF RESEARCHER.....	95
APPENDIX D. APPROVAL FOR RESEARCH (IRB).....	96

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1: Counties and Their Populations	34
Table 3.2: County Demographic Profiles	35
Table 3.3: Number of Students in Each Early Childhood Grade by Districts.....	36
Table 3.4: Teachers' Experience.....	38
Table 3.5: Teachers' Age Range	39
Table 3.6: Teachers from Each Early Childhood Grade	40
Table 3.7: Timeline of Data Collection	43
Table 4.1: Teacher Ratings for Question 1 in First Section of Survey.....	49
Table 4.2: Teacher Ratings for Question 4 in First Section of Survey.....	50
Table 4.3: Teacher Ratings For Question 5 in First Section of Survey.....	50
Table 4.4: Teacher Ratings For Question 6 in First Section of Survey	51
Table 4.5: Teacher Ratings by Grade Levels for Question 6 in Second Section of Survey.....	52
Table 4.6: Teacher Ratings For Question 1 in Second Section of Survey.....	53
Table 4.7: Teacher Ratings by Grade Levels For Question 1 in Second Section of Survey	54
Table 4.8: Teacher Ratings For Question 2 in Second Section of Survey	55
Table 4.9: Teacher Ratings by Grade Levels For Question 2 in Second Section of Survey	55
Table 4.10: Teacher Ratings for Question 2 in Second Section of Survey.....	56
Table 4.11: Teacher Ratings by Grade Levels for Question 2 in Second Section of Survey.....	57
Table 4.12: Teacher Ratings For Question 3 in First Section of Survey.....	58
Table 4.13: Teacher Ratings by Grade Levels For Question 3 in First Section of Survey	58
Table 4.14: Themes that Emerged from the Open-ended Question.....	60
Table 4.15: Barriers Mentioned in Open-ended Question 5	68

ABSTRACT

Play-based learning is an important part of developing the whole child emotionally, socially, physically, cognitively, and communicatively. Through play, children are allowed to explore, investigate, discover, think, solve problems, and communicate. The purpose of this study was to determine what early childhood teachers in public schools know and believe about the use of play-based learning in their classrooms and how these teachers perceive their administrator's role in the use of play-based learning. This study used a mixed method approach to gather the perceptions of early childhood educators in seven different school districts through four counties. The sample included responses from 114 early childhood educators throughout the seven school districts. This study used a survey with Likert-type five-point scales and open-ended questions to gather the results from the participating teachers. The findings showed that the early childhood teachers believe that the use of play-based learning is important in the early years and would like to use it more often in their classrooms. The teachers also stated that they had three main barriers in the use of play-based learning: the rigor of the standards, the lack of time, and the lack of support from their administration.

CHAPTER 1. PROBLEM AND SIGNIFICANCE

One of the most important parts of a child's educational role is to build upon their past learning, and that is done best by exploring, investigating, thinking, discovering, and playing (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020). Through play, children experience new and exciting opportunities that will enable them to develop mentally, physically, emotionally, and socially (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020; Miller & Almon, 2009). Gray (2022) defines play "as an activity that is freely chosen and directed by the child, intrinsically motivated, creative and imaginative, and conducted with a non-stress mindset" (p. 2). Children flourish when enjoying free play, when it is flexible, fun, and voluntary (Weisburg, et al., 2016).

Play also gives children the opportunity to actively explore, while helping them to build and strengthen their cognitive skills (Keung & Cheung, 2019). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2020) highlights the importance of children actively participating and exploring as they learn through play. The NAEYC (2020) states that "play promotes joyful learning that fosters self-regulation, language, cognitive and social competencies as well as content knowledge across disciplines. Play is essential for all children, birth through age 8" (p. 9).

Play is crucial for supporting the development of the whole child emotionally, socially, physically, as well as their language, and cognitive development (Cade et al., 2022); and play helps to form the foundations of "intellectual, social, physical, and emotional skills necessary for success in school and life" (Hewes, 2006, p.4). When children spend time interacting with their peers during play, they have increased comprehension and vocabulary (Weisberg et al., 2013). Children are more engaged when they are in control of the interaction, therefore they speak and listen to what interests them (Weisberg et al., 2013).

Play-based Learning

Play-based learning, also known as guided play, consists when there is an adult mentorship present and child-directed play focuses on an academic outcome (Skolnick et al., 2016). This type of play is most beneficial for young children in school settings because it combines academic standards and a learning environment, as well as a child-directed, fun, playful environment.

During play-based learning a teacher intentionally creates both an academic and playful environment that helps children to engage in play while supporting and encouraging learning and development (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021). Play-based learning creates learning experiences that combine child-centered free play activities with a learning outcome using adult interaction (Weisberg et al., 2016). An effective play-based learning classroom provides “experiences, materials, and interactions to enable children to engage in play that allows them to stretch their boundaries to the fullest in their imagination, language, interaction, and self-regulation” (NAEYC, 2009, p. 18). To use play-based learning strategies successfully, however, teachers must have a strong understanding of both content and play pedagogy (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021).

Play-based learning is a fun and exciting way to instruct children by allowing them to use problem solving, creativity, planning, oral language, social skills, self-regulation, and cognitive thinking (Russo, 2012), and to improve academic and social outcomes for young children. For example, Miller and Almon (2009) found that children who participated in play-based learning performed better in reading and math and were more emotionally and socially adjusted than children who were taught through teacher directed instruction. Another study shows that teachers receive the best educational results when they focus more on supporting and building children’s play (Sandberg & Heden, 2011).

Play helps to strengthen problem solving skills and create opportunities for experimenting and being creative (Sandberg & Heden, 2011). In a research study in Germany, researchers found that by age ten, children who had played in early childhood classrooms excelled over the other students in a variety of ways, such as creativity, intelligence, and expressive language (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Researchers have found a correlation between playing and development in young children (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Some of the advantages of play are social development, communication skills, expressive vocabulary, and interactions with peers and adults (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Many research findings show that young children who are actively engaged in play-based learning either match or perform better than those children who learn through teacher-directed instruction (Weisberg et al., 2013).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2011) states that early childhood educators “have an ethical responsibility to young children to help them learn to live, play, and work cooperatively” (p. 2). Although play-based learning provides benefits, many schools have taken play out of early childhood education, especially during those crucial early years (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021; Bassok et al., 2016; Lynch, 2015). Every young child deserves the opportunity to grow and learn in a play-based experimental classroom (Miller & Almon, 2009). Souto-Manning (2017) states that “play is not only a privilege of a child, but a right of a child,” and as adults it is our responsibility to give those children that right (p. 785).

The Disappearance of Play

Currently, there is a push to have young children start academics early in life (Guirguis, 2018). The U.S. Department of Education (2015) states that over four million children are entering kindergarten every year. Many of these children enter kindergarten having never been

exposed to a preschool environment, and are expected to know their letters, sounds, and numbers, as well as be prepared emotionally and mentally for the rigor of school (Lynch, 2015). Children who enter kindergarten without the essential building blocks of education start school and often stay behind in both language and literacy development (Bluiett, 2018).

Additionally, most kindergarten classrooms do not incorporate play-based learning, but rather consist of teacher-directed instruction to teach the students the state kindergarten standards (Bassok et al., 2016). Children are now expected to be reading by the end of their kindergarten year, spend less time on any art lessons, use daily workbooks, and have fewer opportunities for play and discovery (Bassok et al., 2016). Many of these children are not allowed to learn through play-based learning in their kindergarten classrooms (Bodrova & Leong, 2019; Lynch, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009), suggesting these children may be struggling socially, academically, and emotionally (Lynch, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009).

Guirguis (2018) discusses that despite these benefits of play in the classrooms, there is still a decrease in play in many schools. In one study, preschool teachers observed a kindergarten classroom and noted that every child was taught the same way, expected to learn the same, and had to sit for an extended period of time (Brown et al., 2022). One of the preschool teachers said, “I almost walked out crying because it’s so structured and all academics. They don’t get to be kids anymore” (Brown et al., 2022, p. 551). Lyons (2022) found that kindergarten teachers expected more academic readiness from children as they entered school and more academic success during the kindergarten year than kindergarten teachers in prior decades. These expectations have led to more teacher-directed instruction and standardized assessments and less opportunities for play, arts, and science (Bassok et al., 2016).

Over the years, research has shown that play is important in early childhood educational

learning, yet many teachers do not use play or play-based learning in their classrooms (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021; Bassok et al., 2021; Constantino-Lane, 2019; Miller & Almon, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010). In today's early childhood classrooms, we see more children that are "play deprived" than ever before (Bodrova & Leong, 2019, p. 40). We even see children try to sneak play into their classrooms, by taking blocks and building fences or roads instead of counting or adding, or by drawing smiley faces out of the "o"s in the words look and book (Bodrova & Leong, 2019).

By replacing play in early childhood classrooms, children are being negatively affected in their social skills and language development (Constantino-Lane, 2019). Research has shown that replacing play with teacher-directed activities does not improve test scores, and even shows a negativity in the child's overall well-being (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Background of Problem

Early childhood education (i.e., three-year old kindergarten through age eight in many states) was founded on the ideas of play and play-based learning. The theorists behind early childhood education spent their lives devoted to understanding child development and how children learn best. Then, as more acts and laws came into effect, the decision to remove play from many early childhood classrooms succeeded, leaving children more developmentally behind than ever before (Lynch, 2015).

Bodrova and Leong (2019) state that it is increasingly difficult to get administrators and even some early childhood educators to implement play-based learning due to trying to meet the rigor of the academic standards. Lynch (2015) states that, "so often the people who have the most power to affect your teaching have no idea what appropriate, best practices look like" (p. 359). Many times, teachers are not allowed to have any type of play or play-based learning in their classrooms due to administration. In one study, teachers observed that principals can be

“out of touch with how kindergarteners learn best” (Lynch, 2015, p. 361). Additionally, many teachers observed that principals promote standards that are too challenging for young learners (Lynch, 2015). For example, one teacher stated that she walked into her classroom and noticed that all her play-based learning supplies had been thrown away by her principal, and some teachers described being “lucky” if they were allowed to use play-based learning in their classrooms (Lynch, 2015, p. 357). Yet sometimes it is the teachers who feel they cannot afford to take time away from instruction on the mandated, or assessed, skills to use play (Lynch, 2015).

History of Kindergarten

Kindergarten was founded on the belief that every child grows differently and on different schedules (Constantino-Lane, 2019). The origins of kindergarten began with Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852). Froebel was a strong advocate for helping adults to understand how young children learn in a natural early childhood atmosphere (Taylor & Boyer, 2019). Froebel first created the kindergarten classroom and called it a “paradise garden” which soon translated from German as “children’s garden,” or kindergarten (Repko-Erwin, 2017; Taylor & Boyer, 2019). The first public kindergarten in the United States opened in St. Louis, Missouri in 1873 (Repko-Erwin, 2017; Taylor & Boyer, 2019). Kindergarten was a time to smooth the transition from home to school by using creative, active, fun, and language activities (Constantino-Lane, 2019).

Initially, kindergarten was the way to bridge the gap between early experiences and more formal, academic based learning that is found in first grade and beyond (Repko-Erwin, 2017). Now, the changes in kindergarten have left people wondering if kindergarten is the new first grade (Repko-Erwin, 2017).

Historical Views of Play

Many of the theorists behind early childhood education hold strong opinions of play-based learning and how it improves a child’s development. Specifically, Maria Montessori

(1870-1952), Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), and Jean Piaget (1896-1980) stressed the importance of play in a child's educational setting (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020). These theorists believed that education should be child-centered, both active and inactive, and should involve the child in a social setting (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020).

Maria Montessori believed that young children learn best through experiences using their senses and can develop life learning skills through being interactive in the classroom (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020). Jean Piaget (1976) believed that the interaction between children and their environment creates learning. Both Piaget and Montessori believed that an open environment with a range of possibilities for discovery and exploration creates a classroom full of discovery and construction (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020).

Lev Vygotsky viewed play as a place where children can pretend and use their imaginations by exploring and acting (Vygotsky, 1976). Vygotsky's belief that development and language is built around play helped to change how early childhood educators view play (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020). Vygotsky stressed that when children play, they are learning in different domains, building on their development and language (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020; Vygotsky, 1976). In these domains, children are able to create imaginary situations, act out role-playing scenarios, and learn to follow rules determined by specific roles (Bodrova et al., 2013).

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Early childhood education is a unique pedagogy. The curriculum of early childhood education is different from any other educational curriculum (Miller & Almon, 2009). Early childhood education is the most researched discipline in education since many researchers came from a variety of occupations and professions outside of education (Miller & Almon, 2009).

These professionals all had one thing in common- the understanding of young children and that early education begins with the child, not the subject matter (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Through the use of play-based learning, children are so engaged with the activity that they do not see the learning taking place (Lynch, 2015). When using a play-based approach to learning, teachers need to know and understand each child individually and be able to differentiate teaching methods to meet the needs of the child (Miller & Almon, 2009).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children defines developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) as learning through a play-based, strengths-based approach which leads to engaged learning (2020). DAP is well-known and highly respected by many early childhood educators; however, it has been removed from classrooms by policymakers who are unaware of the needs of the children, specifically that children learn best through enriching, enjoyable, and hands-on activities during purposeful play (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021).

The Effects of National Policy on Early Childhood Education

From the 1990s through the legislation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), many teachers, parents, and students have witnessed the drastic change in the educational system during the early childhood years (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021; Lynch, 2015; Repko-Erwin, 2017).

No Child Left Behind Act

In 2002, NCLB became a federal law, which launched a national movement to standardize instruction, raise achievement levels, and hold schools accountable for the outcomes of the students (Repko-Erwin, 2017). This law required states to conduct annual standardized tests at every school in grades third through eighth and at least one test during the high school years, and for students to meet specific performance levels on those tests (Whitney & Candelaria, 2017).

While NCLB does not apply to kindergarten and preschool classes, the effects and stress of these expectations have trickled down (Lynch, 2015). Before NCLB was introduced, children were considered not ready for kindergarten if they fell into at least one of three categories: they

were 1) physically smaller than other students their age, 2) born during the summer months, or 3) immature (Brown & Lan, 2015).

Due to the passing of the NCLB Act (2001), children needed to be prepared even before they began school (Bluiett, 2018). Prior to NCLB, children were expected to leave kindergarten with the beginning of reading readiness skills, but after NCLB, children are to leave kindergarten already reading (Bassok et al., 2016; Miller & Almon, 2009; Repko-Erwin, 2017). Kindergartens of the past taught children the alphabet and the letter/sound correspondences; now kindergarteners are expected to be able to read simple texts before beginning first grade (Repko-Erwin, 2017).

Common Core State Standards

NCLB led President Obama to create the *Race to the Top* initiative in 2009. This led many states to adopt the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (Repko-Erwin, 2017). Curriculums and standards across the United States have become more rigorous due to the CCSS, putting higher expectations on literacy in the early years (Casbergue, 2017). Due to the rigorous standards, kindergarten teachers have increased academic expectations upon kindergarten entry (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021). Now, children are not ready for kindergarten when they do not know all the alphabet (Repko-Erwin, 2017).

Negative Effects on Childhood Development and Learning

Research findings show that the effects of the NCLB have caused a moderate increase in anxiety for students in the early years (Whitney & Candelaria, 2017). Otto Weinger stated, “You can’t make children grow faster by pushing them, just as you can’t make flowers grow faster by pulling them” (Rushton, 2022, p.90). Yet, many kindergarten teachers state that they do not include any play or play-based centers in their classrooms due to the rigor of the standards (Allee-Herndon, 2021; Lynch, 2015). Public school teachers have reported having to spend more

time on mandated teacher-directed activities and less time with child directed activities due to NCLB (Lynch, 2015).

Bassok et al. (2016) published a national study over 12 years that showed there was an increase in teacher-directed instruction and workbooks, while showing less play-based learning in kindergarten. Miller and Almon (2009) showed that in previous years, kindergarten children were supposed to understand the letters and letter sounds, while now children are expected to leave kindergarten reading simple books.

Young children in today's culture have to learn in a world that is fast paced, accelerating, and more unique than ever before (Rushton, 2011). It is through playing that children are given the opportunity to exist in an imaginary world, become someone else, and experience a variety of feelings and situations (Sandberg & Heden, 2011). Mr. (Fred) Rogers stated, "Play gives children a chance to practice what they are learning," and that is exactly what children are doing when they play (Souto-Manning, 2017).

Research has shown that kindergarten children are now experiencing stress in the kindergarten environment because their lessons are whole-group oriented, teacher-directed, and heavily use paper and pencil work (Burts et al., 1990). As a result, students may show more behavioral issues in school as the schools spend more time on structured instructional time in reading and math, and less time on activities that the students may find more interesting (Whitney & Candelaria, 2017). This may lead to added stress for young children causing high levels of frustration, anger, stress, outbursts, and sometimes extreme behavioral issues (Miller & Almon, 2009). In today's early childhood classrooms, many children are often seen to be struggling comprehending stories, seeing another person's perspective, and self-regulating (Bodrova & Leong, 2019).

Most children in today's world do not have enough time to play even at home (Miller & Almon, 2009). One kindergarten teacher said, "If I give the children time to play, they don't know what to do. They have no ideas of their own" (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 8). This is due to the fact that children in today's world do not have enough time to play, explore, or be creative (Miller & Almon, 2009). The children struggle to use their own ideas because of so many structured activities in their lives (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Kindergarten children are now under increased pressure to meet inappropriate requirements and academic standards that until recently were reserved for first grade (Miller & Almon, 2009). During the same time that policymakers added expectations that create more stressful times for young children, they have also taken away the way young children cope with stress- through play (Miller & Almon, 2009).

In today's world, many young children have so many structured school and afterschool activities, there is little or no time for play anywhere (Bodrova & Leong, 2019). Years ago, children had multiple chances to play with siblings, friends, and neighbors, however due to the world as we know it currently, the early childhood classroom may soon be the only chance children will be allowed to play (Bodrova & Leong, 2019). There is more concern over the children's economic future instead of their social, emotional, and developmental learning (Repko-Erwin, 2017).

Kindergarten Teachers' Role and Dilemma

In today's kindergarten classes, children are spending less time being engaged in hands-on, play-based activities which include time for exploration, imagination, and play, and more time receiving formal teacher-directed literacy and math instruction and preparing for standardized tests (Bassok et al., 2016; Lynch, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009).

In public schools in the United States, early childhood teachers are so pressured with

standardized curriculums and assessments, as well as high-stakes accountability, that the time for play-based curriculums is threatened (Lyons, 2022). This conflict between what is developmentally appropriate practice and standards driven classrooms presents a challenge for early childhood educators. For example, one teacher stated that she found it “incredibly difficult to teach against your philosophy of education!” (Lynch, 2015, p. 359). Another teacher stated, “I feel like my kids get no time for social development, and I certainly don’t get to know them at all. I have kids who are failing, and there is nothing wrong with them. Making kids read and write at the age of five is just not realistic for all students, and telling students and parents that they are failing because they can’t is unfair” (Lynch, 2015, p. 357). Many early childhood educators, often those in low-achieving schools, are forced to teach from a scripted curriculum, and they are often not allowed to make professional decisions which will alter the teaching of the curriculum (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021).

The changes made to early childhood education since the passage of NCLB is a troubling picture for all early childhood educators (Repko-Erwin, 2017). Despite every effort that the country has made since the implementation of NCLB, the students have not experienced the academic gains that were expected (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021). Additionally, those children who come from underserved families are the children that NCLB was intended to protect yet are often the children most negatively affected due to the changes (Repko-Erwin, 2017).

Currently there is a withdrawal from developmentally appropriate practices in preschool classrooms due to academic pressures (Bluiett, 2018). Due to the rigor of the standards, many early childhood teachers are told to avoid all play in their classrooms (Lynch, 2015). Early childhood research shows the importance of play, yet many administrators think play is a

frivolous waste of time and demand that it be taken out of the classrooms and replaced with teacher-directed instruction (Lynch, 2015).

Bodrova and Leong (2019) discuss the struggle of persuading school administrators and even some early childhood teachers to see the benefits of learning through play. This may be explained by the increase of pressure in academic instruction, academic achievement, and other misunderstandings between the relationship of play and learning (Bodrova & Leong, 2019).

It is becoming more difficult to persuade administrators that play-based learning is the best type of learning for young children (Bodrova & Leong, 2019). Some kindergarten teachers report feeling lucky and blessed if they teach in a school or district that supports play-based learning, but many teachers are pressured to use the entire day to teach to standards, leaving no time for exploration, discovery, or play (Lynch, 2015).

When Froebel created kindergarten, or a child's garden, it was seen as a place where "faithful gardeners supported a child's growth and prepared him for a lifelong love of learning" (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 36). Now, due to the rigor and academic pressures on early childhood education, there are increased levels of stress and less enjoyment and love of learning found in the youngest students.

Statement of Problem

With all the added stress on academics due to NCLB and CCSS, there is little room for developmentally appropriate practices, such as play-based learning, in early childhood classrooms. Play is being pushed out of early childhood classrooms in the United States and replaced with didactic, academic, standardized-based approaches (Nicolopoulou, 2010). These changes come at the expense of the child-centered, play-based approaches that the children need (Nicolopoulou, 2010). Many of these changes in our early childhood classrooms are being supported by politicians, parents, school administrators, and other child-serving professionals

who do not understand how young children develop best (Nicolopoulou, 2010).

Miller and Almon (2009) quoted a teacher about the current situation in early childhood:

“Too few Americans are aware of the radical changes in kindergarten practices in the last ten to twenty years. Children now spend far more time being instructed and tested in literacy and math than they do learning through play and exploration, exercising their bodies, and using their imaginations. Many kindergartens use highly prescriptive curricula linked to standardized tests. An increasing number of teachers must follow scripts from which they may not deviate. Many children struggle to live up to academic standards that are developmentally inappropriate...At the same time that we have increased academic pressure in children’s lives through inappropriate standards, we have managed to undermine their primary tool for dealing with stress—freely chosen, self-directed, intrinsically motivated play” (p. 15).

State standards, school assessments, district and state expectations, curriculum, school pressures, and stress from higher grades all trickle down to the early childhood grades (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021; Nicolopoulou, 2010). Policy makers are more concerned about the “children’s future economic productivity” than on their current social-emotional, and developmental issues (Repko-Erwin, 2017, p.60). An increasing number of children are spending more time in settings that focus on teacher-directed, structured educational and recreational activities, which leave little time for open-ended, child-initiated play (Bassok et al., 2016; Lynch, 2015).

The research shows that play is crucial for the development of the child’s intellectual, socio-emotional, and physical development, and that suppressing play can have harmful effects on the child (Nicolopoulou, 2010). In previous years, children have had a variety of opportunities to play with siblings, friends, and neighbors, yet that is no longer the case (Bodrova & Leong, 2019). Early childhood classrooms are becoming the only place children’s play can survive, and it is fading quickly (Bodrova & Leong, 2019).

Significance of Study

Over the years, kindergarten classrooms have become more focused on literacy and

academic skills (Miller & Almon, 2009). Rigorous teaching practices have continued to move down to kindergarten and preschool classrooms (Zosh et al., 2022). These teaching practices have replaced child-initiated play with more time sitting at desks participating in pencil and paper activities, making kindergarten look more like first grade (Zosh et al., 2022).

The purpose of this study is to help to give a voice to early childhood teachers. All of the teacher-directed instruction takes away the freedom that the teachers have to make professional decisions to use developmentally appropriate practices. This study could potentially provide educational leaders with valuable insight into the barriers that early childhood educators face. They are often torn between how they were trained to teach and how the schools, districts, and/or states expect them to teach.

Many of the early childhood teachers feel conflicted between their training and their professional leaders, yet these teachers cannot use their voices to let the leaders see the dilemma they continue to face. This study will help the educational leaders see the barriers in the way our youngest children learn and the predicament that the educators are currently in. Research has shown that using developmentally appropriate practices, which includes play-based learning is more effective for young children's development (Alharbi & Alzhrani, 2020; Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021; Bassok survey 2016; Lynch, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009). This study is important because early childhood educators' voices and concerns need to be heard to begin increasing what works for the youngest students.

Based on the findings in the literature and concerns over the future of play in early childhood education classrooms, the following research questions guided this study:

1. What are early childhood education public school teachers' (grades K3-third grade) knowledge and beliefs of using play-based learning in the early childhood classroom?

2. How do early childhood teachers perceive their administrators' roles in incorporating play-based learning in the early childhood classroom?

Organization of the Study

The study used a mixed method approach to examine early childhood educators' perceptions of play-based learning in the classroom. Teachers' perceptions were gathered using surveys. The survey included items scored on a Likert-type rating scale as well as open-ended questions. The researcher examined both quantitative and qualitative data to identify specific themes and features in the responses.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study uses both learning theory and leadership theory; specifically, social learning theory and constructivism theory. Albert Bandura proposed the social learning theory through watching children observe, model, and imitate others (Mcleod, 2023). Constructivism theory was founded on the beliefs of the works of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Montessori (Mcleod, 2023; Ultanir, 2012). Both theories are appropriate for the proposed investigation because young children learn through observing, and imitating others, as well as adding more information to what they already know.

Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura created the social learning theory which emphasizes learning through observing, imitating, and modeling the behaviors, reactions, and attitudes of others (Mcleod, 2023). Bandura spent much of his time studying children and how they observe the people around them in a variety of ways (Mcleod, 2023). Observational learning, however, does not always come from observing other people (Cherry, 2022). People also learn from verbal language, reading, or watching a character in a book or movie (Cherry, 2022). This type of observational learning is concerning in today's world as many people worry about the bad

behaviors that children are witnessing on video games and television shows (Cherry, 2022).

Children are surrounded by many influential people, both good and bad in today's culture. Children watch people from television, books, peers, teachers, and family members and learn behaviors by observing. Children will notice people around them and begin to imitate their behaviors, often imitating people of the same gender as themselves (Mcleod, 2023).

Children think about what they have observed before they imitate it, noticing if a certain behavior gets rewarded or punished before deciding to imitate it (Cherry, 2022; Mcleod, 2023). Children will be more likely to imitate those behaviors that are being rewarded and avoid those behaviors that result in punishment (Cherry, 2022). Bandura names four different stages of the observational learning process (Cherry, 2022; Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018; Mcleod, 2023). The first of these stages is attention, meaning that in order for a child to learn something, he must be paying attention to what he is wanting to learn (Cherry, 2022; Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018; Mcleod, 2023). The second stage is retention or mentally storing the information, and this is when a child understands the behavior he is observing (Mcleod, 2023). Then, children need to remember or retain the behavior they observed using cognitive processing and memory storage (Mcleod, 2023). The third stage is reproducing and copying the information you have already observed (Cherry, 2022; Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018; Mcleod, 2023). The final stage is being motivated to imitate the behavior that you have observed (Cherry, 2022; Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018; Mcleod, 2023).

Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivist learning theory emphasizes that learners reflect on their own experiences instead of passively receiving information (Mcleod, 2023). Four of the most influential theorists in early childhood development, Maria Montessori, John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Ernst von Glaserfeld are among the founders of this theory (Mcleod, 2023; Ultanir, 2012).

In the constructivist learning theory, a person's learning is related to their social and cultural content and is learned through personal experiences and emotions (Ultanir, 2012). The main idea of the constructivist learning theory is that a learner builds new knowledge on existing knowledge (Mcleod, 2023). There are two types of constructivist theories that are discussed in this research, cognitive and social (Mcleod, 2023). In this theory, all learning is a personal and active process (Mcleod, 2023).

Dewey believed that real education comes from real experiences, yet not all experiences are equally educational (Ultanir, 2012). He believed in continued experiences, where everyone should acquire some learning from both past and future experiences (Ultanir, 2012). Dewey stated that active participation and self-directed learning by students are crucial in education (Ultanir, 2012).

Piaget's main belief in constructivism includes the individual and how that individual gains knowledge (Ultanir, 2012). Piaget believed that children could not be given knowledge, but the children must construct their own knowledge (Ultanir, 2012). Piaget uses four stages of development to help understand how a child learns gradually (Ultanir, 2012). Montessori believes that the learning process is self-directed (Ultanir, 2012). She believes that each child should learn independently, using a hands-on approach (Ultanir, 2012).

In a constructivist learning environment, the children have ownership of their own learning and assessment (Mcleod, 2023). In this theory, an educational leaders' role is to guide the children to discover their own learning and assessment with little guidance. The instructional leader is to help the children to learn through their own experiences, interactions, and reflections (Mcleod, 2023). The instructional leader's role is to create learning centers around hands-on activities, and collaborative learning to authenticate a child's learning experience (Mcleod,

2023).

This type of theory demonstrates leadership as a teacher's role to create a collaborative environment where the learners become active participants (Mcleod, 2023). In this learning theory, the teacher acts as a facilitator instead of a teacher (Mcleod, 2023). The educational leader helps the child to understand what he already knows and furthers their educational experiences.

In this theory, a child can perceive, interpret, and explain the exact same object in different ways (Ultanir, 2012). Every learner has a different and individual point of view based on their own existing knowledge and values (Mcleod, 2023), and it is an instructional leaders' role to help the children to discover them. The instructional leader understands that each student enters the learning journey with different experiences, therefore each child learns differently (Kurt, 2021). Through this theory, every lesson presented may result in a different learning for each child, as their interpretations may differ (Mcleod, 2023). The leader will see that every learner brings a different perspective, so their knowledge gained will be different, too (Kurt, 2021).

Summary

Kindergarten was founded on the creative, hands-on approach through playing. In today's world, that play is quickly disappearing from homes and schools. Children are often expected to sit passively and use teacher directed instruction instead of using hands-on, actively involved instruction. This type of passive learning shows that there is a negative impact on young children, often leaving them socially, emotionally, language, and academically deprived (Constantino-Lane, 2019).

Kindergarten was founded on the principle that every child grows differently and at different paces (Constantino-Lane, 2019). Many of early childhood theorists believe that young

children learn best through the use of active, child-centered, hands-on approaches (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020). Due to the rigor of the standards through NCLB and CCSS, many teachers, parents, and children have witnessed the removal of play-based learning in early childhood classrooms, leaving more stress, behavioral issues, and negative impacts on the young children.

Clarification of Terms

Many times, in education, words, phrases, and abbreviations are used that educators know and understand, yet other noneducators have never heard or seen before. The following section helps to clarify any misunderstandings and confusions in the educational jargon mentioned in this study.

Play: What one wants to do as opposed to what one feels obliged to do. (Gray, 2013).

Play-based Learning: Also known as purposeful play, guided play; Play that is planned and facilitated in a way in which children will achieve learning outcomes (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021).

Free Play: (also known as choice centers or child-centered play): Unstructured form that allows children to play with complete child autonomy and little or no adult interaction or guidance (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021, Keung & Cheung, 2019).

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)

(a). Educational practices that are based on the development of the child (Miller & Almon, 2009).

(b). Understanding the developmental stages of young children (physical, cognitive, emotional, and social) as the child grows from infancy through the early educational years (Miller & Almon, 2009).

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB): An act to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind (Department of Education, 2023).

Standards: (Also commonly called Common Core State Standards (CCSS): Goals in a variety of subject areas for academic achievement.

Didactic Instruction: (also known as teacher-directed instruction)

- (a). Serious and strategic study which requires students to sit still and pay close attention to the teacher (Miller & Almon, 2009).
- (b). Teaching prescribed, curriculum based, academic standards in a scripted approach (Pyle et al., 2018).

CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND RESEARCH

For many generations, kindergarten was seen as a place where children's growth was supported and children were prepared for success and a lifelong love of learning (Miller & Almon, 2009; Repko-Erwin, 2017). However, opportunities for play are disappearing for children both at home and at school (Souto-Manning, 2017). Kindergarten classrooms have changed in which play is being prioritized as second to academics. Miller and Almon (2009) state that placing rigorous academic standards on young children forces teachers to spend most of the class time trying to meet them, and many schools are putting too much stress on these young children by demanding they master skills that are beyond their developmental level and depriving them of ways to deal with that stress through play.

The purpose of this literature review is to present a synthesis of the themes found in the literature relating to play-based learning in early childhood education classrooms. A variety of databases were used to identify literature to include in this review, such as: EBSCOHost-Academic Search Ultimate, ERIC, Google Scholar, Sage Research Methods, Sage Journals, and ProQuest. Within these databases, numerous terms were used to search for studies, papers, journal articles, and peer reviewed articles, including combinations of the following: *parents' perspective, teachers' perspective, early childhood education, play, developmentally appropriate practices, guided play, play-based learning, early childhood teachers or educators, beliefs or perceptions or views or attitudes, kindergarten teachers or preschool teachers, impact.*

The themes that emerged from the literature include (a) types of play, (b) the effects of play on child development, (c) international approaches- to early childhood education, (d) the effects of removing play in the early childhood classroom, and (e) the teachers' perspectives of play in the early childhood classroom.

Types of Play

There are a variety of types of play, all of which help to provide young children with an age-appropriate learning experience. Play is at the core of developmentally appropriate learning practices (Russo, 2013). Through play, children are given a safe place to work through conflicts, experiment with alternative solutions to problems and to learn to see things from another's perspective (Russo, 2013).

Free Play

Free play is child-centered, spontaneous, pleasurable, and intrinsically motivated (Bodrova et al., 2023). This type of play is usually child-centered and includes minimal adult involvement (Weisberg et al., 2013). Free play occurs when a child has unlimited choice and flexibility to make his own decisions (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Free play is mostly pretend or imaginative play (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Zosh et al. (2022) state that free play allows children to explore freely, express themselves, and “to be the captain of their own ship” (p.8).

Play-based Learning

Play-based learning, also known as guided play, is when a child learns through playing. Play-based learning is a learning experience where child-centered free play and adult mentorship combine (Weisberg et al., 2016). While free play is completely child-centered and fun, children need adult support to help them to achieve learning goals (Weisberg et al., 2016).

There are two different types of play-based learning. In the first instance, an adult designs the setting to highlight the learning objective while the child has complete autonomy to explore within that setting (Weisberg et al., 2016). The second type of play-based learning is when the adults watch the children play in child-centered activities and only offer comments, encouragement, or to extend the child's interests (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021; Weisberg et al., 2016). In both settings, adult scaffolding helps to focus the child on learning objectives

without taking away the child's autonomy (Weisberg et al., 2016). Allee-Herndon and Roberts state that play-based learning combines focusing on specific learning skills with the joy of a child's autonomy to choose (2021). This type of instruction is based on the theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, Montessori, and Dewey (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021).

Play-based learning can be used for younger and older children, and in all grades and situations, adult guidance is crucial (Weisberg et al., 2016). Even older children can benefit from the adult scaffolding due to the rigor of the learning (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021; Weisberg et al., 2016). For example, in older grades, children can use nonstandard measuring tools, such as cubes or blocks to measure items, conduct self-directed research on areas of interests, conduct hands-on experiments, play student-centered games, and plan and investigate experiments (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021).

Play-based learning allows children to conduct self-directed exploration while learning through enjoyment (Weisberg et al., 2016). Weisberg et al. (2016) states the adult's role is to use open-ended questioning and prompting to help encourage the child towards learning goals but still allow the child to navigate his own path. A teacher's role during play-based learning is to have a strong understanding of the content being taught and play pedagogy (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021). Miller and Almon (2009) stated that "teachers need to understand the ways in which child-initiated play when combined with playful, focused learning leads to lifelong benefits in ways that didactic drills, standardized tests, and scripted teaching do not" (p. 12).

The teacher needs to provide learning environments that are interactive, investigative, intentional, personalized to the students' needs and interests, and scaffolded to help children discover and connect to prior learning, and meet academic goals (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021). Differentiated instruction during play-based learning helps learners to learn at their level,

while still being encouraged to explore (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021). Allee-Herndon and Roberts (2021) mention that children can challenge themselves, reflect on their own understanding, discover their interests, and make connections through play-based learning.

Effects of Play on Child Development

Young children need a place where they can feel safe and comfortable. Today's world can be a scary place for young children. The place where children can feel safe is in their "world of play" (Nitecki & Chung, 2016, p. 25). Nitecki and Chung (2016) state that play is a naturally safe place, a comfortable environment where a child can be free to learn, and a place that must be protected and nurtured.

According to Miller and Almon (2009), "the power of play as the engine of learning in early childhood and as a vital force for young children's physical, social, and emotional development is beyond question" (p. 8). Play is a way for young children to develop in different ways (Guirguis, 2018). Today's world consists of hundreds of "smart" products that help young children to master the basic elements of reading: letter naming and recognition and phonics (Miller & Almon, 2009). A young child's work is inventing scenarios and stories, solving problems, negotiating through social problems, and communicating, or in other words, play (Miller & Almon, 2009).

The use of play-based learning in the classroom not only provides play opportunities for children but also allows the children to challenge themselves, learn new skills, discover their interests and needs, and make connections to real life situations (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021; Weisberg et al., 2013). Miller and Almon (2009) mention that children who play have greater language skills, better social skills, more empathy, and a greater imagination than those that do not play.

Guirguis (2018) discusses that play enables children to learn to interact with each other in

appropriate ways. Play-based learning also provides children with a variety of opportunities to integrate literacy tools before actually beginning literacy instruction, such as concepts of print, alphabetical skills, and early literacy skills (Guirguis, 2018).

Bodrova and Leong (2019) discuss a variety of reasons that play is the best way for young children to learn. During play, children have the ability to think inside their heads, which leads to abstract symbolic thinking, which is a necessity for success in life. An example of this is when a child uses a piece of yarn or string and pretends it is a stethoscope when playing hospital in a dramatic play center (Bodrova & Leong, 2019). As adults we can see that it is, indeed, a piece of string, yet to a child it becomes a stethoscope in his mind (Bodrova & Leong, 2019). Children also develop ways in which to control their emotions during play. It is easier for a child to control pretend emotions than to control real emotions (Bodrova & Leong, 2019).

International Approaches to Early Childhood Education

In many other countries such as Finland, China, Canada, New Zealand, Japan, Sweden, and the United Arab Emirates, students are not expected to start academic instruction until age seven (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020; Hancock, 2011; Miller & Almon, 2009). The United States often looks up to China and Japan for their success in math, science and technology; however, these children do not start academic schooling before second grade, using the first few years as a playful and experimental schooling (Miller & Almon, 2009). These countries use play-based learning and free play instead of teacher-directed instruction until second grade (Miller & Almon, 2009).

In Saudi Arabia, early childhood is recognized as a time in which children ages three to six years old prepare for general education in school by playing (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020). Finland also allows children to play in preschool and kindergarten until beginning first grade at age seven (Miller & Almon, 2009). Finland also stresses play in every grade (Hancock, 2011).

After finishing a lesson, Finnish schools give children a 15-minute break outside to play (Hancock, 2011). Additionally, Finnish schools use minimal homework and no mandated standardized assessments except for one exam their senior year in high school (Hancock, 2011). There are also no rankings or competitions between students or schools (Hancock, 2011). Their reasoning is, “We have no hurry. Children learn better when they are ready. Why stress them out?” (Hancock, 2011, p. 6). In contrast, children in American schools spend more time in the classroom and less time playing than Finnish children, yet the Finnish students score higher on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) when compared to over 57 other countries and over one half a million students worldwide (Hancock, 2011).

Many European countries such as Denmark, Sweden, Germany, England, and the Netherlands provide full-day forest kindergartens for children aged two to ten years old (Hunter-Doniger, 2021). The children get to spend up to six hours a day in an outdoor learning environment such as a farm, a forest, a park, or a designated space on school grounds (Hunter-Doniger, 2021). The daily schedules provide times where the children can explore, read, have music and art lessons, do language and math, and participate in free play (Hunter-Doniger, 2021). These schools use a child-centered approach which keeps the children engaged and the joy of learning evident (Hunter-Doniger, 2021). Miller and Almon (2009) show that young children in these excelling countries enjoy a long, playful early childhood experience.

Rentzou et al. (2018) also examined the status of play and play-based learning on early childhood education in eight different countries (Rentzou et al., 2018). Findings indicated that free play is considered a daily necessity in Denmark (Rentzou et al., 2018). The same study states that Turkey places such a great emphasis on play that the children are called “play experts” (Rentzou et al., 2018, p.4). Cyprus, Italy, Estonia, Spain, and Greece all emphasize that play is a

“main vehicle for learning,” a “main principle” in early childhood education, a “cornerstone” of early childhood education, and “one of the most important learning contexts” (Rentzou et al., 2018, p. 4). These same authors described the United States as “prioritizing play secondary to academics” (Rentzou et al., 2018, p. 4).

Effects of Removing Play in the Early Childhood Classrooms

In the United States, children spend most of their time in schools, diminishing the opportunities for imagination and play (Nitecki & Chung, 2016). The rising academic expectations of young children have preschool and kindergarten programs sacrificing play for more formalized methods of teaching, which in many cases is developmentally inappropriate (Miller & Almon, 2009). The pressures on academics in many schools have resulted in more teacher-directed instruction, even in preschool and kindergarten classrooms, and losing the respect of the child's place of play (Nitecki & Chung, 2016). Another teacher said that more children now cry in early childhood classrooms than before the standards became so rigorous (Constantino-Lane, 2019).

Reading, which is the foundational skill for all other subjects, was typically not taught until first grade so children's listening and speaking skills could be developed in preschool and kindergarten classrooms (Constantino-Lane, 2019). Children come into kindergarten with vast differences in oral language skills, reading readiness skills, and experiences with both letters and books (Constantino-Lane, 2019). Constantino-Lane (2019) discusses that kindergarten curriculums often focus on reading achievement, requiring teachers to teach reading to all students, even those children who are new to school procedures, letters, sounds, and books.

Furthermore, researchers and educators have expressed concerns about teaching reading before language is developed in young children (Constantino-Lane, 2019). Early childhood educators have a responsibility to promote expressive language development for all the students

in their classrooms by providing a language-rich environment where the children can become actively involved in classroom discussions (Massey, 2013).

Research has shown that children are able to hear in the womb, and most children speak their first words around one year old (Constantino-Lane, 2019). Communication is the foundation in all of humanity; however, workbooks, phonics worksheets, and phonemic awareness activities have very little effect on developing a child's oral language skills (Constantino-Lane, 2019). In an interview with teachers, Constantino-Lane stated that one teacher said, “if they don't have oral language there is no way they are going to get into reading, and that's where we have problems” (p. 591).

Teacher’s Perspectives of Play in the Classroom

Research has shown that many early childhood educators are struggling with the loss of play in their classrooms (Lynch, 2015; Wood, 2014). Instead of young children playing within a group of multi-aged children where they learn play skills from the older and more experienced peers, young children are learning to play with their own aged peers who are equally inexperienced in playing (Lynch, 2015). Sandberg & Heden (2011) stated that students often spend more of their time in preschools, after school activities, and school than ever before and the responsibility of teaching the children to socialize, develop, and even raise the children falls on the educational institutions.

Lynch (2015) discussed that many early childhood educators do not include any time for play or play-based learning due to the mandated activities. Teachers have reported that they feel overwhelmed and stressed to meet all of the teaching requirements, therefore, leave very little time for play (Lynch, 2015). Pyle and Bigelow (2015) discuss the challenges that early childhood educators face trying to implement a play-based learning environment while also addressing the academic standards. Teachers express concern in trying to incorporate play-based

learning while being held accountable for preparing students for the next grade (Pyle et al., 2017).

One teacher stated that, “I keep it a secret that I teach developmentally” (Constantino-Lane, 2019, p. 590). Lynch (2015) quoted another teacher as saying, “I’ve considered myself a bit of a rebel during all of the foolishness that’s been going on in our states and our classrooms for the past few years. I hope you will not buckle under pressure-even though it is very scary to ‘buck the system.’ If we don’t stay strong, though, the system is going to beat us down” (p. 359).

Foundations of the Methodology

The research method used in this study used a mixed method using an electronic survey. Teacher’s perceptions were gathered by using a survey. The data collected was through the use of the surveys which included items scored on a Likert-type rating scale as well as open-ended questions.

This mixed method approach provided the researcher with more depth in the data and help to better understand the teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, and use of play-based learning in the early childhood classrooms, which is considered three-year old kindergarten through third grade. The study will also help the researcher to understand how teachers perceive the administrators’ role in incorporating play-based learning.

Many research articles have been published about play in other countries, but there is not much published research on play in the United States. There are also a variety of studies on the teachers’ perspectives on play, but not specifically early childhood educators’ views on play-based learning in the early childhood classroom setting.

Summary

This chapter showed five major themes that emerged throughout literature. These themes included the (a) types of play, (b) the effects of play on child development, (c) international

approaches to early childhood education, (d) the effects of removing play in the early childhood classrooms, and (e) the teachers' perspectives of play in the early childhood classroom. Much of the research has shown that young children thrive academically, socially, cognitively, and communicatively when play-based learning is incorporated into the classroom.

Many other countries use play as a basis in the children's educational environment until age seven, not starting academics until the second grade (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2019; Miller & Almon, 2009). Most of the children in these academically excelling countries use a long, playful, hands-on approach throughout the early years of childhood (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Children are struggling more emotionally and academically in the early childhood classrooms after the removal of play (Constantino-Lane, 2019; Nitecki & Chung, 2016). Children are coming into kindergarten with less language skills and are expected to be able to read by the end of kindergarten, leaving teachers trying to teach reading skills before the language is developed (Constantino-Lane, 2019). Teachers are struggling with teaching how they were taught children learn best and the rigorous standards they must teach (Lynch, 2015).

CHAPTER 3. METHOD AND PROCEDURES

Early childhood educators and researchers have established the importance of play and play-based learning in the classroom. Unfortunately, since the 1990's and after the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), play is being seen less often in early childhood classrooms. Findings from the literature review indicate that there is concern regarding the removal of play and play-based learning from early childhood classrooms. This study addressed this concern by gaining an understanding of teachers' perspectives of play-based learning in early childhood classrooms.

Study Overview

The purpose of this study was to gain K3 through third grade public school teachers' perceptions of using play-based learning in their early childhood classrooms and how supported the teachers feel from their administrators in the use of play-based learning in the classroom setting. Gaining a better understanding of teachers' perspectives helps to inform administrators of the importance of play-based learning in early childhood and how to better support their teachers.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. What are early childhood education public school teachers' (grades K3-third grade) knowledge and beliefs of using play-based learning in early childhood classrooms?
2. How do early childhood teachers perceive their administrators' role in using play-based learning in the early childhood classroom?

Research Design

The study used a mixed method approach using surveys containing Likert-type rating scales and open-ended questions with early childhood educators to answer the research questions. A mixed method design was selected for this study because this approach is descriptive and focuses on process, meaning and understanding, allowing the researcher to gain a better understanding of what teachers feel is important in their early childhood classrooms (Russo, 2012).

Setting

Participants from seven public-school districts in a Southeastern state were recruited to participate in this study. These seven school districts span four different counties. The four counties range in size from approximately 68,000 people to over 545,000 people (Census.gov). See Table 3.1 for a summary of the participating counties and their populations.

Table 3.1

Counties and their Populations

County	Population
County 1	547,950
County 2	209,581
County 3	80,180
County 4	67,965

These four counties are increasing in population and have a majority of Caucasian residents (Census.gov). See Table 3.2 for a summary of the demographics for each county included in the study.

Table 3.2*County Demographic Profiles*

Demographic	County 1	County 2	County 3	County 4
Population	547,950	209,581	80,180	67,965
Race				
Caucasian	76.1%	80.3%	89.3%	72.2%
African American	18.2%	16%	7.5%	20.7%
American Indian	0.5%	0.4%	2%	0.5%
Asian	2.9%	1.2%	0.8%	0.7%
Hispanic	10.3%	4.6%	6%	6.1%
Two or More Races	2.3%	2.1%	2%	1.9%
Median Household Income				
Income	\$70,950	\$62,720	\$55,195	\$54,334
Highest Educational Level				
No Degree	9%	10%	13%	16%
High School Diploma	22%	31%	30%	39%
Some College	28%	33%	28%	24%
Bachelor's Degree	26%	15%	17%	14%
Post Graduate	16%	10%	11%	7%
Poverty	9.9%	16%	20.3%	18.2%

Note. Data for this table was retrieved from Census.gov.

Participants

This study examined data from early childhood teachers in the seven school districts in the above-mentioned counties. Each of these districts contain early childhood classrooms, pre-kindergarten through third grade. Across these districts, six schools included three-year-old kindergarten classrooms through fifth grade, 52 of these schools consisted of four-year-old kindergarten through fifth grade, 22 schools consisted of five-year-old kindergarten through fifth grade, one school consisted of kindergarten through eighth grade, one school consisted of four-year-old kindergarten through eighth grade, one child development center consisted of three and four-year old preschool, and one primary school consisted of four year old kindergarten through second grade. Across these schools, 37,046 children were served in early childhood classrooms during the 2022-2023 school year (sc.ed.gov.). See Table 3.3 for the number of students in each

early childhood grade for each district represented in this study.

Table 3.3

Number of Students in Each Early Childhood Grade by District

Districts	Grades					Total
	PreK	Kindergarten	1st Grade	Second Grade	Third Grade	
District One	383	829	776	823	801	3,612
District Two	126	192	205	187	181	891
District Three	82	221	251	242	240	1,036
District Four	1,942	5,611	6,035	5,911	5,809	25,308
District Five	441	727	765	756	732	3,421
District Six	305	407	421	381	350	1,864
District Seven	143	201	215	185	170	914

Note. Data for this table was retrieved from the state’s 180-day headcount in grades three-year old kindergarten through the third grade (sc.ed.gov).

Participants for the study included early childhood educators in grades 3K-third grade across the seven participating districts described above. The researcher chose to include teachers from these grades because early childhood certification in this particular state consists of three-year old preschool through the third grade. Each three-, four-, and five-year-old kindergarten classroom across these schools has a certified early childhood education teacher and a paraprofessional assistant. First, second, and third grade classrooms have one certified teacher.

Eligibility Criteria

Participants were eligible to participate based on the established inclusion and exclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria was as follows:

- Certified early childhood education teachers
- Works in one of the participating schools
- Currently teaches in an early childhood classroom
- Is willing to participate in the study

Exclusion criteria was as follows:

- Not a certified early childhood teacher
- Not working in one of the participating schools
- Not currently teaching in an early childhood classroom
- Not willing to participate in the study

To better understand the characteristics of the participants and to ensure they were eligible to participate, the researcher collected demographic data from the participants in the study, including school demographics, teacher educational status, and teacher experience.

Participant Demographics

One hundred fifty-nine teachers consented to participate in the survey, with 149 teachers completing portions of the survey. Of those 149 teachers, 34 were eliminated because they were not certified in early childhood education. Of those remaining 115 teachers, 67 participants were certified in early childhood education and 48 participants were certified in both early childhood and elementary education. The final sample included 115 participants, however one of the participants who consented to the survey did not complete any of the survey questions, leaving 114 participants who provided data. The data indicated that the majority of the participants were female (n=112, 96.5%), with one male participant (0.9%), one participant (0.9%) who preferred not to answer, and two participants (1.8%) who chose not to complete this question.

Years of experience was more variable, with the largest group of the participants who responded indicating they had more than twenty years of experience in early childhood education (n= 42, 35.1%). The numbers of participants in each of the three categories representing five to twenty years of experience were more evenly distributed. Table 3.4 shows the years of experience of the teachers who participated in the survey.

Table 3.4*Teachers' Experience*

N= 114		
Teachers' Experience	n	Percentage
First Year	2	1.8%
Less than Five Years	14	12.3%
5-10 Years	17	14.9%
10-15 Years	21	18.4%
15-20 Years	19	16.7%
More than 20 Years	40	35.1%
Missing ^a	1	0.9%

Note. N= number of participants who responded to the survey. n= The number of participants who responded with that rating. ^a Number of participants who did not respond to this question.

As represented in Table 3.5, participants spanned the ages of 20-25 through over the age of 45, with 40% of the participants being over the age of 45. See Table 3.5 for the participants' age ranges. The majority of the participants were Caucasian (n=109, 94.7%) with 1.8% of participants with two or more races (n= 2), less than 1% African American or Black (n=1), and less than 1% Hispanic (n=1). Two (1.8%) of the participants chose not to answer this question. Of the 114 respondents, all of the early childhood grades were represented with the largest group of participants (n=36, 31.3%) reporting being 4-year-old preschool teachers. See Table 3.6 for the number of participants from each grade level.

Table 3.5*Teachers' Age Ranges*

N= 114		
Teachers' Age Range	n	Percentage
20-25 Years Old	11	9.6%
26-34 Years Old	26	22.8%
35-45 Years Old	32	28.1%
Over 45 Years Old	45	39.5%
Missing ^a	0	0.0%

Note. N= number of participants who responded to the survey. n= The number of participants who responded with that rating. ^a Number of participants who did not respond to this question.

Table 3.6*Teachers from Each Early Childhood Grade*

N= 114		
Teachers' Age Range	n	Percentage
3-Year-Old Kindergarten	1	0.9%
4-Year-Old Kindergarten	36	31.6%
5-Year-Old Kindergarten	28	24.6%
First Grade	20	17.5%
Second Grade	14	12.3%
Third Grade	8	7.0%
Other	7	6.1%
Missing ^a	0	0.0%

Note. N= number of participants who responded to the survey. n= The number of participants who responded with that rating. ^a Number of participants who did not respond to this question.

When asked about previous training in play-based learning, 57.9% (n=48) participants reported no training in undergraduate courses. When asked if the participants had any training on play-based learning in graduate courses, 66.7% of the participants (n=76) said no, 11.4% of the participants (n=13) did complete a course on play, and 20.2% participants (n=23) stated they did not attend graduate school. There were 1.8% (n=2) participants that chose not to answer the question.

Instrumentation

The study used a researcher-developed survey. This survey included 28 questions in three different sections. The first section included 14 questions that provided the researcher with information about the school and the early childhood program, teacher characteristics, and the

children being served in the schools.

Of the remaining 14 questions, eight were Likert-type rating scale questions asking the teachers about their knowledge, beliefs, and use of play-based learning in their classrooms, and their perceptions of support from the administrators in using play-based learning. These questions used a five-point scale. The statements to the first six questions were rated on a scale of *strongly agree*, *agree*, *neutral*, *disagree*, and *strongly disagree*. The last two questions used a Likert-type rating scale using the statements *always*, *frequently*, *occasionally*, *very little* and *never*. The survey concluded with six open-ended questions to gain a better understanding of the teachers' beliefs and feelings of the use of play-based learning in their classrooms. Flick (2011) states that a good research study design should be manageable in time, so this survey was designed to take the participants approximately thirty minutes to fill out. See Appendix B for a copy of the survey.

Procedure

Recruitment

Following Institutional Review Board approval (IRB), the researcher contacted the superintendents from nine school districts, and seven school districts gave permission to conduct the survey (See Appendix D). The researcher then sent an email to the specified representative from each district and followed each district's required procedure. In some of the districts, the superintendent forwarded the information to a public service employee that handles all data related items. The superintendent or the specified representative sent the recruitment email to all of the early childhood educators in the 37 schools with eligible participants throughout their districts.

This recruitment email stated who the researcher was and the purpose of her study. The email also contained information about the study, clearly stating that participation in the study

was voluntary, but their support was greatly appreciated. The email also assured the participants that their name and school would remain anonymous, and their confidentiality would be maintained throughout the process. See Appendix C for a copy of the recruitment email.

The email concluded with a link to the electronic survey using Qualtrics. When potential participants clicked the link, they were taken to an informed consent page. See Appendix A for a copy of the informed consent page. If the participants consented, they continued with the survey. The participant was allowed to complete the entire survey or only part of it if wanted. The survey remained open for two weeks. After the two-week period, the survey closed, and the anonymous data was kept on a password protected computer in a secure Google drive.

Data Collection

The researcher collected data through an electronic survey using Qualtrics. The survey contained a Qualtrics link attached to the email which was forwarded to the early childhood educators in their districts. Once the teachers received the emails, they had a two-week period to complete the survey. The researcher sent reminders out after one week. After two weeks, the survey closed, and the responses were analyzed. See Table 3.7 for a timeline of the data collection process.

Table 3.7

Timeline of Data Collection

Steps for Data Collection	Proposed Timeline
Gain permission from school districts	December 2023
Send electronic surveys to participants	January 2024
Gather and analyze data	February 2024
Group responses and determine correlations	March 2024

Data Analysis

The data from the surveys were analyzed in a mixed method approach. Quantitative data was gathered by using the Likert type rating scales. Qualitative data was gathered through using open-ended questions. The researcher used both of these types of data to help answer the two research questions.

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data was collected through the first three sections of the survey. The first section included 14 statements about the teachers' school demographics, teaching experience, and educational level. These first 14 questions were used to assist in understanding the sample population and identify the categories represented, such as grade levels and demographics. These questions also allowed comparison of responses across different categories. This section was also used to eliminate participants who did not meet the required eligibility criteria.

The second section included six statements about the teachers' knowledge and beliefs regarding play-based learning in the early childhood classroom. These quantitative questions used a Likert-type five-point rating scale that demonstrated the participants' level of agreement with the statements on beliefs and knowledge about play-based learning. This data allowed the researcher to describe the responses using the rating scales and provided a way to parse the results into different categories and grade levels to compare rating outcomes between groups. Questions one, four, five, and six helped answer the first research question, while questions two and three helped answer the second research question.

The third part of the survey included two statements focused on the teachers' use of play-based learning in the early childhood classroom. This section used a five-point Likert-type rating scale. This data helped answer the second research question about teachers' use of, and desire to use, play-based learning.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data was collected through open-ended questions. The survey concluded with six open-ended questions to gather the participants' beliefs about play-based learning. Data from questions one, two, and three helped the researcher gather data to answer research question 1. Data from questions four, five, and six helped the researcher to answer the second research question. In the open-ended questioning, the participants also shared written responses on their understanding of and training in play-based learning.

After the surveys were completed and returned through Qualtrics, the researcher prepared and analyzed the data carefully, read and reread them continuously as Flick (2018) recommends. The researcher familiarized herself with the collected data and looked for similar themes in the responses. The data was sorted into small snippets that were similar in each survey and began creating codes connecting them.

Gathering open-ended responses allowed a deeper and richer understanding of how teachers use and perceive play-based learning in their classrooms. The researcher looked at responses from participants as a whole, and also compared the participants' responses across the grade groups. The researcher grouped the responses of common themes among grade levels, looking specifically at teacher's grade groups, their perspectives on play-based learning, and their level of support from their administration. This type of survey took a small sample of people and used them to gain a "snapshot in time" (Privitera & Ahlgrim-DeLzell, 2019, p. 248).

Ethical Considerations

The participants received a consent form at the beginning of the survey. The consent form informed them of their rights and option to not participate. The participants chose whether they would consent to being a part of the study or would opt out of it without penalty. All policies and procedures from the Institutional Review Board were followed to gather appropriate

permission for research. The participants provided consent before gaining access to the survey. All participants' identities were hidden from the researcher. The recipients of the survey, as well as the schools and the districts were kept confidential by stripping all potentially identifying information. After the final defense, all files were deleted from the researcher's computer. All aspects of the study were conducted with the supervision of the Instructional Review Board. (See Appendix D for IRB approval).

Summary

This chapter included the method of the data collected from the surveys. All components of this method were intentionally designed to gain a better understanding of what early childhood educators understood and believed about play-based learning. Chapter Four will include the results found in this study. Throughout the recruitment process, the researcher maintained confidentiality among early childhood educators. Once the data was collected the researcher coded the data and looked for themes among the different grade levels.

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are early childhood education public school teachers' (grades K3-third grade) knowledge and beliefs of using play-based learning in early childhood classrooms?

RQ2: How do early childhood teachers perceive their administrators' role in using play-based learning in the early childhood classroom?

This chapter includes findings related to the data collected using a survey with early childhood education teachers. Within each of the sections of this chapter, the researcher will share the findings specific to each research question. The first part of this chapter will describe the findings from the quantitative data which were collected through Likert-type five-point rating scales. The second part of the chapter will describe the findings from the qualitative data which were collected through open-ended questions.

Trustworthiness

According to Merriam (1995), qualitative research is best for understanding situations when variables cannot be identified ahead of time; finding new and creative approaches to looking at difficulties, better understanding how participants can perceive their roles in organizational skills and building hypotheses and theories. The purpose of this study was to gain 3K through third grade public school teachers' perceptions of using play-based learning in their early childhood classrooms and how supported the teachers felt from their administrators in the use of play-based learning in the classroom setting. The researcher collected data from a survey containing questions using Likert-type rating scales and open-ended questions to develop themes revealed in this study. In an effort to maintain trustworthiness and credibility, the researcher

deleted the data from the respondents who did not meet the eligibility requirements to participate in the study. Deleting these responses ensured that the data reflected early childhood educators' beliefs. The researcher also made every effort throughout the data collection and analysis process to ensure research bias was controlled.

When considering trustworthiness and credibility within a study, it is important to recognize that no study is completely without bias. Bias can be found in poorly worded questions or responses from the participants. In this study, the researcher carefully constructed each statement and question to ensure that the participants were not guided to answer in a specific way. Participants may also create responses based on what they believe the researcher may want to hear, so data collected through many interviews or open-ended questions in surveys can be biased (Yin, R. K., 2009). To help control the potential for bias, this survey was sent to district superintendents rather than directly to participants ensuring that the survey was completed anonymously, so the researcher was not able to know which participant stated the answers.

Another important issue is that the researcher can potentially have bias. In this study, the researcher is an early childhood educator with over 25 years of experience. She has received no training on play-based learning in her college or postgraduate studies, but through her experience and professional development, she has become aware of the research of the use of play-based learning in the classroom. Because of the researcher's experiences, every effort was made throughout the data collection and analysis process to ensure bias was not present.

Once the data was confirmed and found credible, the researcher began the coding process. The researcher calculated different words and phrases finding common themes across statements from the open-ended questions. The data was coded line by line, organized, and categorized into words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs looking for similarities. Data were

grouped according to the grade level taught by each of the participants, and these responses were categorized and chunked into words, phrases, and sentences to analyze the responses for deeper meaning. During this process, common themes began to emerge.

Findings

The survey data were collected from 114 early childhood educators currently teaching 3-year-old kindergarten through third grade in a public school. Of these participants, 67 (n=58.8%) were certified in early childhood education, and 47 (n=41.2%) were certified in both early childhood and elementary education. Most participants were female (n=110, 96.5%), and Caucasian (n=108, 94.7%), with participants spanning the ages of 20 to over the age of 45 years and ranging in years of experience from first year teachers to those who have taught more than 20 years.

Quantitative Findings

To answer research question 1, participants responded to Likert-type rating scales in the first two sections of the survey. The first section of the survey gathered data about teachers' knowledge and beliefs about play-based learning through four questions (i.e., questions 1, 4, 5, and 6). The second section of the survey asked two questions to help gather data about the teachers' use of play-based learning. See Appendix B for a copy of the survey.

Teachers' Knowledge and Beliefs

Of the 114 participants, 112 responded when asked in question 1 if play-based learning was important in the early childhood classroom, with 98.2% indicating they strongly agreed or agreed. Question 4 asked teachers if they believed children could learn through the use of play-based learning. Of the participants who responded, 97.4% (n=111) indicated they strongly agreed or agreed. Question 5 asked if children should have more opportunities to play in school. Of the participants who responded, 96.5% (n=110), strongly agreed or agreed with that statement.

When asked in question 6 if the rigor of the standards kept the teachers from using play based learning in their classrooms, there was more variability in the answers with 71.1% (n=81) of teachers indicating they strongly agreed or agreed that the rigor prevented them from using play-based learning. When the responses from question 6 were broken down by grade groups, the data shows that the higher the grades, the teachers believed that the more rigorous standards hinder the use of play-based learning. See Tables 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4 for the number of participants who responded within each rating category for each of these questions. See Table 4.5 for the number of participants who responded within each rating category by grade level.

Table 4.1

Teacher Ratings for Section 1 Question 1

Rating	N= 114	
	n	Percentage
Strongly Agree	91	79.8%
Agree	21	18.4%
Neutral	0	0.0%
Disagree	0	0.0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0%
Missing ^a	2	1.8%

Note. Question 1: *Play-based learning is important in the early childhood classroom..* N= number of participants who responded to the survey. n= The number of participants who responded with that rating. ^a Number of participants who did not respond to this question.

Table 4.2*Teacher Ratings for Question 4*

Rating	N= 114	
	n	Percentage
Strongly Agree	71	62.3%
Agree	40	35.1%
Neutral	0	0.0%
Disagree	0	0.0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0%
Missing ^a	3	2.6%

Note. Question 4: *Children can learn academics through play-based learning.* N= number of participants who responded to the survey. n= The number of participants who responded with that rating. ^a Number of participants who did not respond to this question.

Table 4.3*Teacher Ratings for Question 5*

Rating	N= 114	
	n	Percentage
Strongly Agree	83	72.8%
Agree	27	23.7%
Neutral	1	0.9%
Disagree	1	0.9%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0%
Missing ^a	2	1.8%

Note. Question 5: *Children should have more opportunities to play in school.* N= number of participants who responded to the survey. n= The number of participants who responded with that rating. ^a Number of participants who did not respond to this question.

Table 4.4*Teacher Ratings for Question 6*

Rating	N= 114	
	n	Percentage
Strongly Agree	44	38.6%
Agree	37	32.5%
Neutral	14	12.3%
Disagree	13	11.4%
Strongly Disagree	3	2.6%
Missing ^a	3	2.6%

Note. Question 6: *The rigor of the standards keep me from using play-based learning in my classroom.* N= number of participants who responded to the survey. n= The number of participants who responded with that rating. ^a Number of participants who did not respond to this question.

Table 4.5*Teacher Ratings for Question 6 by Grade Levels*

Rating	N= 114					
	3K n=1	4K n=36	K n=28	First n=20	Second n=14	Third n=8
Strongly Agree	0 (0.0%)	5 (13.9%)	13 (46.4%)	13 (65.0%)	8 (57.1%)	4 (50.0%)
Agree	0 (0.0%)	9 (25.0%)	11 (39.3%)	6 (30.0%)	4 (28.6%)	2(25.0%)
Neutral	0 (0.0%)	8 (22.2%)	2 (7.1%)	1 (5.0%)	1 (7.1%)	2 (25.0%)
Disagree	0 (0.0%)	11 (30.6%)	1 (3.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Strongly Disagree	1 (100.0%)	2 (5.6%)	1 (3.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Missing ^a	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.8%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (7.1%)	0 (0.0%)

Note. Question 6: *The rigor of the standards keep me from using play-based learning in my classroom.* N= number of participants who responded to the survey. n= The number of participants who responded in each grade level. ^a Number of participants who did not respond to this question.

Teacher's Use of Play-based Learning

In the second Likert-type scale, teachers were asked about their use of play-based learning in their classrooms. When asked in question 1 how often they use play-based learning in their classrooms, 112 participants responded with 16.7% (n=19) indicating they always used play-based learning, 21.9% (n=25) saying they use it frequently, and 30.7% (n=35) indicating they use it occasionally. When the data for question 1 is broken down into grade groups, the amount of play diminishes the older the grades. See Table 4.6 for the number of participants who responded within each rating category for question 1. See Table 4.7 for the number of participants who responded within each rating category by grade level.

Table 4.6

Teacher Ratings for Section 2 Question 1

Rating	N= 114	
	n	Percentage
Always	19	16.7%
Frequently	25	21.9%
Occasionally	35	30.7%
Very Little	29	25.4%
Never	4	3.5%
Missing ^a	2	1.8%

Note. Question 1: *How often do you use play-based learning in your early childhood classroom?* N= number of participants who responded to the survey. n= The number of participants who responded with that rating. ^a Number of participants who did not respond to this question.

Table 4.7*Teacher Ratings by Grade Levels for Section 2 Question 1.*

Rating	N= 114					
	3K n=1	4K n=36	K n=28	First n=20	Second n=14	Third n=8
Always	0.0%	16 (44.4%)	3 (10.7%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Frequently	1(100.0%)	13 (36.1%)	9 (32.1%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (7.1%)	0 (0.0%)
Occasionally	0 (0.0%)	6 (16.7%)	9 (32.1%)	9 (45.0%)	5 (35.7%)	4 (50.0%)
Very Little	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.8%)	7 (25.0%)	10 (50.0%)	6 (42.9%)	2 (25.0%)
Never	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (5.0%)	1 (7.1%)	2 (25.0%)
Missing ^a	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (7.1%)	0 (0.0%)

Note. Question 1: *How often do you use play-based learning in your early childhood classroom?*
 N= number of participants who responded to the survey. n= The number of participants who responded in each grade level. ^a Number of participants who did not respond to this question.

When asked in question 2 how often teachers would like to use play-based learning in their classrooms, 112 participants responded with 37.7% (n=43) indicating they would always like to use it and 50.9% (n=58) would like to use it frequently. See Table 4.8 for the number of participants who responded within each rating category for question 2. See Table 4.9 for the number of participants who responded within each rating category by grade level.

Table 4.8*Teacher Ratings for Section 2 Question 2.*

Rating	N= 114	
	n	Percentage
Always	43	37.7%
Frequently	58	50.9%
Occasionally	11	9.6%
Missing ^a	2	1.8%

Note. Question 2: *How often would you like to use play-based learning in your early childhood classroom?* Note. N= number of participants who responded to the survey. n= The number of participants who responded with that rating. ^a Number of participants who did not respond to this question.

Table 4.9*Teacher Ratings by Grade Levels for Section 2 Question 2.*

Rating	N= 114					
	3K n=1	4K n=36	K n=28	First n=20	Second n=14	Third n=8
Always	1 (100.0%)	28 (77.8%)	8 (28.6%)	4 (20.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (12.5%)
Frequently	0 (0.0%)	8 (22.2%)	19 (67.9%)	13 (65.0%)	11 (78.6%)	4 (50.0%)
Occasionally	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (3.6%)	3 (15.0%)	2 (14.3%)	3 (37.5%)
Very Little	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Never	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Missing ^a	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (7.1%)	0 (0.0%)

Note. Question 2: *How often would you like to use play-based learning in your early childhood classroom?* N= number of participants who responded to the survey. n= The number of participants who responded in each grade level. ^a Number of participants who did not respond to this question.

Teachers' Perceptions of Administrators' Support in the Use of Play-based Learning

To answer research question 2, participants responded to two questions (i.e., questions 2 and 3) in a Likert-type rating scale in the first section of the survey in addition to three open-ended questions. See Appendix B for a copy of the survey.

When asked in question 2 if their administration supports the use of play-based learning, 111 participants responded with 55.4% (n=62) indicating they strongly agree or agree. See Table 4.10 for the number of participants who responded within each rating category for question 2. See Table 4.11 for the number of participants who responded within each rating category by grade level.

Table 4.10

Teacher Ratings for Section 1 Question 2.

Rating	N= 111	
	n	Percentage
Strongly Agree	29	25.4%
Agree	33	28.9%
Neutral	36	31.6%
Disagree	10	8.8%
Strongly Disagree	3	2.6%
Missing ^a	3	2.6%

Note. Question 2: *How much support do you have from your administration in the use of play-based learning?* N= number of participants who responded to the survey. n= The number of participants who responded with that rating. ^aNumber of participants who did not respond to this question.

Table 4.11*Teacher Ratings by Grade Levels for Section 1 Question 2.*

N= 114						
Rating	3K n=1	4K n=36	K n=28	First n=20	Second n=14	Third n=8
Strongly Agree	0 (0.0%)	18 (50.0%)	5 (17.9%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (21.4%)	1 (12.5%)
Agree	1 (100.0%)	10 (27.8%)	9 (32.1%)	4 (20.0%)	2 (14.3%)	4 (50.0%)
Neutral	0 (0.0%)	4 (11.1%)	11 (39.3%)	11 (55.0%)	7 (50.0%)	2 (25.0%)
Disagree	0 (0.0%)	2 (5.6%)	3 (10.7%)	4 (20.0%)	1 (7.1%)	0 (0.0%)
Strongly Disagree	0 (0.0%)	2 (5.6%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (5.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (12.5%)
Missing ^a	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (7.1%)	0 (0.0%)

Note. Question 2: *How much support do you have from your administration in the use of play-based learning?* N= number of participants who responded to the survey. n= The number of participants who responded in each grade level. ^a Number of participants who did not respond to this question.

When asked in question 3 if their administration values the use of play-based learning, 111 participants responded with 25.4% (n=29) indicating they strongly agree, and 25.4% (n=29) indicating they agree. See Table 4.12 for the number of participants who responded within each rating category for question 3. See Table 4.13 for the number of participants who responded within each rating category by grade level.

Table 4.12*Teacher Ratings for Question 3.*

N= 114		
Rating	N	Percentage
Strongly Agree	29	25.4%
Agree	29	25.4%
Neutral	37	32.5%
Disagree	14	12.3%
Strongly Disagree	2	1.8%
Missing ^a	3	2.6%

Note. Question 3: *My administrators value the use of play-based learning in the classroom?* N= number of participants who responded to the survey. n= The number of participants who responded with that rating. ^a Number of participants who did not respond to this question.

Table 4.13*Teacher Ratings by grade levels for Question 3.*

N= 114						
Rating	3K n=1	4K n=36	K n=28	First n=20	Second n=14	Third n=8
Strongly Agree	0 (0.0%)	17 (47.2%)	4 (14.3%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (21.4%)	2 (25.0%)
Agree	100.0%	11(30.6%)	10 (35.7%)	5 (25.0%)	1 (7.1%)	1 (12.5%)
Neutral	0 (0.0%)	3 (8.3%)	10 (35.7%)	10 (50.0%)	6 (42.9%)	5 (62.5%)
Disagree	0 (0.0%)	3 (8.3%)	4 (14.3%)	4 (20.0%)	3 (21.4%)	0 (0.0%)
Strongly Disagree	0 (0.0%)	2(5.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Missing ^a	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (5.0%)	1 (7.1%)	0 (0.0%)

Note. Question 3: *My administrators value the use of play-based learning in the classroom?* N= number of participants who responded to the survey. n= The number of participants who responded in each grade level. ^a Number of participants who did not respond to this question.

Qualitative Findings

To answer research question 1, participants responded to open-ended questions in the third section of the survey. The first three open-ended questions (i.e., questions 1, 2, and 3) in the survey gathered data about teachers' knowledge and beliefs about the use of play-based learning. Questions 4, 5, and 6 in the open-ended section of the survey helped to gather data about how teachers' perceive their administrators' role in using play-based learning in the early childhood classroom. See Appendix B for a copy of the survey.

During the review of the data collected from the open-ended questions, the researcher noticed three main themes that emerged: the importance of play in developing the whole child, the administrators' influence on play-based learning, and the barriers in the use of play-based learning. Table 4.14 shows a list of the themes that emerged.

Table 4.14

Themes that Emerged from the Open -ended Questions

Importance of Using Play-Based Learning	Administrator Influence	Barriers of using Play-Based Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develops the whole child • Increases <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social skills • Imagination • Problem solving skills • Communication skills/vocabulary • Empathy/character • Self-confidence • Motor skills (fine and gross motor) • Creativity and curiosity • Building teamwork • Critical thinking • Engagement • Exploration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No Support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Administrators come from higher grades and do not understand PBL • Standard based play or rigorous play • Supportive <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Buys materials ○ Administration trusts teachers to make best decisions for the children ○ Understands that all children learn at different rates and teachers need to meet each child where they are 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of Time • Rigorous Standards • No training in PBL/ do not understand how to use it • Lack of support from district/administration • Rigorous Curriculum • Standardized testing

Note. This figure shows the three main themes that emerged from the teachers’ responses. Under each theme are examples of each theme that the teachers’ mentioned in the survey.

Importance of Using Play-based Learning

When asked in question 1, in what ways do you believe play-based learning can help children develop, there were many different responses. One teacher stated that,

“Play-based learning helps develop the whole child in all ways...It builds executive function skills, content knowledge, creative thinking, problem solving, vocabulary, prediction and observation skills, and social and emotional skills. It allows them to build confidence, the ability to collaborate, and to express their feelings, and it helps them learn about themselves and the world around them. It motivates them to take risks and to test ideas and make modifications.”

The participants mentioned play-based learning helps children to strengthen their social skills 47 times. The participants also stated play-based learning increases children’s problem-

solving skills 22 times and increases children's vocabulary and communication skills 16 times.

One teacher stated that, "play-based learning provides opportunities for children to explore and learn about the world around them. Through play-based learning, they develop problem solving skills, critical thinking skills, creativity as well as academic skills." One teacher stated, "Learning is more authentic due to the engagement of the learner." Another teacher said, "Play-based learning encourages kids to learn about the world and have fun doing it." As one second grade teacher stated, children "can learn life skills, such as problem solving and teamwork. They are required to be active participants" while using play-based learning.

A kindergarten teacher stated that, "If we brought back play centers our kids could be ready for the academics." The participants also mentioned that play-based learning increases prediction making, critical thinking, character building, empathy, concrete understanding, imagination, curiosity, creativity, fine and gross motor, teamwork, and risk taking, exploration, and self-confidence skills.

A first-grade teacher mentioned, "By adding play into the curriculum, it allows students to understand that learning can be fun and engaging and not daunting." A third-grade teacher stated that

"At such a young age, students are able to learn best through hands-on, kinesthetic experiences. Young children benefit from having concrete manipulatives that they are allowed to explore. This often occurs in play-based learning where students have concrete items they can work with. This works to build a solid foundation of concrete understanding for skills that will later become more abstract. Play-based learning also helps young children develop their social skills as they must learn how to appropriately communicate with others and how to properly express their emotions."

A five-year-old kindergarten teacher stated that,

"Children learn through play and dialogue with others. Unfortunately, most students are no longer getting these at home, so play is even more important than it was 30 years ago. So many of our children have stunted language when they begin school,

and we all know that oral language is the beginning of reading. They also have very little imagination. Many of them simply do not know HOW to play.”

Another teacher in this study said,

“With the new alpha generation now attending school, I have noticed a huge decrease in social skills, vocabulary knowledge, and problem-solving skills. Play encourages students to use critical thinking skills and explore their imagination. It is also important for children to talk to one another and learn to solve problems. With the demands on academic performance so high, teachers are forced to give up play in primary grades and only focus on standards. This is further decreasing the opportunity for students to develop these crucial skills.”

When asked, “If you used play-based learning in your classroom, what would it look like?” there was a variety of responses from participants’ ranging from no play at all, to short center time, to playdoh and legos. One participant mentioned that she “may incorporate items like play doh or blocks as part of a math lesson.” Another teacher said, “Learning with play-based intentions can look loud and disruptive. It could look very untraditional, but that doesn’t mean it’s wrong.”

To answer research question 2, participants responded to questions 4, 5, and 6 in the open-ended section of the survey. These questions help to gather data about how teachers’ perceive their administrators’ role in using play-based learning in the early childhood classroom.

Administrators’ Influence on Play-based Learning

The data that emerged from the second research question about the administrators’ support was mixed between no support and support with constraints. Of the participants who responded to these questions, 38 stated they had very little or no support from their administrators or district, while 32 stated they had the support of their administrators. A few teachers stated that the play had to be “standard based or rigorous.”

One teacher indicated that play is limited in the classroom. The teacher went on to say, “I do not feel as though administration and district office staff understand that children are learning

even though it looks like they are just ‘playing.’” Another participant stated, “Unfortunately, the district administration in our school district does not support play-based learning and actively tries to diminish the opportunities that we have to support play-based learning.” Another teacher stated that “We’re not really supported. Much of our admin came from higher grades and does not understand the importance of play in pre-K.” Another teacher stated that she was “supported by the State Department but PLC [Professional Learning Community] and assessment seems of more value at our school than allowing our young children to learn through play.” One teacher expressed that, “I was allowed to do it because I am old and that’s the way I teach. New teachers are discouraged from ‘play.’ Centers have to be academic- as if play is not academic!” Another teacher stated that she had taken a class on play-based learning over 35 years ago. “This was the way we taught back then. Students become engineers and mathematicians using blocks and puzzles and games. The first manuals students read were how to put Legos™ together. Students talk and pretend in housekeeping and through centers using their imaginative props.”

Other participants stated that their administration would be supportive of their use of play-based learning if it is implemented with standards or rigorous. One even stated, “I feel supported to do the things I feel right for my students, but rigor typically is what is expected” and the “district requires the use of a specific curriculum that is not play-based.” One teacher stated that her administration encourages the use of play-based learning because “they know that all children learn at different rates and meeting each child where they are is important”.

Some teachers stated that their administration was very supportive, would buy materials for them, and supported their use of “teaching the necessary standards in various ways, play-based learning being one of them.” Another teacher mentioned that “my admin trusts that we are doing what is best and developmentally appropriate for my students. They understand the skills

students are learning while they are playing and fully support us!” One participant mentioned that her director makes sure she is supported and has all of the materials needed to incorporate play-based learning. One teacher stated, “In my current classroom, I feel like they know how important play is.” Other teachers said, “I am blessed to be supported.” and “Our K4 director makes sure that we are all supported and have all the materials that we need for play-based learning.”

Barriers to the Use of Play-based Learning

When asked what barriers prevent the participants’ use of play-based learning, the rigor of the standards was mentioned the most with 33 mentions, while lack of time was listed second with 28 mentions. The third biggest barrier in the use of play-based learning was the lack of support from the administration and/or district with 21 mentions.

Rigor of the Standards

The rigor of the standards also was noted as a barrier in the use of play-based learning. Bassok, et al. (2016), stated that preschool and kindergarten classrooms have become much more academically based and less focused on play, exploration, and social interaction. Today’s children are experiencing increasing amounts of pressure for academic success. One teacher stated,

“There are too many standards students have to meet in a short period of time in first grade to allow for exploring the concept through play. Direct instruction is faster to meet these standards as we typically only have 1-2 weeks per standard. Admittedly, play-based learning would give students a deeper understanding of the concepts, it would just take longer!”

Another teacher stated that she “did not use play-based learning ... due to the time

constraints placed on tested grade levels with the rigorous and time-consuming standards.”

Another teacher stated that,

“Play-based learning can create an environment to work on social/emotional skills and standard based learning in a fun way. The day doesn’t have to be so rushed in order to have a certain amount of small groups which cause intense stress for the teachers and the children. Learning should be fun especially in a preschool classroom. Standards can be met without all of the rigor.”

In regard to the rigor of the standards, another teacher in this study stated, “My district uses a State Test that the children take three times a year. I am also graded on my SLO [Student Learning Objective] using my student’s progress. Everything I do is surrounded by standards.”

One teacher in this study made a statement about play-based learning, “It is essential. These children are babies and need to develop appropriately. I fear mental health issues will only skyrocket with the lack of play and expectation to perform in lower grades.”

Lack of Time

The lack of time to use play-based learning was mentioned 28 times in the open-ended questions. One teacher noted, “District guidance for the structure of the day, longer small group instruction, shorter amounts of time outdoors are the barriers to play-based learning.” Teachers also commented on the lack of time saying, “Time constraints and expectations within the classroom. There just isn’t enough time during the day to meet all expectations.” and

“Sometimes we have less play time, if we are short on time and have lots of standards left to cover before state testing.” Another teacher stated that the biggest barrier is, “Time- our school day doesn’t allow for play-based instruction often, and the rigor and expectations make it challenging to allow students to learn through play.” Another teacher stated that, “I really do not use play much in my first-grade class because there is NO time for it. It is sad, but very true!”

Lack of Support from the Administrators

The lack of support from the administrators was mentioned 21 times in the open-ended questions. One teacher stated,

“I don’t think my administration gets it! They are more concerned with essential standards and if they meet that standard, where I am more concerned with social functionality in the classroom. Don’t get me wrong, I 100% want them to meet all standards, but when teaching at the 4K level, months matter, and I am happy with any and all growth.”

Another second-grade teacher stated that a lack of support comes from, “The district office and ignorance in how young children learn. Also, people being out of the classroom so long they have no clue what children today need.” Another teacher stated, “I would like for them to remember what they know about young children. I would like for them to support teachers who want to keep play in their classrooms.” One more teacher stated that, “I don’t use it, because I can’t. If I did, it would look like centers where children are able to play, explore, and interact with each other.” Another teacher in the study stated, “Unfortunately, the district administration in our school district does not support play-based learning and actively tries to diminish the opportunities that we have to support play-based learning.” One teacher in this study stated that she struggles with, “developmentally appropriate versus what we are forced to do.”

Other Barriers

Table 4.16 shows other barriers that were also expressed in the open-ended question responses and how many times they were mentioned. These included lack of materials, standardized testing, the use of required schedules, the use of using a specific curriculum word by word, lack of space, behavioral issues, and lack of materials. One teacher in this study stated, “The curriculum and standards take up so much time, so we don’t have much time for play.” Another teacher stated “Our district requires the use of a specific curriculum that is not play-

based.”

The teachers also indicated lack of training as a barrier to using PBL. Many teachers stated they were not trained in how to use play-based learning and would like to know more about how to effectively use play-based learning in their classrooms. One participant stated, “If I had more knowledge of how to use play-based learning, I’m sure I would use it more often.” Another teacher stated that, “I’ve had no real play-based instructions: however, play-based instruction is the work of the child.”

One teacher stated that her class uses whole group time to “play- letting the children choose between book station or puzzles station.” A few teachers mentioned using “flashcard type games,” manipulatives, Play-Doh™, puzzles, tangrams, building with blocks, Magna tiles™, kitchen centers, games, and letter and number tracing. One teacher stated that “we have centers and sometimes utilize play as an avenue for learning during small group activities.” Another teacher in the study stated, “If we brought back play centers, our kids would be ready for the academics.”

Table 4.15

Barriers in Play-based Learning in Question 5.

N= 79	
Barriers	n
Rigor of Standards	33
Lack of Time	28
Administration and/or District Curriculum	21
Lack of Materials	8
Required Schedules	7
Standardized Testing	6
Lack of Space	5
Behavioral Issues	4
	2

Note. Question 5: *Describe barriers that prevent you from using play-based learning in your classroom?* N= number of participants who responded to the open-ended question in the survey. n= The number of participants who responded with that wording or phrase. Participants could list multiple barriers.

Summary of the Results

This chapter presented the data related to the two previously mentioned research questions on early childhood teachers' knowledge and beliefs on play-based learning in their classrooms, and how they perceive their administrators' role in the use of play-based learning. The researcher used the mixed method approach of the Likert-type five-point scales and open-ended questions to gather the beliefs of 114 early childhood educators. Findings indicate the majority of the early childhood teachers who participated in this study strongly believed that play-based learning is important in the classroom, and that children can learn academics using play-based learning. These teachers also believe children should have more opportunities to play

in school.

When asked about administrators' role in the use of play-based learning the participants were split in their agreement about their administrators' support for the use of play-based learning, with some teachers feeling supported while others felt a lack of support. Some participants also stated that some administrators can cause a barrier in the use of play-based learning through their lack of support.

Teachers mentioned a variety of barriers in their use of play-based learning. The three barriers most frequently mentioned by the participants were the rigorous standards, lack of time, and lack of support from the administration and/or district. In addition, lack of training was also mentioned numerous times by the participants, stating that they did not know how to incorporate play-based learning in their classrooms. Although this was listed as a barrier, teachers showed an interest in receiving training on play-based learning.

In Chapter 5, the researcher will present a discussion related to the findings of this study. This discussion will include implications and recommendations for the field of early childhood educators, administrators, and researchers.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

The use of play-based learning in the early childhood classroom has been well researched with evidence showing positive outcomes (Bassok et al., 2016; Constantino-Lane, 2019; Lynch, 2016; Miller & Almon, 2009). The purpose of this study was to gather early childhood teachers' views and perceptions on the use of play-based learning in their classrooms, and their perceptions of the support received from their administration in that use. The researcher used a mixed method approach using an electronic survey with Likert-type five-point rating scale questions and open-ended questions to gather data from early childhood teachers. The survey collected data from 114 early childhood educators, currently teaching 3-year-old kindergarten through third grade in public schools from seven school districts across four counties.

This chapter presents a discussion of the findings related to each research question. This discussion includes a comparison of the results related to literature and theory, implications and recommendations, and suggestions for future research in play-based learning and how children learn using play-based learning. This discussion provides recommendations to help school districts, administrators, and early childhood educators better implement play-based learning in their classrooms. This chapter concludes with discussion of the limitations of the study.

Results Related to the Literature

In the following section of this chapter, the researcher will compare the data from this study with the findings from previous literature. Much of the previously mentioned literature is compatible with the results of this study. Most teachers feel play-based learning is important in the development of young children, yet struggle with the standards, lack of time, support of administrators, and other barriers mentioned. The findings of this study agree with previous findings in the literature.

Research Question 1: Teachers' Knowledge and Beliefs of Play-based Learning

The findings from this study suggest early childhood teachers in this sample believe that play-based learning has positive effects on a child's learning. Findings indicate the majority of the early childhood teachers who participated in this study strongly believe that play-based learning is important in the classroom, and that children can learn academics through play-based learning. These early childhood educators believe that learning through hands-on, explorative, and experimental play-based learning is critical in the early years.

These findings are consistent with findings from previous research. Research has shown that through using play-based learning, certain skills (e.g., turn taking, expressive language, communication) are taught, while these skills cannot be learned in the use of seat work (Taylor & Boyer, 2019). Alharbi & Alzahrani (2020) state that children learn best by exploring, investigating, problem solving, thinking, discovering, and using materials in their classrooms. Previous educational researchers, such as Dewey, Montessori, Erikson, Piaget, and Vygotsky stress the importance of learning through the use of play (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020). Children learn many skills through the use of play-based learning. They develop social skills, communication skills, motor skills, problem solving skills, confidence, and learn about the world around them in a fun, interactive way.

The findings from this study also suggest early childhood teachers in this sample believe that children should have more opportunities to play in school. It is not surprising that the participants believe that children should be able to play more often in the classroom setting, due to the way early childhood classrooms are focusing more on seatwork. Since the passing of NCLB (2001), findings in the literature suggest children are less likely to have opportunities for play in early childhood classrooms (Bassok et al., 2016; Miller and Almon, 2009). Instead of engaging in play in ways that can enhance social skills and language development, children are

found sitting and engaging in more academic based activities. As developmentally appropriate activities have decreased, the expressive language skills and emotional development of children have also decreased (Bodrova and Leong, 2019). With this change in early childhood pedagogy, there is a new type of issue. Educators are now having to intentionally think of ways to help young children strengthen their social and emotional and communication skills.

The data from this study showed that most participating teachers believe that play-based learning is important in a child's learning. The study also showed that many of the teachers want to use play-based learning more often. Throughout the study, teachers mentioned a variety of barriers of their use of play-based learning. Some of these barriers were rigorous standards, the lack of time and training in the use of play-based learning, and the lack of administrators' support.

When asked if the rigor of the standards kept the teachers from using play-based learning, most of the participants agreed. Kindergarten was traditionally designed to bridge the gap between early daycare type experiences with more formal academically focused environments found in first grade settings (Repko-Erwin, 2017). Yet currently, early childhood education classrooms spend more time on academic-based curriculums and less time on play-based learning (Miller & Almon, 2009, Lynch, 2016).

The findings of this study also show that many early childhood teachers in this study would like to use play-based learning more often in their classrooms yet struggle with barriers to do just that. Early childhood educators are torn between what they believe is best for the children and what is mandated by the schools, districts, and states. The teachers struggle with the use of developmentally appropriate practice, the rigor of the standards, the use of a curriculum verbatim, the lack of support from the district and/or administrators, and the lack of time that can

be devoted to play-based learning.

Constantino-Lane (2019) mentioned teachers expressed concerns about teaching reading before the language is developed in young children, and many teachers in this study mentioned that play-based learning increases social interactions and opportunities to increase vocabulary and communication skills. Repko-Erwin (2017) mentioned that kindergarteners today spend far less time engaged in play-based learning, and more time in structured instruction. This study shows that play is diminishing with every grade. The teachers in this study state that they use play much more often in 4-year-old kindergarten, but very little in the older grades, and by third grade the teachers rarely use play-based learning.

Research Question 2: Teachers' perceptions of their administrators' role in the use of play-based learning in the classroom

The findings from this study suggest early childhood teachers have mixed feelings about their administrators' support in their use of play-based learning in their classrooms. Some teachers said that they were very supported, some teachers were supported as long as the play was rigorous, and some teachers were not supported at all.

In the literature review, teachers expressed the same concerns of support from administrators. Lynch (2015) mentioned that administrators support was mixed. One teacher in Lynch's (2015) study said they felt lucky to teach at a school where they are supported in play, while another teacher in the same study said her school was so academic based so the principal does not approve of any play. Bodrova and Leong (2019) mentioned that it is becoming harder to persuade school administrators and some classroom teachers that children learn best when learning through play (Lynch, 2015).

Theory Discussion

Chapter One mentioned some of the theories that are being used when using play-based

learning. Two of these theories are the social learning theory and the constructivist theory. The social learning theory emphasizes learning through observing, imitating, and modeling the behaviors, reactions, and attitudes of others (McLeod, 2023). This is what children do when they are playing. The children are learning through these actions in a real-life setting. The second theory demonstrated when playing is the constructivist learning theory. This is when children reflect on their own experiences instead of just passively receiving information (McLeod, 2023). Teachers in this study mentioned numerous times that children increase communication, social skills, real life connections, and risk-taking during play-based learning. These are a few examples of how the social learning theory and the constructivist theory are evident in the use of play-based learning.

Implications and Recommendations for the Field

Based on the findings in this study, the researcher has several recommendations for play-based learning. The researcher recommends using more developmentally appropriate practices, more training in play-based learning for administrators and early childhood educators and lessening the rigor of the standards and curriculums for the early childhood grades.

The following section will mention recommendations for early childhood educators and administrators about the results found in this study. There is still much to be learned about the use of play-based learning.

Recommendations

Using More Developmentally Appropriate Practices

Research shows that play-based learning in the early childhood classroom is a necessity in the development of young children. The findings from this study agree with decades of research on this topic, that children learn best through play. However, the children are getting less and less time to play at home and at school, and the children are suffering in social,

emotional, motor, and cognitive skills. Bodrova and Leong (2019) mentioned that children no longer have the ability to play with friends and neighbors. Since children are playing less at home, they need to be allowed to play more often at school settings by using play-based learning.

The first recommendation is the return of developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood classrooms. Using developmentally appropriate practices is not new, and it has been backed up by years of research on how children learn best. This cannot be accomplished by using a one-size-fits-all approach for every early childhood classroom. Teachers cannot teach a curriculum or standards by putting children in passive seats without any active participation in the learning process. Teachers need to be allowed to teach how they know children learn best—using a hands-on approach.

More Training in Play-based Learning for Educators and Administrators

Another recommendation is for the administrators and early childhood educators to become more knowledgeable about play-based learning and how to effectively use it. The researcher found that many teachers are receptive to the use of play-based learning in their classrooms, but do not have the training or the time to use it effectively. School districts should provide more training to their early childhood educators as well as their administrators on how to effectively use play-based learning in their classrooms. This can be done with early childhood education specialists from the state department of education, once or twice a year.

Having Administrators Learn More about Best Practices for Young Children

Another recommendation is for administrators to learn more about how young children learn. Bodrova and Leong (2019) stated that it has gotten much harder to persuade administrators and even some educators that “learning through play is the right kind of learning—and often the best kind of learning—for young children” (p. 37). Teachers have been trained on the best practices for young children, and they believe that administrators want to change instruction to

prepare the children for more rigorous instruction. Research has shown that this is not how children learn best. It appears that early childhood teachers are trained to better understand how children learn best, but many administrators may not have been trained in the best practices for the youngest children. Gaining a deeper understanding into how young children learn using play-based learning will help administrators ensure that the instructional practices are implemented with fidelity, effectiveness, and reliability.

Rigor of the Standards, Curriculums, and District/School Settings

Participants in this study stated that they believe play-based learning is essential in the development of young children. These teachers stated that they would like to use play-based learning more often in their classrooms, yet struggle with the rigor of the standards, curriculums, and the district and/or school settings. Common Core State Standards and NCLB added additional rigor to these early learning grades, however those standards can be changed due to the needs of the children. Previous research has shown that the rigor of the standards is not helping the children, and oftentimes adding more stress, behavioral issues, and frustration in our youngest learners. Lynch (2015) mentioned teachers feel overwhelmed and stressed to meet all requirements and standards, leaving no time to use the play-based learning which they want to use in their classrooms. Teachers and administrators select curriculums to use, and they need to be mindful of how young children learn best when choosing a curriculum.

Administrators also need to give the teachers the flexibility to make wise and educationally based decisions in the use of a selected curriculum. Teachers should be able to choose which curriculum and parts of curriculums to use based on the needs of their students. Curriculums are not meant to be followed verbatim, as each child is different and learns at different paces.

Implications for Future Research

Future research on this topic is recommended by the researcher. There is still much to be learned about the use of play-based learning in the early childhood classroom. There is much that can be gained from studying young children and how they develop. More research is still needed on how our youngest children learn. This section will cover some of the possible studies that would help further the development of young children.

This study was conducted with only early childhood teachers, so additional research with administration would be beneficial. Another recommendation for future research is additional interviews with early childhood teachers and/or observations in early childhood classrooms. Teachers will most likely be more open in a face-to-face interview than in a typed survey. Often, participants say what they believe the researcher wants to hear in a survey. An interview might be more comfortable between the researcher and the interviewee. Interviews are less distracting, giving the interviewee a personal touch. Another suggestion is to allow superintendents and district personnel to observe how young children learn best in their classrooms. When the district office staff sees firsthand how children better retain information, through hands-on learning, they may be more understanding of the use of play-based learning.

Variety of Schools

Another recommendation for future research would be to conduct the study in a variety of school settings. This study was limited to public early childhood teachers in a small state. More data could be collected from other states, private schools and Montessori schools. Early childhood educators who implement play-based learning in other educational settings such as Montessori or private schools may have more insight and views about how to incorporate play-based learning into public educational settings. Such data would be beneficial to researchers, administrators, and early childhood educators who want to further the use of play-based learning

instruction.

Different Perspectives

The second recommendation for further research would be to conduct the survey on a larger scale with more participants from different states. This would give a larger sample of data to analyze. A larger sample would give more views from both teachers and administrators on their use and knowledge of play-based learning. Teachers from other states may have different ideas and strategies to teach using play-based learning.

Another important viewpoint would be from the administrators in primary and elementary schools. Many times, the administrators are the ones that make the decisions about the use of play-based learning and the teachers comply with their decisions. More research should be focused on what the administrators feel about play-based learning and the barriers that they face as administrators.

Limitations of the Study

There were a few limitations in this study that should be acknowledged. One limitation was that this study was distributed through an email list to a variety of schools throughout the state. Therefore, it only represented a small portion of a Southeastern state. A larger national or statewide study might have seen a more accurate collection. The researcher attempted to reach as many early childhood educators as possible in the area. This is a small sample representing the early childhood educators in one region of the state, and their thoughts about incorporating play-based learning into their classrooms. This sample is a good representation of the state of early childhood educators and the ongoing dilemma that is going on within the early childhood classrooms. When there is a greater response to the survey, there is more confidence that the sample is a good representation of the larger population of early childhood educators (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019).

Another limitation is that many of the teachers did not complete the survey. The survey was sent to a large number of child development, primary, and elementary schools, and only 114 participants responded. There are many more early childhood educators in those seven school districts. The survey was sent through an email. Teachers receive a lot of emails, so emails are easy to get overlooked. This survey was also not sent directly from the researcher. The researcher had to rely on someone else to forward the survey to the participants, which could have missed some potential participants.

The survey also took time to complete. Teachers had to type responses into the survey, taking their time and many educators are overwhelmed with their school responsibilities and taking time and effort away from the daily activities may have been a limitation.

A third potential limitation was that the researcher is a certified early childhood educator, also. The researcher had to be aware of potential bias to help her keep her thoughts and opinions about the subject matter unbiased.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore early childhood educators' use and knowledge on the use of play-based learning, and how they perceive the administrators' role in the use of it in their classrooms. A mixed method study using a survey of Likert-type five-point questions and open-ended questions were used to gain teachers' input.

Previously, play-based learning was more commonly used in early childhood classrooms, especially the kindergarten classrooms. Early childhood teachers in this study mention that they believe play-based learning is important in developing the whole child. The participants also stated that they would like to use play-based learning more often, but struggle with these barriers, rigor of the standards, lack of time and training, and lack of support from administrators.

Teachers and administrators need to be more mindful of the standards and not push students to reach the previous grades standards. Many standards state that the students have the complete school year to meet the required standards, yet schools/districts/administrators try to squeeze the standards into a certain amount of time depending on the report cards and or yearly plans. That is not a developmentally appropriate practice, and often adds more stress on the teachers, students, and administration.

Teachers need to use more developmentally appropriate practices, which includes hands-on, experiential learning. Teachers and administrators would greatly benefit from training in best practices for young children. The study shows that the participants would like to use play-based learning more often, yet do not know how to. The participants also stated that some of the administrators are not trained in best practices for young children, so constant training with specialists and the teachers/administrators/district office staff would be beneficial for the young children.

As schools have begun implementing this style of teaching there is a drastic need for more social/emotional and communicative skills between children. Using play-based learning, children can practice oral language skills in a safe, friendly, and comfortable environment, where they can take risks, try new things, and build confidence. Play cannot be replaced by rigorous academics and show the same success later in life.

The results of this study show how early childhood educators value play-based learning in their classrooms. The teachers mentioned play-based learning increases children's oral language, social/emotional, risk taking, empathetic development, and developing the whole child. The findings from this study show that the teachers, administrators, and school districts need to be more vigilant in the fight to bring play-based learning back into the classrooms. As

play-based learning is brought back into the early childhood classrooms, teachers, parents, and administrators will more likely see a more positive impact that can only be gained through hands-on learning found in the use of play-based learning.

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APPENDIX A. INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT FOR ---Play in the Early Childhood Classroom---

You are invited to participate in a research study to see how early childhood educators in public schools perceive play-based learning in their classrooms. The study also shows how supported the educators feel by their administration. All responses will be kept confidential and anonymous. The questionnaire will begin by asking demographic, educational, and experiential questions for demographic purposes only.

This study is being conducted by Laura B. Rushatz. You were selected as a possible participant because you currently teach early childhood education in a public school.

If you decide to participate, the questionnaire will be sent via school email and only once. The questionnaire should take about five to ten minutes to complete.

Any information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential. Information collected through your participation may be used to fulfill a doctoral degree. If so, none of your identifiable information will be included.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not jeopardize your future relations with Anderson University or your elementary school or your school district.

If you have any questions I invite you to ask them now. If you have questions later, please contact me at lreeves110@andersonuniversity.edu and I will be happy to answer them.

For more information regarding your rights as a research participant you may contact the Chairs of the Human Subjects Committee/Institutional Review Board by phone or e-mail. The HSC Chairs, Dr. Joni Criswell and Dr. Robert Franklin, can be reached at (864) 231-2000 or through email at hsc@andersonuniversity.edu.

APPENDIX B. SURVEY

Survey

I consent to participate in this survey.

Yes

No

Directions: Please respond to each of these prompts by selecting one answer that best reflects your beliefs about play-based learning.

Play-based learning occurs when a teacher guides children's play to meet a learning outcome.

Demographic Information

What school district do you currently teach in?

What school are you currently employed in?

What is your certification in?

Early Childhood Education

Elementary Education

Both Early Childhood and Elementary Education

Other

Gender

Male

Female

Prefer not to answer

What is your race?

Caucasian

African American

American Indian

Asian

Hispanic

Two or more races

Prefer not to answer

Age range

20-25

26-35

35-45

Over 45

Is your school considered a Title One school?

Yes

No

What grade do you currently teach?

3K

4K

5K

First grade

Second grade

Third grade

What grades have you previously taught?

3 year old kindergarten

4 year old kindergarten

5 year old kindergarten

First grade

Second grade

Third grade

Other

How many years of experience do you have in teaching?

First year

Less than 5 years

5-10 years

10-15 years

15-20 years

More than 20 years

Have you taken a course on play in your undergraduate program?

Yes

No

Have you taken a course on play in your graduate program?

Yes

No

Did not attend a graduate program

How much time daily do your students spend using play-based learning in your classroom?

None

Less than 25% of the day

25 % of the day

50% of the day

75% of the day

More than 75% of the day

Is your program a full or half-day program?

Full day

Half day

Teacher's Knowledge and Beliefs About Play-Based Learning

1. Play-based learning is important in the early childhood classroom.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	4	3	2	1

2. My administration supports my use of play-based learning in my classroom.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	4	3	2	1

3. My administrators value the use of play-based learning in my classroom.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	4	3	2	1

4. Children can learn academics through play-based learning.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	4	3	2	1

5. Children should have more opportunities to play in school.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	4	3	2	1

6. The rigor of the standards keeps me from using play-based learning in my early childhood classroom.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	4	3	2	1

Teacher's Use of Play-Based Learning in the Early Childhood Classroom

1. How often do you use play-based learning in your early childhood classroom?

Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Very little	Never
5	4	3	2	1

2. How often would you like to use play-based learning in your early childhood classroom?

Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Very little	Never
5	4	3	2	1

Open-Ended Questions About Play-Based Learning

1. In what ways do you believe play-based learning can help children develop?
2. What types of training have you had on using play-based learning in the classroom?
3. If you use play-based learning, what does that look like in your classroom? If you do not, please explain.
4. How are you supported in your use of play-based learning in your classroom?
5. Describe barriers that prevent you from using play-based learning in the classroom.
6. Is there anything you would like your administrators to know and understand about play-based learning? If so, please explain.

APPENDIX C. INTRODUCTION OF RESEARCHER

Dear Early Childhood Educator,

My name is Laura Rushatz, and I am a doctoral candidate from Anderson University in Anderson, SC. I am currently conducting research on the use of play-based learning in the early childhood classrooms. The goal of my research is to hear how early childhood educators perceive and use play-based learning in their classrooms, and how the teachers perceive their administrators' roles in incorporating play-based learning into their classrooms.

A link to a survey using Qualtrics is included in this email. If you choose to participate in the survey, click on the link and review the consent document. We anticipate it will take you approximately thirty minutes to complete the survey. This survey will be completely anonymous, but will hopefully be a valuable asset to early childhood educators and administrators. Thank you for your help in completing this survey.

Laura Rushatz

APPENDIX D. APPROVAL FOR RESEARCH (IRB)



Human Subjects Committee (HSC) Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Dear Laura B Reeves,

Proposal Title: Teachers' Perception of Play-Based Learning in the Early Childhood Classroom

Submission date: Monday, January 29, 2024, 12:46 PM

The Human Subjects Committee (HSC) has received and reviewed the submitted above-titled research proposal. I am happy to inform you that AU's IRB has voted to **APPROVE** your proposal as submitted. Your approval number is **AU202410IRB**.

Please be reminded that if at any point during the research, the risk level to any human subjects involved changes, either physical harm or loss of anonymity, or should you find it necessary to make any adjustments to the study as approved, please contact the HSC/IRB Chair in advance of implementing such changes. This may require that you submit an IRB Modification form.

We wish you well in your research.