EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES WITH IMPLEMENTING

PLAY-BASED LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Lori Lee Wagner

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

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Abstract

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to understand the early childhood education teachers' lived experiences implementing play-based learning in the early childhood classroom setting in the Maricopa County region of Arizona. Play-based learning is defined as an instructional approach involving playful, child-directed elements planned for, facilitated, or capitalized upon by the educator cognizant of learning objectives that are standard-driven (Allee-Herndon et al., 2021). The theory guiding this study was Vygotsky's social constructivism theory as it relates to the teachers' lived experiences implementing the play-based learning pedagogy with the children in the classroom. The study design was hermeneutical phenomenological qualitative research. The design used a criterion sampling strategy where early childhood education teachers from the Maricopa Region in Arizona were selected due to their experience with the phenomenon in this study. The data collection included in-person interviews, a focus group, and an in-person observation of every ECE teacher who participated in the study. The data was transcribed and analyzed with the use of memoing and coding to determine themes that were identified. Six themes were identified: learning through play, play-based learning's impact on children, guided learning strategies, the role of the teacher in play-based learning, challenges with implementing play-based learning, and the development of the child in play-based learning. The study results and implications can assist administrators, stakeholders, and directors in supporting teachers who implement play-based learning pedagogy for young children.

Keywords: play-based learning, early childhood education, early learning standards

Dedication

This study is dedicated to my brother, Paris Wallace. You were always there supporting me in anything I wanted to do in life, and you showed me in so many ways that you believed in me. Your love for God and tenacity to serve Him all throughout life inspired me to pursue my educational journey. In 2017, when you left this earth and joined Jesus in Heaven, I decided to go back to school and get my master's and then my doctorate. When times were hard and I thought about quitting, I remembered your contagious laugh and your famous saying, "that's crazy". Throughout my educational journey, you have been with me every step of the way and I have felt your presence even at 4:00 am in the morning as I sat at my computer working on an assignment. I know that you would be so proud of my accomplishment in receiving this degree and how I plan to use it in life to serve God. I love and miss you more than you could ever know.

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I want to thank my husband, Don, for your continuous sacrifice and support. Your encouragement, empathy, and love helped get me through the difficult days through this educational journey. I absolutely could not have accomplished this great achievement without you!

I want to thank my precious daughters Noelle, Stephanie, and Jessica for believing in me and consistently encouraging me to finish.

I want to thank my parents for loving and encouraging me all throughout my journey. Dad, I wish you could be here to see me accept my doctorate degree. I know that you are so proud of me and my accomplishment.

I want to thank my friends for putting up with my deadlines, listening to my challenges, and just being there for me.

I want to thank my doctorate committee members, Dr. Barnett, and Dr. Stone, for your guidance and support through this educational process.

I want to thank God for giving me the ability to learn and to teach. God, I give you all the credit for this great educational accomplishment. Through this educational journey, I have grown closer to you in so many ways and you have taught me so much about myself.

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List of Abbreviations

Early Childhood Education (ECE)

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Young children utilize a mixture of methods in their approaches to learning. Children learn through a variety of modes, methods, and modalities (Bredekamp, 2017). Some children learn through auditory, visual, kinesthetic, or hands-on (Bredekamp, 2017). Young children's learning is most successful through what interests them (Kellough and Jarolimek, 2008). They are intrinsically motivated when activities are offered that they find fun and exciting (Yogman et al., 2018). Therefore, early childhood teachers need to implement teaching pedagogy that is best for each child to be successful in learning. Although early childhood teachers may be interested in offering children a play-based model of learning, they can experience several challenges that hinder them, such as academic state standards, lack of knowledge of how to implement the play-based learning model, or that veteran teachers are set in the way of delivering instruction through the traditional teaching method (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). **The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to understand the early childhood education teachers' lived experiences implementing play-based learning in** any of the early childhood classroom settings servicing 3- to 5-year-olds in the Maricopa County region in Arizona**. In this chapter, there are multiple components discussed such as research background, researcher's situation in addition to including the problem, purpose, significance of the study, research questions, research plan, and limitations.**

Background

This section discusses the historical, social, and theoretical concepts that support the research by utilizing synthesized literature that is relevant to the study. The historical

context addresses the question of how the problem evolved, the social context discusses how society and education are affected by the problem, and the theoretical context discusses theoretical concepts associated with the research.

Historical Context

Early childhood children's learning expectations have increasingly advanced over the past decade due to the federal and state standardized testing and expectations to meet the requirements to enter Kindergarten. Therefore, early childhood educators must choose to implement individualized developmentally appropriate learning activities and methods of instruction for the students to meet the learning standards requirement to enter kindergarten (Bubikova-Moan et al, 2019). Play-based learning is a pedagogy that is being utilized in the early childhood classroom as an instructional strategy for successful learning (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019; Kheioh & Low, 2022; Ward & Wilcox Herzog, 2019, Yogman et al., 2018; Zosh et al., 2022). Due to the demands of increased learning standard expectations for students entering kindergarten, early childhood educators are finding it difficult to balance the learning standards expectations with the play-based learning pedagogy (Lewis et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2022; Pyle et al., 2017; Taylor & Boyer, 2019).

When early childhood teachers implement individualized developmentally appropriate instruction for the children, the children experience a variety of benefits. Among those benefits are increased executive function (Yogmen et al., 2018; Goble and Pianta, 2017), and a positive effect on the child's social and emotional development (Yogmen et al., 2018). When children experience learning through play with teacher scaffolding and teacher engagement with the play activity, the child builds strong, positive relationships with their teacher which enhances learning (Goble & Pianta, 2017).

Social Context

When young children learn through play-based learning they acquire skills that promote thinking independently, problem-solving, socialization skills, and expressing individualized differences (Kheioh & Low, 2022). An instructional approach involving playful, child-directed elements planned for, facilitated, or capitalized upon by the educator cognizant of learning objectives that are standard driven are included in the play-based learning pedagogy (Allee-Herndon et al., 2021). Play-based learning involves teacher-guided, and student-directed learning through play experiences (Goble & Pianata, 2017; Hu et al., 2018; Schmerse, 2020; Van Craeyevelt et al., 2017). Due to the pressure put on early childhood teachers to meet the state learning standards for school readiness, school administrators and directors must continually support teachers in the play-based learning pedagogy through resources and training (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019).

Theoretical Context

Although research supports the play-based learning theory in early childhood classrooms, direct instruction is still being widely utilized (Bruder & Ferreira, 2022; McKoy, 2022). Research does not provide the lived experiences of early childhood education teachers when implementing play-based learning in the early childhood classroom setting while balancing the academic learning standards content.

The purpose of this research was to understand the early childhood teacher's experiences implementing play-based learning pedagogy while balancing the academic instructional content to prepare the children to be ready for kindergarten. This research study could help school districts, administrators, supervisors, and directors support early childhood education teachers in

navigating a balance of implementing play-based learning along with meeting the state academic learning standards. Early childhood education teachers can use the study to learn from peers about their experiences with successes and challenges in implementing the play-based pedagogy.

Problem Statement

The problem is that early childhood education teachers experience challenges when trying to implement play-based learning. The benefits of play-based learning have been well-established in the literature (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Goble & Pianata, 2017; Mavilid et al., 2018; Schmerse, 2020; Vidal-Carulla et al., 2021; & Ward & Wilcox-Herzog, 2019). The problem is the absence of qualitative phenomenological research intended to articulate the early childhood education teachers' lived experiences with implementing play-based learning in the early childhood classroom. Lerslip et al., (2021), Mavilid et al. (2018), Rouse and Joseph (2019), and Trundle and Smith (2017) noted that when young children learn through play and hands-on experiences, learning is sustained. Learning and play are often separated in the minds of school administrators, teachers, and parents (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Early childhood education teachers must navigate a balance to protect play-based learning while children achieve school readiness within the state academic guidelines (De Luca et al., 2020). Early childhood education teachers experience challenges when trying to implement play-based learning. This study will examine play-based learning with young children, the benefits children experience when involved in play-based learning, and teacher/child interactions within this learning pedagogy. There are not many studies that address the early childhood teachers' lived experiences with implementing play-based learning or the benefits that children experience long-term with the play-based method of instruction. There is an absence of qualitative phenomenological research

intended to articulate the early childhood education teachers' lived experiences with implementing play-based learning in the early childhood classroom. This study's empirical significance will add research to the existing gap.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to understand the early childhood education teachers' lived experiences implementing play-based learning in any of the early childhood classroom settings servicing 3- to 5-year-olds in the Maricopa County region in Arizona. Play-based learning will be generally defined as an instructional approach involving playful, child-directed elements planned for, facilitated, or capitalized upon by the educator cognizant of learning objectives that are standard-driven (Allee-Herndon et al., 2021).

Early childhood education teachers provide educational instruction in a variety of modes and methods. Some of the methods are in the form of traditional instruction with the use of worksheets, flashcards, and rote memory. Other methods are hands-on activities and play-based learning. Play-based learning is being implemented in early childhood classrooms to address the variety of approaches to learning that children experience (Goble & Pianta, 2018). Early childhood education teachers experience challenges and difficulties implementing play-based learning due to the academic learning expectations to prepare children for school readiness (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Educational study results suggest that young children maintain learning when they experience hands-on and play-based activities. The expectations of young children's academic school readiness have changed in the past decade. Teachers in early childhood classrooms must make decisions on the best way to prepare children with the variety of children's approaches to learning and the variety of methods of instruction being offered to children. Due to the demand for children's knowledge entering kindergarten, early childhood

teachers must navigate incorporating play-based learning within state academic standards to ensure that children are ready for school. Early childhood education teachers' academic instruction is guided by academic standards, and therefore early childhood teachers must choose the best method for each child to effectively learn the content that is required. Challenges happen when early childhood teachers focus on content and neglect to implement developmentally appropriate methods for hands-on activities and play-based learning (Lewis et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2018; Pyle et al., 2017; Walsh et al., 2019). This research study could help school districts support early childhood education teachers in navigating a balance of implementing play-based learning along with meeting the state academic standards. Early childhood education teachers can use the study to learn from peers about their experiences with successes and challenges in implementing the play-based pedagogy.

Significance of the Study

The benefits of play-based learning experiences in early childhood classrooms have been established through research (Goble and Pianta, 2017; Hesterman & Targowska, 2020; Lunga et al., 2020; Nolan & Pataasch, 2018; Pistorova & Slutsky, 2018; Robertson et al., 2020; Wishart & Rouse, 2019; Yogmen et al., 2018; Zosh et al., 2022; Zucca, et al., 2022). According to the results of the research, a gap has been discussed between best practices and what is happening in the classrooms (De Luca et al., 2020; Fleer, 2018; Kheioh & Low, 2022). Although there has been extensive research conducted on play-based learning experiences, this study explored the experiences of early childhood education teachers' experiences in implementing the play-based learning pedagogy and the gaps that are present when utilizing the learning model in early childhood classrooms.

The theoretical significance of this study originated with Vygotsky (1978), a social cognitive constructivist theorist, who believed that children learn more effectively through social interactions with teachers, and peers, and the implementation of hands-on learning. Vygotsky (1978) promoted the idea that children should not just learn with hands-on activities in a play-based setting but also be guided by teacher scaffolding and by more capable peers (Schunk, 2020; Shoaib, 2017).

This study was practically significant because, through the lived experiences of early childhood education teachers, insight into the success and challenges of implementing play-based learning was gained. The information will help supervisors, administrators, and directors better support the teachers as they implement play-based learning pedagogy in the classroom. The research focus on play-based learning has addressed the benefits that pedagogy has for children but often missing the teachers' experiences (Devi et al., 2021; Goble & Pianta, 2017; Smolucha & Smolucha, 2021; Yogman et al., 2018). This research discussed the early childhood education teachers' experience in play-based learning implementation in their classrooms.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of early childhood education teachers when implementing play-based learning in any of the early childhood classroom settings servicing 3- to 5-year-olds in the Maricopa County region in Arizona?

Sub-Question One

How do early childhood education teachers describe the importance of play in the classroom?

Sub-Question Two

What challenges do early childhood education teachers experience when implementing play-based learning?

Sub-Question Three

How does the early childhood education teacher view their role in the play-based learning experience with the student's learning?

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Definitions

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1. *Approaches to Learning* – Children's individualized preferred way of learning while engaged in classroom activities and interactions (Chen & Mcnamee, 2011).

2. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* – Teaching pedagogy that considers the child's strengths and the practice of play in children's learning (McKoy, 2022).

3. *Direct Instruction* – Teacher-directed learning activities that focus on the practice of skills (Reyes, 2010).

4. *Early Childhood Education* – Instruction for children from birth to eight years of age by people outside the family or in a setting not at home (Law, 2012).

5. *Early Childhood Education Teachers* –Adults in early childhood settings who are caregivers and instruct children from birth to eight years of age (Manning et al., 2019).

6. *Early Learning Standards* – Standards that characterize the dispositions, skills, and knowledge that young children can demonstrate before entering kindergarten (Bruder & Ferreira, 2021).

7. *Play-Based Learning* – Play experiences are offered to children while they engage in meaningful learning (Daniels & Pyle, 2018).

8. *Quality in Early Childhood Education* – Education that consists of staff, child ratios, group sizes, teacher qualifications, teacher wages, teacher turnover, teacher/child relationships, and intentional teacher observation (Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel, 2007).

9. *Scaffolding* – Support provided by a teacher or a more capable peer to assist a child in completing a task that would be hindered by the absence of assistance (van dePol et al., 2010).

10. *Zone of Proximal Development* – "The child's zone of proximal development is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Zaretesky, 2021, p. 39).

Summary

Due to the emphasis on academic learning to prepare young children to be ready for kindergarten, early childhood education teachers are under pressure to decide the best way to implement instruction (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). In this study, the researcher explored early childhood educator's experiences with successes and challenges when trying to implement play-based learning. This study sought to understand the teachers' lived experiences implementing play-based learning in the early childhood classroom and to provide information for supervisors, administrators, directors, teachers, and parents to support teachers' decision to effectively utilize the play-based learning pedagogy in the classroom. Important components addressed in this study were the research background, problem, purpose, significance, questions, research plan, implications for practice, limitations, delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to explore the early childhood education (ECE) teachers' lived experiences with implementing play-based learning in any of the early childhood classroom settings servicing 3- to 5-year-olds in the Maricopa County region in Arizona. This chapter will present a review of the current literature related to the topic of study. In the first section, the theory relevant to play-based learning will be discussed, followed by a synthesis of recent literature regarding ECE teachers' lived experiences with implementing the play-based learning pedagogy. Finally, the nature of play-based learning, the benefits to children involved in play-based learning, the role that developmental learning environments play, teacher-child interactions, and teacher challenges will be discussed. The need for the current study is addressed by identifying a gap in the literature that includes teacher implementation, equal opportunities for all children to participate, and lack of research in educational play.

Theoretical Framework

There are several cognitive constructivism theorists such as Piaget, Dewey, Bruner, and Vygotsky. Piaget (1953) believed that children develop in four stages, and promoted that children have a logical way of thinking that must be followed in stages according to specific age brackets. The cognitive constructivism theory that was associated with Piaget (1953) endorsed the idea that children learn through assimilation and accommodation and that they search for an equilibration while learning (Cheung, 2018). Equilibration is defined as children shifting from one stage to another with ease (Piaget, 1953). The cognitive constructivism theory centered on logical development (Piaget, 1953). Cognitive constructivists believe that individuals construct their learning and understanding (Schunk, 2020; Smolucha & Smolucha, 2021; Taylor & Boyer,

2019). Dewey promoted learning that was student-oriented in which children were actively engaged in activities that they could relate to in the real world (Schunk, 2020). Dewey promoted teachers as guides to children's learning through thought-provoking inquiries to increase the child's problem-solving skills and increase critical thinking (Schunk, 2020). Bruner promoted a constructivist learning theory in which the learning focus was on social interactions and children engaged in hands-on activities (Schuck, 2020). However, the theorist who promotes play-based learning and was chosen to discuss in this study is Vygotsky (1978).

Social Cognitive Constructivism Theory

Vygotsky's (1978) social cognitive constructivism theory provided the theoretical foundation for this research. Cognitive constructivism promotes the idea that knowledge is developed by situational experiences (Schunk, 2020). Vygotsky (1978) was a cognitive constructivism theorist who believed that children learn through social interactions through teacher scaffolding and more capable peers during hands-on activities. The cognitive constructivism theory promotes the idea that children should not just learn with hands-on activities in a play-based setting but also be guided by teacher scaffolding and more capable peers (Cheung, 2018; Schunk, 2020; Shoaib, 2017; Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, Vygotsky's learning theory is referred to as social constructivism (Schunk, 2020).

Social constructivism refers to individuals' learning through interactions that are interpersonal (social), cultural-historical, and individual (Schunk, 2020; Smolucha & Smolucha, 2021). Vygotsky (1978) promoted the theory that individual learning is successful when it is experienced in a social setting with peers and teachers scaffolding the learning experience (Hun & Cheung, 2018; Nardo, 2021; Shoaib, 2017; Smolucha & Smolucha, 2021). Scaffolding in

education can be defined as a teacher using language in the form of open-ended questions and word usage with the child to enhance the child's success in learning (Schunk, 2020).

One of Vygotsky's main concepts in his theory is known as the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Schunk, 2020). The zone of proximal development is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Zaretesky, 2021, p. 39). The zone of proximal development involves the child and the educator working together to learn a concept with the educator's guidance for the child to learn a difficult task that otherwise he or she would not be able to learn on their own (Schunk, 2020; Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding plays an important role in the zone of proximity development as the teacher guides the child to a higher order of thinking for the child to be successful in learning the skill or being successful in completing the task (Schunk, 2020). When early childhood teachers guide learning, they do not deliver direct instruction to the children. Direct instruction from a teacher is when instruction is led by the teacher with instruction that is structured and delivered sequentially. Teachers' direct instruction and the teaching process are directed "to" a student. Direct instruction contradicts the teaching practice that of play-based learning where the child directs the learning and the teacher acts as a guide. The negative effect of direct instruction is that not all children learn the same and possess a variety of approaches to learning.

Vygotsky (1978) believed that children learn at an individual pace instead of in stages as was Piaget's learning theory (Schunk, 2020). Within the social cognitive constructivist belief promoted by Vygotsky, individuals learn more effectively with hands-on opportunities with guided instruction (Smolucha & Smolucha, 2021). Vygotsky (1978) was a cognitive

constructivism theorist who promoted and expanded the idea of ZPD, scaffolding, and play-based theory pedagogy. The theory of social cognitive constructivism associated with the theorist, Vygotsky (1978), provided the theoretical foundation for this research.

<div align="center">**Related Literature**</div>

The play-based learning model is designed for children to have free choice in activities and hands-on experiences with a teacher's guiding instruction through a conversation format rather than direct instruction (Goble & Pianta, 2018). The purpose of this study was to explore the early childhood education (ECE) teachers' lived experiences implementing play-based learning in any of the early childhood classroom settings servicing 3- to 5-year-olds in the Maricopa County region in Arizona. In this literature review, the following concepts of play-based learning pedagogy are discussed: the nature of play-based learning, the benefits to children involved in play-based learning, the role that developmental learning environments play, teacher-child interactions, and teacher challenges. This section will provide a synthesis of the current literature on play-based learning and the effects that it has on children in early childhood classrooms.

Nature of Learning through Play

There is a growing consensus among educators that children's play through learning involves an intrinsically motivated activity, with active engagement and joyful discovery (Yogman et al., 2018). Play-based learning refers to a practice of facilitating learning through play that encompasses creativity and imagination (Moedt & Holmes, 2020; Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019). Play-based learning with young children started in the early 1800s with Friedrich Frobel introducing the concept of preschool settings being natural (Kandemir & Sevimli-Celik, 2021; Taylor & Boyer, 2019). In the late 1800s, Rudolf Steiner focused on children's learning

activities to be tailored individually centering on children's interests and understanding (Taylor & Boyer, 2019). Other early childhood pioneers such as Maria Montessori supported the idea that children's learning should involve freedom of choice to enhance individual learning and focused engagement (Kandemir & Sevimli-Celik, 2021; Taylor & Boyer, 2019).

In the United States, early childhood education includes facilities that offer center-based care, family childcare, faith-based care, and Head Start. Center-based care are facilities that can be licensed or unlicensed depending on state regulations. The center-based care for children meets in a facility building and can service children from a small to a large occupancy capacity. Family childcare facilities are early childcare businesses that meet out of homes and usually have smaller occupancy numbers. Faith-based facilities are childcare facilities that often meet in a church, associated with a church, and/or conduct religious practices. Faith-based preschools can be licensed or not depending on the state regulations and range from small to large in occupant capacity. Head Start is a preschool program that offers preschool to low-income families.

Within play-based learning, there is structure, freedom, flexibility, and a mix of child, and adult-initiated activities (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019; Moedt & Holmes, 2020). Play-based learning encourages children to learn through thinking independently, problem-solving, enhancing socialization skills, and expressing individualized differences (Kallitsoglou, et al, 2022). Play-based learning has been referred to as an instructional approach involving playful, child-directed elements planned for, facilitated, or capitalized upon by the educator cognizant of learning objectives that are standard-driven (Allee-Herndon et al., 2021; Taylor & Boyer, 2019). Zosh et al., (2022) introduce the idea of "playful learning" in which children play freely in self-directed or free play. For playful learning to be successful, three components must be considered: the degree of involvement from the adult, the degree of learning that is child-directed, and the

individual child's learning goal. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) discussed learning through play as self-directed by the child and guided by the educator (Zosh et al., 2022). Learning through play is a needed developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) in the early childhood classroom (Zosh et al., 2018; Ward & Wilcox Herzog, 2019).

Pistorova and Slutsky (2017) discussed the importance of children learning through play to enhance the four C's: critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. Pistorova and Slutsky (2017) noted that in the United States, educators continue to teach in a one-size-fits-all mentality and that thriving, successful businesses are looking for people who are innovative and creative. When children are allowed to be involved in a play-based learning environment where they can discover, explore, and create the four C's are utilized.

Play-based learning encompasses social, cultural, emotional, and physical development. Play-based learning goals include children's social, cognitive, emotional, and physical development and preparing them with abilities that are associated with life skills (Sethusha, 2020). Children's learning through play can be classified as free play (child-controlled), guided play (shared-controlled), and teacher-directed (teacher-controlled) play (Wickstrom et al., 2019). Within play-based learning, children can learn through free choice along with teacher-directed activity settings (Goble and Pianta, 2017). In these learning setting models, teachers allow young children to have free choice in activities but scaffold alongside the child's learning with intentional interactions (Bourbour et al., 2020; Goble & Pianta, 2017). Teachers instruct less formally through conversations and interactions in the child's play pointing out developmentally appropriate concepts, and that the child should be learning (Goble & Pianta, 2017). There is a need for a balance with this type of play-based learning to help the child be school-ready (Goble

and Pianta, 2017). When children engage in free play there are no specific learning goals in mind (Bustamante et al., 2020). In guided play, there is a specific learning goal involved for the child but is mixed with child-directed play and teacher scaffolding (Bustamante et al., 2020). Zosh et al. (2022) discuss the success of guided play for the child that focuses on the teacher's intentionality with the learning goals and setting up the physical environment for exploration that is child-directed and intentional questions that will lead to a higher level of thinking with the individual child. There are several benefits for the children in guided play which are child-directed activities, and learning materials that invite the child to explore and discover which will enhance the enjoyment of learning and increase child assimilation of information that is new with knowledge that already exists (Zosh et al., 2022).

There are several categories of play such as object play, physical, locomotor, or rough-and-tumble play, outdoor play, and social or pretend play alone or with others (Yogman et al., 2018). Through play, children learn how to problem-solve, collaborate and be creative (Kesalainen et al., 2022; Moedt & Holmes, 2020). Children learn how to plan, develop roles, use props, share, and use language. Children should learn through exploration, creativity, and discovery (Moedt & Holmes, 2020). Early childhood educators guide and provide the learning environment with activities that promote learning through play for exploration, creativity, and discovery to be successfully mastered (Kesalanien, 2019; Zosh et al., 2018). Taylor and Boyer (2020) discuss the types of play as free play, in which children engage in choice, inquiry play which involves play according to the interests of the child and directed by the child, and collaboratively designed play that involves both the teacher and child often learning through play via games. Pyle et al., (2017) discussed the three types of play as child-directed play or free play, mutually directed play, and teacher-directed play. Sethusha (2020) notes the types of play as

object play, symbolic play, games with rules, fantasy play, and physical play. Lunga et al., (2020) note six types of play: fantasy play, dramatic play, manipulative play, games with rules, exploratory play, and small-world play. Simoncinic and Lasen (2021) refer to the areas within the play as play taxonomies. Play taxonomies consist of stages of play, types of play, and modes of play (Simonicini & Larsen, 2021).

Although the play-based learning model has been experienced by teachers, children, parents, and stakeholders to be developmentally appropriate and effective for young learners, other stakeholders believe that young children should be taught in more academic, traditional, and educator-directed instruction (Arlene Harris, 2021). Arlene Harris (2021) argues that the evidence denoted that the academic, educator-directed learning approach is not age or developmentally appropriate and that there are no benefits to the overall growth of the young child. Arlene Harris (2021) notes that the constructivist approach that is child-centered promotes more development and learning opportunities because of the natural way that children learn.

Children develop in several areas when learning through play. When infants play and learn they are involved in activities such as smiling interactions, games such as "peek-a-boo" and physical movement (Yogmen et al., 2018). Over time, young children's play moves from dependence to independence and from regulation from the adult to self-regulation from the child (Yogman et al., 2018). Through the development of play, young children learn social skills and increase executive function. Children gain several benefits through play-based pedagogy including social, cognitive (executive function), and language benefits (Zosh et al., 2022).

The main emphasis of play-based learning is that it is child-centered where children follow their intrinsic and explorative inclination as they develop and learn (Lunga et al., 2020). When children learn through play, the focus is not so much on the outcome as much as the

process (Hesterman & Targowski, 2020). Play-based learning is viewed through the lens of each child (Pistorova & Slutsky, 2018; Zosh et al., 2022).

Play-Based Learning Benefits

Educational researchers discuss the benefits of children who experience play-based learning, which include the potential to increase executive function and therefore increase their school readiness (Nolan & Pataasch, 2018; Yogmen et al., 2018; Goble and Pianta, 2017). When children learn through play, children benefit from cognitive procedures that involve thinking of a higher order in solving problems, thinking reflectively, talking with perspective and attention, and self-regulation (Robertson et al., 2020). For social benefits to be experienced the classroom needs to be set up for children to interact socially with peers which includes pedagogical processes that are interpersonal, relationships built between the child and the educator, behavior guidance strategies that are positive, and teacher's play involvement with the children (Robertson et al., 2020). Social environments that enhance social development include the involvement of children in an area of dramatic play including guided play, free play, interactions, relationships, and supervision between the teacher and the child (Robertson et al., 2020). Social involvement can take place throughout the classroom within the variety of learning centers and activities offered. Zosh et al. (2022) note the benefit of self-directed play or free play to the encouragement of a child's independence initiative and problem-solving skills that enhance development in social and emotional areas.

Another benefit that children acquire through play-based learning is holistic development that includes social, emotional, physical, and intellectual aspects that essentially affect the whole child (Hesterman & Targowska, 2020; Lunga et al., 2020; Wishart & Rouse, 2019; Zucca et al., 2022). Play-based learning includes benefits such as "emotion regulation, promotion of positive

feelings, stress response systems, creativity, and learning" (Pistorova & Slutsky, 2018, p. 499). Lunga et al. (2020) discuss that when a child plays it reinforces skills that children need as they develop such as communicating with peers, problem resolution, relationship building with adults and peers, enhancing motor skills and self-regulation skills (Pistorova & Slutsky, 2018). When children experience play-based learning through their interests they benefit from acquiring self-identity, understanding more about life and more about themselves and how they fit into the world (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). Hesterman and Targowska (2020) note the benefits of play-based learning to enhance language skill development and memory function which will help the child to be more prepared for school and have a positive attitude to learn and grow. There is neuroscience research that acknowledges that when children engage in effective play-based learning environments, it encourages the development of executive function (Hesterman & Targowska, 2020).

Cognitive Benefits

Some of the benefits that children experience when they learn through play are that play has effects on brain functioning and structure, executive functioning improvements which include cognitive flexibility, inhibitory control, and working memory which allow for distraction filtering, attention better sustained, self-control, self-regulation flexibility mentally and increased capacity for problem-solving, early math skills, language, relationship with peers, physical and social development (Devi et al., 2021; Goble & Pianta, 2017; Hesterman & Targowska, 2020; Smolucha & Smolucha, 2021; Yogman et al., 2018). When children engage in pretend play it reinforces cognitive functions through symbolism which includes the substitution of objects, role enactment, action sequencing, and involving stories and characters within the story (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). Sensorimotor and verbal functioning along with involvement were observed in 2-

to 4-year-old children during collaborative play resulting in higher cognitive functioning (van

Schaik et al., 2018). Kesalainen et al., (2022) note some of the cognitive benefits of learning

through play are inhibitory control, cognitive flexibility, attention regulation, planning, problem-

solving, and planning. Kesalainen et al., (2022) discusses how learning through play intertwines

language, social, and cognitive benefits through children working together and connecting to the

world around them.

Social Benefits

In the early childhood classroom, children need to learn social skills such as positive peer

relationships by learning how to interact with peers, perspective-taking, and sharing

(Kallitsoglou, 2020). Kallisoglou (2020) discusses the importance of young children acquiring

social skills in the early childhood setting for preparation for academic development. Yogman et

al., (2018) discuss the benefits of learning through play that positively affect the child's social

and emotional development. When children experience learning through play with teacher

scaffolding and teacher engagement with the play activity, the child builds strong, positive

relationships with their teacher which enhances learning (Goble & Pianta, 2017). Play

encourages problem-solving skills, reading and arithmetic skills, and social-emotional skills

(Kesalainen et al., 2022; Kheioh & Low, 2022). Robertson et al., (2020) discuss that dramatic

play benefits children with social skills and language development. Starting with infants, when

teachers communicate with children and assist them in engaging in group activities, enhanced

social competencies in later years (van Shaik et al., 2018).

When preschool children engage in play activities that are offered by the teacher in the

classroom, they play with peers. While playing with peers, they learn how to communicate,

collaborate, gain content, think critically, exercise creative innovation, and gain confidence

(Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2020; Kesalainen et al., 2022; Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). Play requires children to learn to give and take and to communicate their feelings and ideas (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2020). Through play, young children can set social goals and identity assertions (Erdemir & Brutt-Griffler, 2022). When young children set their social goals when interacting with one another, they exhibit interactions with engagement, being cooperative and constructive (Erdemir & Brutt-Griffler, 2022). On the other hand, not all social interactions in play are positive. During adverse negative interactions with children, teachers can scaffold with language to help the children problem-solve differences and learn positive social norms that can be later used as adults (Erdemir & Brutt-Griffler, 2022; Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2020).

Children develop self-regulation skills when playing socially with one another (Kesalainen et al., 2022; Taylor & Boyer, 2019; Lunga et al., 2022; Sharer, 2017). Children learn to follow rules and monitor fairness with one another while engaging in playing (Taylor & Boyer, 2019; Sharer, 2017). Cognitive decentering takes place through play when children look at others' perspectives and objects through the lens of those whom they are playing with (Sharer, 2017). Children set short- and long-term goals while playing as they develop the setting within their play environment (McArdle et al., 2018; Sharer, 2017).

Language Benefits

When children play together, often language is required to be used. Children communicate during play to share ideas or thoughts (Moedt & Holmes, 2020). Taylor and Boyer (2019) list the language benefits of play such as increased communication skills, conversation routines, and oral vocabulary all during the play interactions with teachers and peers. When communication is taking place children learn how to verbally use words and increase vocabulary development (Erdemir & Brutt-Griffler, 2022). Language development in play is important for

children who speak a second language to learn the prominent language of the classroom to communicate with each other (Erdemir & Brutt-Griffler, 2022). Group play requires children to learn how to communicate with one another, enhance language such as sentence structure, advance vocabulary, effectively express their message, and follow instructions (Lunga et al., 2020; Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). Robertson, et al., (2020) discuss the use of guided play that is child-directed with the teacher and enhances the child's vocabulary. There are a variety of ways that children can enhance language development through play. One of those ways is shared book reading followed by children reenacting the story to one another with the use of props (Moedt & Holmes, 2020). Moedt and Holmes (2020) discuss the benefits of shared book-reading activities to enhance reading, and vocabulary development and to promote literacy.

Developmental Learning Environments

In the play-based learning model, environments play a crucial role for children to be successful in the learning process (Butamante et al., 2020). There are two essential environments in which the children engage in exploration and discovery: the indoor environment and the outdoor environment. The teacher needs to understand what is offered indoors in the way of furniture, and learning materials, and instruction should be extended to the outdoors. Early childhood educators should understand that open-ended learning should be offered to children not exclusively indoors but outdoors as well and that the transition between the two learning environments should be fluent (Tuuling et al., 2019).

Indoor Learning Environment

Within the learning environment, learning materials and classroom layout should be conducive to inviting children to actively explore and connect their experience to the real world in which they live (Hesterman & Targowski, 2020). Conversely, a disorganized arrangement in

the early childhood classroom setting can impede engagement, exploration, and interactions (Matthews & Lippman, 2019). The environment needs to encourage children to engage and interact in a collaborative setting with teachers and peers (Matthews & Lippman, 2019; Sethushsa, 2020). The environment layout of the classroom decides who will be guiding the learning whether it is the teacher or the child (Sethusha, 2020). Environments include physical and tangible learning materials along with teacher/child interactions (Goble & Pianta, 2017; Karlıdağ, 2021; Lerslip et al., 2021; Rentzou, 2021). When children can explore their environment with the use of their senses when they are playing, intentional learning takes place (Sethusha, 2020). The verbiage used in the play-based learning model is crucial for parents and stakeholders to understand the difference between children playing with the use of "toys" and children learning with learning materials that are specifically offered to the children by the teacher to learn a specific subject matter. Children are learning through play when using learning materials which can be in the form of random objects called loose parts. Early childhood education teachers play a vital role in making sure that environments are set up in a manner that is conducive to learning independently with guided instruction or scaffolding from the teacher or a more capable peer. Behavior and social interactions exhibited by children in the early childhood setting are the result of the physical environment (Matthews & Lippman, 2019). The learning environment includes the size of the classroom, noise level, organization, density, lighting, classroom design, furniture, learning materials, and the quality of air and ventilation (Matthew & Lippman, 2019).

Another area of importance to discuss in the developmental learning environment is teacher and child interaction. Vygotsky (1978) discussed the importance of teachers guiding children's learning through scaffolding. Teachers must observe children at play and engage when

children need help with understanding a concept or mastering a skill (Goble & Pianta, 2017; Leggett & Newman, 2017). When teachers guide a child in understanding a concept or mastering a skill, they are exercising the zone of proximity development that Vygotsky promoted in his theory (Vygotsky, 1978). When teachers are involved in scaffolding and guiding learning, they build relationships with children which help children feel more confident in the learning process (Goble & Pianata, 2017; Hu et al., 2018; Schmerse, 2020; Van Craeyevelt, et al., 2017). Teachers who build relationships through conversations and intentional interactions increase young children's success in maintaining learning (Goble & Pianta, 2017; Hu et al., 2018). Evidence from research indicates that when teachers are emotionally supportive and stimulate young children cognitively, there is an increase in school readiness (Goble & Pianta, 2017; Schmerse, 2020). When teachers are collaborative partners in the child's learning experience, the child learns a variety of academic and social skills (Goble & Pianta, 2017; Hu et al., 2018). Within teacher/child interactions when teachers are in physical proximity while children play, children tend to engage in learning through play longer (Devi et. al., 2021, Goble & Pianta, 2017).

Outdoor Learning Environment

Play-based learning is play with a purpose for young children. While children play, they explore, discover, problem-solve, and exercise their curiosity. Not only should teachers implement play-based learning indoors but should offer a quality outdoor environment to enhance critical thinking, problem-solving, and teacher/child interactions along with peer interactions. "Natural outdoor play spaces invite open-ended interactions, spontaneity, risk-taking, exploration, discovery, and connection with nature. Natural play spaces also foster an appreciation of the natural environment, developmental environmental awareness, and provide a

platform for ongoing environmental education" (Wishart & Rouse, 2019, p. 2285). Early

childhood educators are implementing a more holistic learning environment in the outdoor play

area to promote development and learning in the young child in the following areas: intellectual,

social, emotional, and physical (Tuuing et al., 2019; Wisehart & Rouse, 2019). Outdoor play

areas that provide children with loose parts instead of stationary structures, promote children to

increase social skills when working with other children to create something, be creative, and

include opportunities that are open-ended for the child to learn (Wishart & Rouse, 2019). Early

childhood educators refer to outdoor learning as having a holistic approach to learning and

consider it nature-based (Zucca et al., 2022). In the nature-based learning setting, children play

with loose parts and things found in nature to learn and develop in the areas defined in the

holistic approach such as cognitive, social, physical, and emotional (Zucca et al., 2022). In the

nature-based setting, children create their ideas and experiences with little guidance from the

teacher (Zucca, et al., 2022).

There are several benefits to outdoor play-based learning. Kandemir and Sevimli-Celik

(2021) note a few of the benefits for young children to play outdoors as connecting with nature,

understanding the natural world, and understanding the order of everyday life. Kandemir &

Sevimli-Celik (2021) discusses other benefits of play-based learning outdoors such as enhancing

children's working memory, social-emotional development, and academic subjects such as

literacy, art, science, and math as well. When children experience indoor learning opportunities

to the outdoors, they engage in activities in which they get to experiment and explore (Kandemir

& Sevimli-Celik, 2021). Outdoor play-based learning can be met with some opposition as

children tend to get dirtier while engaging in outdoor activities. Parents, stakeholders, and

educators need to understand and have knowledge of all the learning benefits for children that

are associated with outdoor learning and not be afraid if children get dirty (Kandemir & Sevimli-Celik, 2021). Teachers must engage with the children with play-based learning pedagogy outdoors to successfully enhance the child's learning goal or activity (Kandemir & Sevimli-Celik, 2021). Teacher's physical interaction with the child engaged in an outdoor learning activity helps to build teacher-child relationships along with guided open-ended questions and conversations to help the child engage in a higher level of thinking process along with improving critical thinking skills (Kandemir & Sevimli-Celik, 2021). Kandemir and Sevimli-Celik (2021) discuss the importance of early childhood education teachers to be fully equipped with knowledge and continued professional development of the outdoor play-based learning pedagogy for the child's outdoor learning to be achieved. Kandemir & Sevimli-Celik (2021) note that when teachers have the acquired knowledge, the outdoor learning environments are set up for the child; so that it encourages learning through play with loose parts, equipment to promote physical activity, and play that is exciting.

Children's Interests

In the play-based learning environment, children need to have offered to them inspirational and exciting surroundings with many learning materials for children to use to be creative discover, and explore (Matthews & Lippman, 2019; Sethusha, 2020). Children can learn in a variety of ways in a play-based learning environment with the use of both structured play in which the teacher plans activities for the children to engage in and free play that allows the child to engage with learning materials that interest them (Robertson et al., 2020; Sethusha, 2020). When children are allowed to choose activities through play they learn how to design, create, experiment, explore, problem-solve, think, imagine, and learn (Sethusha, 2020). Simoncini and Lasen (2021) discuss that play for the child should be enjoyable, chosen freely, and motivated from within each child.

Important Adult Interactions with Children

Within the constructivist learning theory, the basis for learning is the idea of students' knowledge being constructed through their environment and interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). In the constructivist learning environment, the role of the teacher is important (Goble & Pianta, 2017, Sethusha, 2020). Positive relationships between the teacher and the child are essential in the early childhood classroom setting because it sets children up for success by providing a secure base to engage and explore in-classroom activities that support social and academic development (Taylor & Boyer, 2019; McNally & Slutsky, 2017; Pistorova & Slutsky, 2018). The role of the teacher in play-based learning pedagogy is to guide the child as they learn through play (Goble & Pianata, 2017; Hu et al., 2018; Schmerse, 2020; Van Craeyevelt et al., 2017).

Teacher-child interactions are crucial for a child's development (Coelho et al., 2019). Teacher-child interactions are more important than the education content or the physical learning environment (Shim & Lim, 2019). Within the classroom, teacher-child interactions can be seen in the emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support that teachers give to children during the play-based learning process (Coelho et al., 2019).

The teacher engages in the students learning by observation, assessment, and active participation (Coelho et al., 2019). During active participation, the teacher asks open-ended questions and engages in intentional conversation with the child within the scope of the activity to help the child have a deeper and richer learning experience (Goble & Pianata, 2017; Hu et al., 2018; Schmerse, 2020; Van Craeyevelt et al., 2017). Teacher-child interactions consist of the characteristics of being sensitive and supportive (van Schaik et al., 2018).

Research shows that children who learn through their own experiences through exploring, discovery, and creativity retain the concepts that were learned during the activity more than rote

memory or inclusive teacher instruction (Lewis et al., 2019). Therefore, teachers need to know their role in the play-based learning implementation with the children (Stavholm et al., 2022). First, teachers need to be intentional with learning outcomes so that the physical environment and child-interest activities can be offered (Taylor & Boyer, 2019). When teachers lack the understanding of why or how to implement play-based learning, they get discouraged and overwhelmed which leads to the play-based learning pedagogy not being utilized (Miller et al., 2022; Seo & Yuh, 2021).

Early childhood educators can experience a lack of self-efficacy in their profession due to the adverse work environment with overwork and low pay. Shim and Lim (2019) discuss that due to teachers experiencing low self-efficacy, teacher-child interactions can be negatively affected. Teachers who display low self-efficacy affect the children's behavior often observed during peer interactions during play, play disruptions, and play disconnections (Shim & Lim, 2019). If teachers experience any of the challenges mentioned later in this paper it can cause a negative teacher-child interaction which can impede the child's learning (Miller et al., 2021; Seo & Yuh, 2021).

When teachers interact and use language with children during the learning process, they are building relationships with the children. When strong, positive relationships are built, then children will be able to have more trust in the teacher and have a sense of safety to learn which is discussed within Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Mutch, 2021). Educators need to understand that integrating play-based learning with intentional teaching is vital for the improvement of child outcomes through quality adult-child interactions that take place during instruction (McArdle, et al., 2018).

Use of Technology

The use of technology in the early childhood setting encompasses a variety of components that are utilized by both the child and the teacher. In 2001, the National Science Foundation introduced internationally the educational conception of focus in pedagogy to concentrate and include science, technology, engineering, and mathematics otherwise known as STEM (Simoncini & Lasen, 2018). The use of technology came with mixed ideas amongst the early childhood educators both in personal preference with instruction, the education with implementing usage in the classroom, and the challenges with the young children using technology in the classroom from the lack of devices offered or the guidance for learning usage (Alelaimat, et al., 2020; Chordia et al., 2019; Eliasson et al., 2022; Eliasson et al., 2022; Johnston et al., 2018; Kulaksiz & Toran, 2022; Mertala, 2019; Nikolopoulou, 2021; Romero-Tena et al., 2020; Zabatiero et al., 2018). The use of technology and learning through play in the play-based classroom should not be looked at as two separate avenues of learning but be utilized by the early childhood educator as an integrated way of learning in a variety of subjects such as literacy, math, science, and the whole child's development in physical, social, emotional, and cognitive areas. Johnston et al., (2018) discuss how due to societal technology usage it is important for early childhood educators to prepare children for digital citizenship in the twenty-first century.

Technological devices come in a variety of ways such as tablets, smartphones, personal computers, televisions, and laptops where digital games and interactive websites are utilized (Alelaimat et al., 2021; Nikolopoulou, 2021). Nikolopoulou (2021) reported that in 2019, 67% of 5-7-year-old children preferred using the tablet to go online. Zabetiero et al., (2018) noted that in research conducted in Australia in 2017 findings showed that one-third of the children in Australia from birth to five years owned their tablet or smartphone and the usage results were that infants and toddlers spent approximately 14 hours a week on digital devices compared to

two to five-year-olds usage a week averaging 26 hours per week. Chordia et al, 2019 noted that "a comprehensive national census of digital media use among United States children (ages 0-8) reported that in 2017, almost every US household with young children had both a television and internet access" and "42% of children (ages 0-8) owned their dedicated tablet-up from less than 1% in 2011" (Chordia et al., 2019, p. 3). When COVID-19 happened in 2020 and children had to learn through digital devices, the importance of using a variety of devices became an important tool for instructional and academic learning to continue (Romero-Tena et al., 2020). Challenges to digital academic instruction became apparent as teachers were not prepared to teach in the digital method and some children did not have a digital device or internet to be able to access the teacher's instruction (Romero-Tena et al., 2020).

It is essential to address in this literature review focusing on technology intertwined with play-based learning the complex components that are involved for young children to be successful in using technology for academic learning. Some of those components include teacher preparedness when utilizing technology, curriculum development incorporating technology in the classroom, and benefits and challenges that teachers face to incorporate technology within the play-based learning pedagogy.

Teacher Preparedness with Technology

As defined and discussed earlier in this chapter, early childhood children sustain learning concepts when they can have activities offered to them that they are interested in with the teacher available to guide learning. Within the play-based learning classroom environment, it is becoming more of a necessity to incorporate digital learning also known as mobile learning (Nikolopoulou, 2021) with the variety of digital tools that can be offered to the child to learn from. According to Romero-Tena et al., (2020), early childhood education teachers feel

inadequate to know how to incorporate technology into the classroom and/or do not feel

confident to use the technology themselves. Mertala (2019) discusses the teacher's beliefs about

integrating technology into early childhood education and the inadequacies that teachers have

with not only using the technology but where to start with the integration within the curriculum.

Teacher's beliefs are critical in both play-based learning and the implementation of technology

in the play-based learning environment (Mertala, 2019). For technology learning to be successful

within the play-based curriculum, teachers need to know why it is important to use it and what

learning goals it addresses. Teachers can use technology to supplement children's learning

within academic and instructional guidelines (Alelaimat et al., 2021; Eliasson et al., 2022;

Kulaksiz & Totan, 2022; Mertala, 2019; Niolopulou, 2021; Romer-Tena et al., 2020). Teachers

must advocate to stakeholders for digital play as a learning opportunity in the early childhood

classroom (Zabatiero et al., 2018). Zabatiero et al., (2018) discussed how teachers felt confident

in using technology personally but shared concerns about incorporating technology usage within

academic instruction in the classroom. Teachers must embrace integrating technology in the

classroom with perceptions and attitudes that are positive and understand the benefits of its usage

(Naikolopoulou, 2021). Due to the complexity of using technology in the classroom, early

childhood educators must be trained in technology usage along with integrating it into the play-

based learning pedagogy.

Intentional Technology

Parents and teachers tend to look at the use of technology as a form of keeping a child

busy via entertainment or a babysitter while they get things done (Zabatiero et al., 2018).

Chordia et al., (2019) discuss the importance of teachers using apps that enhance learning while

the children utilize them. When early childhood educators use technology in the classroom for

learning they want to meet developmental goals, support the child's independence, regulate behaviors in the child, and track learning data from the children to name a few (Chordia et al., 2019). Chordia et al., (2019) discuss the usage of early childhood educators using a variety of technologies within their classrooms for learning such as whiteboards and collaborative peer learning. For younger children, hand-held tablets are preferred because they are easier to independently use with only their finger movement (Nikolopoulou, 2021). When early childhood educators are intentional in using digital devices, stakeholders can have access to children's learning through specific academic apps being used and data collection with programs programmed into the device to give specific information (Nikolopoulou, 2021).

Benefits, Concerns & Challenges with Technology

Mertala (2019) discusses that technology if used with intention can address the whole child including physical needs as well as social and emotional needs. Other benefits of using technology with young children in the classroom are positive effects on literacy skills, intrinsic motivation, mathematic skills, self-efficacy, problem-solving, and science (Taylor & Boyer, 2019; Nikolopoulou, 2021). Taylor and Boyer (2019) address other benefits of technology being used by young children such as increasing collaboration skills, skills for learning independently, and providing other learning activities for children that finish tasks quicker. Some of the barriers to using technology in the classroom are not enough digital tools for children to utilize, lack of on-site technical support, and little professional development offered (Zabatiero et al., 2018). Nikolopoulou, (2021) noted that some teachers had concerns over cyber safety issues, fewer hands-on activities, and impediments to children's concentration. Other educators noted concern over passivity being encouraged in the child, overall distraction, less interaction, and conversation with peers with the use of technology in the classroom (Johnston et al., 2018).

Teacher Challenges

At an alarming rate, fewer and fewer teachers who work in the early childhood field are educated in early childhood education (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Many Early childhood education teachers who have not received education before entering the classroom are left to their interpretation of what young children's academic needs are to be considered school-ready (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Sethusha (2020) discusses the need for teachers to know about play-based learning before trying to implement it effectively as environments need to be set up for meaningful and intentional learning. ECE teachers, whether educated or not, enter the classroom with their thoughts and ideas of what children need based on their preferences or personal experiences (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019).

A research study was conducted by Hu et. al. (2018) that focused on teachers' beliefs, personality, self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence when implementing play-based learning in the early childhood classroom. Teachers who are not educated in early childhood education rely on curriculum and lesson plans that are purchased ready for instruction. Teachers are not aware that the curriculum and lesson plans can be modified to fit individual children's approaches to learning and that the environment can be set up to allow children free choice within the lesson plan objective. For some early childhood teachers, the argument for using direct instruction is that research in the past showed that children tested higher when they learned from rote memory or the use of repetition (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Goble and Pianta (2017) refute that argument in the latest study they conducted that discusses the need for children to maintain learning and be school-ready, the child's individual free choice along with hands-on activities and teacher-guided instruction through conversations and scaffolding in the form of learning for young children. Other early childhood teachers feel that if they implement play-based learning

they will lose control of the classroom and the learning instruction will be watered down or learning objectives not reached (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019).

Early childhood teachers who promote the free-choice, hands-on, play-based theory to young children report that they experience children's love for learning and those children learn with a positive attitude toward learning (Yogman et al., 2018). Early childhood teachers who are in favor of the play-based learning model discuss that children are more engaged in the learning process, objectives for the lesson plans are met, and there are fewer instances of children displaying adverse behaviors (Yogman et al., 2018). The early childhood teacher creates an environment that meets the children's individualized learning needs while engaging in play-based learning (Devi et al., 2021). The teacher guides instruction and observes children while they are engaged in the activity of choice to continue to meet the child's approaches to learning (Devi et al., 2021). The teacher enhances the child's learning while they interact with the child through scaffolding and conversations with open-ended questions to increase a deeper thought process while the children are engaged in playing (Bubikova et al., 2019; Goble & Pianta; Smoluca & Smolucha, 2021). When the teacher enhances the child's learning while they interact with the child through scaffolding and conversations with open-ended questions to increase a deeper thought process or a higher order of learning they are utilizing the zone of proximity concept (Vygotsky, 1978).

Research results suggest that early childhood educators face other barriers and challenges when trying to implement play-based learning such as academic expectations set forth by the state, parents' expectations, cultural beliefs and practices, teacher's lack of knowledge in implementing play-based learning, teachers' role, teachers confidence, time limitations, lack of resources available due to funding, concerns for safety, and insufficient colleague support

(Arlene Harris, 2021; Kallitsoglou, 2020; Lewis, Fleer, & Hammer, 2019; Miller et al., 2022; Pyle et al., 2017; Taylor & Boyer, 2019). For play-based learning to be successful with children, teachers (with thoughtfulness and intentionality) need to be aware of the work that is required behind the scenes to make the pedagogy successful (Taylor & Boyer, 2019). Seo and Yuh (2021) discuss that play-based learning requires early childhood educators to be mindful and resilient with the pedagogy when implementing this type of learning with the children. Seo and Yuh (2021) note that early childhood educators could easily suffer from job-related stress that can affect burnout and therefore there is a need for pre-service training with mindfulness and resilience and a strong need for supervisor and colleague support.

Since some early childhood educators are not trained in play-based learning pedagogy implementation or have a lack of education in the field, they have difficulty incorporating the idea of learning through play (Pyle et al., 2017). Early childhood educators see children's academics and play as two separate activities that happen in the classroom with young children (Lewis et al., 2019; Lin, Li, & Yang, 2018; Pyle et al., 2017; Walsh, McGuinness, & Sproule, 2019). Lewis et al., (2019) note that early childhood educators can experience conflict with the relationship idea involving learning objectives and free play because it is viewed by these educators as two separate classroom activities.

Early childhood educators do not always view themselves as active participants while children play. An argument that is verbalized by early childhood educators is that they do not want to assert themselves while children play because it is too intrusive. Vygotsky (1978) discussed the role of the teacher is to be near the children while they play to be available to guide learning as needed. Early childhood educators need to understand the balance and know when it is the right time to step in to participate with children. The participation on the part of the teacher

is through scaffolding with the child for deeper learning within the play activity. Teachers engage in scaffolding through open-ended questions and intentional conversations with the children.

Teacher Preparedness

Teachers and educators in the early childhood field need to have the knowledge and understanding of how to effectively implement play-based learning pedagogy (Robertson et al., 2020; Sethusha, 2020). Teachers must understand play-based learning pedagogy and how to integrate it with the demands of the academic requirements that are expected (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018; Taylor & Boyer, 2019). When teachers understand the play-based learning model, they can effectively balance a child-centered environment and meet curriculum expectations (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). Zosh et al., (2022) note that "rather than view children as empty vessels receiving information teachers see children as active explorers and discoverers who bring their prior knowledge into the learning experience and construct an understanding of" (p. 3). Nolan and Paatsch (2018) discuss the need for teachers to have professional development within the play-based learning model to effectively implement the play-based learning approach. Early childhood educators understand play-based learning pedagogy when they assimilate children's learning with instructive learning (McArdle et al., 2018). McArdle et al., (2018) conducted a study of play meets early childhood teacher education in which the results of their findings were documented that in the United States of America, early childhood teachers were formally educated in child development and less in the play-based learning pedagogy. Teachers enter the classroom with preconceived attitudes and beliefs about "what" and "how" to teach young children by their own experiences (Rodriguez-Meehan, 2021). Early childhood educators understand the importance of play in learning for the young child but do not know if they fully

trust the play-based learning pedagogy (Rodriguez-Meehan, 2021). The connection between play and developmental domains is a struggle for teachers to embrace (Rodriguez-Meehan, 2021). For play-based learning to be effective, early childhood educators need to understand the importance of the play-based learning framework which consists of four areas: facilitation, experience, design, and outcomes which all work together and interchangeably when teaching through play (Parker et al., 2022).

Pressure with Academic Standards

Teachers must understand play-based learning pedagogy and how to integrate it with the demands of academic requirements that are expected (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). When teachers understand the play-based learning model, they can effectively balance a child-centered environment and meet curriculum expectations (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). When early childhood educators focus more on children reaching a one-time fit-all learning expectation outcome in which academic standard expects, a child's inquiry and play are removed from the learning process in which the child lacks a sense of the world in which they live (Pistorova & Slutsky, 2017). Pistorova and Slutsky (2017) note that the "increasing pressure on teachers to engage in such didactic, pedological approaches now permeated our earliest learners in the preschool and kindergarten classrooms and has little to do with that research tells us is effective in early childhood education and developmentally appropriate pedological practices for young children" (p. 496). A failed society is one when children are not allowed to engage in the play-based learning pedagogy for the sake of learning through rote memory, emphasis on standardized assessments, and a curriculum that teaches a one-size-fits-all approach (Pistorova & Slutsky, 2020). Pistorova and Slutsky (2020) note that due to teacher pressures to meet academic standards, children's learning is not meeting the developmentally appropriate practices. Teachers

revert to direct instruction without considering the individual child's approaches to learning which can hinder the child's success in reaching individualized learning goals. Society prospers when children can engage in student-led activities that are developmentally appropriate and where children can create, explore, and discover with teacher-guided interactions to enhance learning (Pistorova & Slutsky, 2020).

Teacher Instructional Preferences

The research conducted by Nolan and Paatsch (2018) findings noted that teachers deal with tensions within themselves regarding the play-based learning model in the classroom environment and their preferences of how children should be instructed. Teachers feel that if there is no tangible evidence of children's learning it does not validate that instruction or learning has taken place (Nolan and Paatsch, 2018). In interviews conducted by researchers, early childhood educators share their thoughts with the researcher of being more progressive with the play-based learning model but in observation of practice, teachers implement direct instruction (Pyle et al., 2023). Early childhood educators may understand and agree with the play-based learning pedagogy but be fearful to implement it due to the lack of preparedness or set in their ways of teaching that they view to be successful.

Play-based Learning Pedagogy and Practice Gap

Although there have been several articles written on research on play-based learning pedagogy in the early childhood setting, early childhood educators struggle in several areas to implement play-based learning in the classroom (De Luca et al., 2020; Fleer, 2018; Kheioh & Low, 2022). Some of those struggles involve teachers teaching preference, the "why" behind the reasons that teachers do not implement play-based learning, understanding of teacher's role, and

assessment of children's learning utilizing the play-based learning model of instruction (De Luca et al., 2020; Fleer, 2018; Kheioh & Low, 2022).

Children are not always afforded experiences in play-based learning and teachers resort back to direct instruction and worksheets due to the lack of knowledge of how to implement play-based learning (Robertson et al., 2020; Sethusha, 2020). Early childhood educators struggle with teacher preference over their knowledge of the benefits of play-based learning (Nolan and Paatsch, 2018). In addition to early childhood educators' preferences, children's achievement in expected standardized testing outcomes plays an important role in pedagogy decision-making. There is a plethora of articles on research of the "how" and "why" of play-based learning pedagogy. Research is lacking the specific individual educator's reasons why teachers do not implement play-based learning pedagogy. More research is needed on the early childhood educator's role in the implementation of play-based learning for the child's learning goals to be reached and the learning experience to be successful with each child.

Assessment of the children's learning in the play-based learning pedagogy is vital for accountability on the part of the teacher and for stakeholders to see the development areas in which children are excelling and improvements that need to be addressed (Pyle et al., 2023). Pyle et al., (2023) discuss the effectiveness of informal assessments such as anecdotal observation documentation when observing children's learning and interactions and conversation through open-ended questions that educators have with children about their play activity in which they are engaged. Educators then document what they hear and observe through note-taking (Pyle et al., 2023). Pistorova and Slutsky (2018) note the important role that documentation and hard data play for play-based pedagogy to be successful, especially in documenting individual children's

progress. Assessments in the play-based learning model are conducted through careful observation and documentation by the early childhood teacher.

Another gap in research within play-based learning is the focus on the most effective ways for children to learn. Early childhood physical environments have gone from a place to learn through play into a more structured learning environment with desks, direct instruction, and worksheets to fulfill the accountability of learning and show proof of the performance of academics (Pistorova & Slutsky, 2018). Pistorova and Slutsky (2018) state that early childhood educators must continue to encourage play-based learning environments where children can be creative for the success of the future. Adversely when play is left out of the early childhood classroom, children in the United States can suffer more from higher stress levels, and adverse behaviors which increases expulsions (Pistorova & Slutsky, 2018).

Summary

The theoretical framework that best describes play-based learning pedagogy with young children is the social cognitive constructivism theory. Vygotsky's (1978) constructivist theory encouraged hands-on activities along with play-based experiences and intentional teacher/child interactions to maintain learning (Goble & Pianata, 2017; Hu et al., 2018; Schmerse, 2020; Van Craeyevelt et al., 2017). The social cognitive constructivism theory which Vygotsky is most associated with emphasized that children learn through their learning and understanding (Schunk, 2020; Smolucha & Smolucha, 2021). Vygotsky (1978) believed that children learn through a zone of proximity development (ZPD) which refers to children learning at their own pace, teacher scaffolding, and children learning through hands-on experiences which are associated with play-based learning (Schunk, 2020; Shoaib, 2017).

The reviewed literature discussed the nature of learning through play and what play-based learning entails. The added literature review included play-based learning's benefits to children, developmental learning environments, and some of the challenges teachers face when implementing play-based learning. There is a gap in the literature in which little is mentioned about the experiences and challenges that teachers face when implementing play-based learning (De Luca et al., 2020; Fleer, 2018; Kheioh & Low, 2022). Examining the gap between teacher implementation of play-based learning while meeting the academic learning standards can help stakeholders better understand the need for developmentally appropriate practices in learning in early childhood classrooms.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to understand the early childhood teachers' lived experiences implementation of play-based learning in any of the early childhood classroom settings servicing 3- to 5-year-olds in the Maricopa County region in Arizona. Within the scope of the methodology planning the following things were considered such as an adequate research design, a variety of collection methods for data, and methods for data analysis that are the most comprehensive for the study. The data strategies that were used for this hermeneutical phenomenological study comprised interviews, focus groups, and observations (van Manen, 2016). Two appropriate data analysis strategies were used for the design: coding and memoing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To ensure the integrity of the design, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations were important components implemented throughout the study. This chapter contains the study's method components including the design, research questions, setting, participants, procedures, researchers' role, data collection plan, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

This study used a hermeneutical phenomenological qualitative design that explored the interpreted meaning of the lived experiences of participants who all experience a common phenomenon (van Manen, 2016). The design used a criterion sampling strategy where ECE teachers from Maricopa County Arizona were selected due to their experience with the phenomenon in this study. The data collection included in-person interviews, a focus group, and an in-person observation of every ECE teacher who participated in the study. The data was

transcribed and analyzed with the use of memoing and coding to determine themes that may emerge.

This design is appropriate for the study because the aim is to describe and interpret the lived experiences of ECE teachers who have experienced the phenomenon of implementing play-based learning in their classrooms. Within phenomenology research, I was able to understand a specific phenomenon by gathering data from multiple sources about lived experiences and applying meaning to the common phenomenon (van Manen, 2016). According to van Manen (2016), the phenomenology design allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning and nature of everyday lived experiences. Phenomenological research asks the question "what" about the experience of the specific phenomenon (van Manen, 2016). The hermeneutical phenomenology research focuses on individuals who are engaged naturally in their worlds which justifies the appropriateness of this research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2014, 2016). The purpose of the hermeneutic phenomenology focused on the interpretation of the lived experiences of the participants to examine and explore a deeper meaning of the lived experiences (van Manen, 2016). Phenomenology is used by the researcher to understand and identify phenomena from data gathered from multiple sources about experiences from which the researcher makes meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2016).

Phenomenology is used for the researcher to understand and identify phenomena from data gathered from multiple sources about experiences from which the researcher makes meaning (van Manen, 2016). There are a variety of data collection methods that can be used and that are appropriate for phenomenological studies. The qualitative method for this study was to collect data in the form of personal interviews consisting of open-ended questions, focus

groups, and observations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2014; van Manen, 2016).

The data analysis within the hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on data that is organized which will allow the researcher to identify themes that will organize and guide the writing (van Manen, 2014; van Manen, 2016). When the researcher develops the themes, the data is then formulated into tables, figures, or a narrative (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hermeneutic phenomenology's data analysis explores the interpretation of the texts of the lived experiences to gain meaning (van Manen, 2014; van Manen, 2016). Memoing, pattern identification, and themes that emerged within the study will be used in the writing.

Memoing was used while I examined the data from the interviews and the focus group transcripts. The purpose of memoing was to refer to thoughts that were written at the time of the interviews and focus groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Memoing was used to assist in identifying and grouping themes from the collected data from the interviews, focus groups, and observations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Themes are important within hermeneutical phenomenology because they lead to understanding and making sense of the phenomenon (van Manen, 2014; van Manen, 2016). The participants' responses were recorded and transcribed word-for-word with the use of the otter.ai app or the recorded Zoom app to the questions from the in-person interview and recorded focus group. The transcription was coded by the researcher to investigate if there were recurring themes. Subthemes were developed from the underlying major themes from other statements that the participants shared. The identification of the themes and subthemes helped in formulating patterns of ideas that will be in the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I examined the transcriptions from the interviews and the focus groups several times to make sure that all themes and

subthemes were identified. With the observation and field notes, the researcher examined the contents for themes and subthemes to interpret teachers' lived experiences in the truest form possible (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of early childhood education teachers when implementing play-based learning in any of the early childhood classroom settings servicing 3- to 5-year-olds in the Maricopa County region in Arizona?

Sub-Question One

How do early childhood education teachers describe the importance of play in the classroom?

Sub-Question Two

What challenges do early childhood education teachers experience when implementing play-based learning?

Sub-Question Three

How does the early childhood education teacher view their role in the play-based learning experience with the student's learning?

Setting and Participants

Site (or Setting)

The research setting was in any of the early childhood classrooms servicing 3- to 5-year-olds in the Maricopa County region in Arizona. The Maricopa County region is composed of approximately 2120 childcare centers serving a population of 4,155,501 people in an area of 9,198 square miles. There is one childcare per 1,960 people and one childcare per 4 square

miles. Maricopa County is ranked 4th of 15 counties in childcare per capita, and 1st of 15 counties in childcare per square mile. The childcare settings servicing children 3- to 5-year-olds include in-home, faith-based, and early childhood classrooms meeting in facilities.

Participants

A criterion sampling strategy was used for this study since only teachers were selected who have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Criterion sampling was used to choose the participants so that rich data information can be used from the phenomenon being studied. The participants for consideration and chosen for the study were from a pool of any preschool setting servicing children 3- to 5-year-olds from in-home, faith-based, and early childhood classrooms meeting in facilities in the Maricopa County region in Arizona. The teachers that were selected had experience with implementing play-based learning in their classrooms. This requirement helps to set the guidelines for the study of the criteria of early childhood teachers' lived experiences with implementing play-based learning in the classroom. The participants were selected from various preschools within the specific region of the county. I strived for maximum variation in my participants and an accurate representation of the site demographics for the county that includes both more and less affluent student populations. Diverse challenges can be faced when schools have a different school population which can impact the teacher's experiences.

Preschool directors in the area were contacted via email to see if permission would be granted for me to interview the teachers who were employed within the preschool and if access could be available for observations in the classrooms with the specific teachers within the study. I asked the directors for the names of the possible participants for the study. The purpose of the study and the procedure for the observation were explained in the email to the director. Early

childhood teachers were contacted by email. The purpose of the email was to explain the study and to request their participation. The email stated that teachers who only integrate play-based learning in their classrooms will be accepted.

Teachers who were willing and accepted the invitation to be a part of the study signed an informed consent that explained their role in the research and their understanding of the role (See Appendix A). The sample size for participants of this study ranged between 10 and 15 participants. With this sample size, saturation can be reached during the data collection process. The early childhood education teachers varied in both having early childhood education and not having early childhood education, physical age, and years of experience with the play-based learning pedagogy. I did not have direct connections to the participants to avoid potential researcher bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Researcher Positionality

Thirty years ago, when I started instructing young children, I used a formal, traditional teacher-led approach. In the past few years, working with early childhood education teachers, observing hundreds of instruction styles, and conducting many hours of research and observation of play-based learning for young children, I became interested in understanding why teachers in the early childhood education setting chose the play-based learning model which motivated me to conduct a qualitative phenomenological research study that focused on play-based learning. I also wanted to understand any successes and challenges that teachers experienced while implementing the play-based learning pedagogy.

Interpretive Framework

The interpretative framework as a researcher that resonates most with me is social constructivism. Social constructivism refers to individuals learning through interactions that are

interpersonal (social), cultural-historical, and individual (Schunk, 2020; Smolucha & Smolucha, 2021). In the past 35 years that I have worked with teachers who work in the early childhood field, I have seen the shift of curriculum move from traditional teaching to play-based theory. Through my personal experience a decade ago, I switched my teaching philosophy from worksheets to learning through play with hands-on activities. When I implemented the play-based theory, so many positive developments happened within children cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically.

Jesus practiced social constructivism throughout the Bible. It was important for Him to allow individuals to share their thought processes and then to use parables or stories to relay the answers to individual responses. In Genesis 3, God asks Adam and then Eve why they ate the forbidden fruit (King James Bible, 1769/2017). In Matthew 26, Jesus asks the disciples "why" they were sleeping in the Garden of Gethsemane (King James Bible, 1769/2017). Even though Jesus knew the answer to the question being asked, he allowed the individual to verbally share the meaning of their thoughts and was empathetic to their needs. I am very interested in people's thoughts on issues, especially the play-based learning pedagogy. I want to propose through the research process when meeting with individuals to follow Jesus' example to be inquisitive but empathetic and sensitive at the same time.

Philosophical Assumptions

There are three philosophical assumptions that I possess that affect my values and belief system. These three assumptions are ontological, epistemological, and axiological. It is important for the reader of the study to understand my view of the world and for me to use these assumptions in my approach to the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ontological Assumption

Ontological assumption is defined as the examination of the nature of reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ontology studies the nature of human beings' existence in the universe, society, and as individuals. The researcher may ask "What is reality?" "Who are we?" "What are we here for?" Researchers, participants, and readers can believe in a single reality or truth, multiple realities, or that realities can be debated, negotiated, or interpreted. In summary, involved in an ontological assumption, many views, perspectives, and experiences are shared differently. The researcher gathers the shared perspectives and analyzes them for themes. As a Christian researcher, I kept an open mind as participants shared their personal views and experiences that might contradict my personal belief in a single reality and where it originates. As I examined the responses from early childhood educators with implementing the play-based theory, I recognized that my bias is that I see the benefits with young children when play-based learning is implemented but not all participants or readers of the research may agree.

Epistemological Assumption

Epistemology can be defined and centered around knowledge. Questions can be asked in this assumption that address knowledge; "How do we know what we claim to know?" (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this assumption, the researcher is driven to uncover the truth. Humans develop knowledge based on our perceptions and experiences. Knowledge is known to be a social constructive of whatever we treat as knowledge is knowledge. Therefore, the researcher experiences the issue with the participants in the related field. The researcher collects firsthand information from the participants through experiences. Researchers build relationships with the participants by interacting with them through interviews and conversations. As a researcher that is passionate about teachers understanding and the implementation of the play-based model in the classroom, I conducted interviews with open-ended questions, focus groups, and observations

with the participants. For any participant who could not meet in person for the interview or the

focus group, I offered recorded Zoom meetings. Through the process of interviews, focus

groups, and observations, I anticipated themes to emerge from the participants' perspectives that

I had not even thought of yet.

Axiological Assumption

The axiology assumption can be defined as knowing the importance of the part the role

plays in research (Creswell & Poth, 2018)**.** The researcher can ask questions such as 1) What do I

value? 2) What values should guide my research? 3) What values or outcomes will result from

the research? A question to reflect on is can research be neutral or do my values shape how I do

the research? I was a Quality First Coach who trained early childhood educators (directors and

teachers) on how to utilize the play-based model to teach children. Often, I observed the lack of

play-based learning. Due to the passion, I have for play-based learning, I would like for every

teacher to implement play-based learning with all children and to know the reasons why this

pedagogy can be so important. I was aware of my personal biases going into the study. Within

this study, it was apparent that my goal was to seek change with teachers with the use of the

play-based learning model to help children sustain learning.

Researcher's Role

I am currently working with early childhood teachers in the state of Arizona training and

teaching them how to implement play-based learning pedagogy with their students while keeping

a balance with the Arizona Early Learning Standards. My passion is to teach early childhood

teachers how to be successful with hands-on learning as well as all the other approaches to

learning that children possess. I am a strong advocate for early childhood educators to keep

developmentally appropriate practices for young children's learning along with the academic

standards that must be met. A reflective log of my thoughts, emotions, and feelings was kept

throughout the study from the data and participants due to my personal experience with the

phenomenon. I was the human instrument in the collecting of data. The interpretation of the

results was impacted due to my worldview as a Christian and many years of experience teaching

young children.

<div align="center">**Procedures**</div>

The steps that were used to conduct the study are outlined in this section and are detailed

enough so that the study can be replicated. The information that is included in this section

includes site permissions, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval procurement process,

participant solicitation, data collection and plans for analysis, and the studies achieved

triangulation explanation.

Permissions

I completed a research proposal to the Liberty University Institutional Review Board

(IRB) along with following the proper procedures to gain permission from the directors of the

preschools for participants to be involved in the study. When approval was given from both

sources, I emailed the participants to be involved in the study. Appendix B contains the IRB

approval and Appendix C contains the site approval. When teachers agreed to participate, they

signed an informed consent form that contained the purpose of the study, that they understood

the study, and their rights to participate in the study. See Appendix A for the consent form.

Interview questions were given to early childhood teachers who will not be involved in

the study to pilot the questions for the accuracy of data (see Appendix I). After the piloting

interviews were completed, I conducted the interviews with the participants at their preschool or

other locations that were convenient for the participants. The interviews were recorded. I

scheduled two recorded focus groups conducted by a Zoom meeting allowing six participants in each group. For both the interviews and focus groups, I transcribed and analyzed data for themes. I conducted an hour-long in-person observation in each of the participant's classrooms and took minimal notes as I partially participated in the observation. I completed the Observational Protocol after each observation and analyzed data for themes.

Recruitment Plan

A criterion sampling strategy was used for this study since teachers will only be selected if they have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Criterion sampling was used to choose the participants so that rich data could be obtained about the phenomenon being studied. The participants chosen for the study were from a pool of any preschool setting servicing children 3- to 5-year-olds from in-home, faith-based, or early childhood classrooms meeting in facilities in the Maricopa County region in Arizona. The teachers that were selected must also have experience with implementing play-based learning in their classrooms. This requirement helps to set the guidelines for the study of the criteria of early childhood teachers' lived experiences with implementing play-based learning in the classroom.

Due to the study using criterion sampling, I contacted directors from the early childhood education settings in Maricopa County, Arizona via email to recruit participants. The early childhood education settings selected included in-home, faith-based, and early childhood classrooms that currently implement a play-based learning curriculum. The email contained the purpose of this study and information about the study's procedures. The directors were asked to complete and sign a consent form to participate in the study. When the signed consent was returned to me, I emailed the teachers for whom the directors provided names to inquire about being participants in the study. This email contained the purpose of the study. The email to the

participants followed IRB (Institutional Review Board) guidelines and included that participation in the study was voluntary and that they may refuse to participate at any time.

Data Collection Plan

The qualitative method for this study was to collect data in the form of personal interviews consisting of open-ended questions, focus groups, and observations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A critical component of the phenomenological research design is personal interviews (van Manen, 2016). When the researcher in a hermeneutical phenomenological study uses interviews, they are seeking information that is shared by the participants of their lived experiences within the phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2016). The use of the the recorded personal interview that consists of open-ended questions asked by the researcher and answered by the participants helps the researcher to have data to examine later and for the participant to share in their own words the experience with the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, van Manen, 2016). For participants who could not attend an interview in person, I offered an invitation for them to join via a recorded Zoom meeting.

When the personal interviews were completed, I invited all the teachers to a virtual focus group to discuss and share experiences of implementing play-based learning in their classrooms. The teachers had the opportunity to share and discuss ideas, strengths, and challenges with implementing play-based learning with one another. The focus group was recorded for further examination during the data analysis process. I started the focus group with open-ended questions for introduction and followed up with other questions regarding the phenomenon if needed. These follow-up questions were formulated from the information that was gathered from the personal interviews. The purpose of the follow-up questions was to help with any

clarification from the responses of the interviews and possibly provide more information for deeper data for analyses.

When the focus groups were completed, I conducted a single in-person observation of the teacher in the classroom setting. The in-person observation focused on the purpose of the study and the interview questions. The observation involved the researcher watching the teachers, physical setting, interactions, activities, and conversations, and being aware of the researcher's perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data was collected by the researcher and field notes will be taken with the use of a designed observational protocol that will be both descriptive and reflective (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As much as possible and is allowable, the researcher will engage in being an active participant in the observation for relationship building with the teacher and the students to create a more natural environment (van Manen, 2016).

The use of this triangulation method for data collection reinforces the validity of the study. Another reason for this specific data collection will be to receive descriptions from the lived experiences of the participants that were thick and rich in content (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2016). The quantitative method of procedures that uses statistical data and surveys is not appropriate for use in phenomenological research. The reason for this study was to understand the lived experiences of ECE teachers' implementation of play-based learning in the early childhood classroom setting. The phenomenon focus was to identify and understand the lived experiences that the ECE teachers experience and the effects that they had on them when implementing the play-based learning pedagogy.

Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach

The individualized interviews were conducted in person unless participant availability or a catastrophic event occurred. If in-person interviews could not occur, then individualized

interviews were conducted via Zoom on the Internet. All interviews were recorded for later data analysis. All participants were notified that the interviews would be recorded and explained the purpose of the recordings. I asked the interviewee (participant, teacher) the questions listed below. I took minimal notes during the interview and focused more on eye contact with the interviewee. I verbally let the interviewee know that at any time the interview could be over and that the interview would last approximately 60 minutes. I set a time clock for the interview to respect the interviewees' time. At the end of the interview, I thanked the participants for their time. The next step was to analyze by coding the data collected.

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about your educational background and current career. CRQ

2. What is your description of play-based learning in the preschool classroom? SQ1

3. What experiences have you had implementing play-based learning in your preschool classroom? SQ1

4. What impact has play-based learning pedagogy had on your students? SQ1

5. What challenges, if any, have you experienced implementing the play-based learning model in your classroom? SQ2

6. Please describe your role as the teacher in the play-based learning environment. SQ3

7. Describe how the play-based learning environment contributes to children's development. SQ3

Question one was asked to inquire and learn more about the participants' educational status and current position at the time of the interview. This question is asked to help the interviewee to be more comfortable as they share about themselves (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Questions two through four were designed to seek participants' responses to play-based learning instruction,

implementation, and the impact that they experienced when implementing play-based learning. Question five was designed to seek information on challenges participants encountered with implementing the play-based model. In question six participants had the opportunity to explain their role as teachers in the play-based learning classroom. Question seven asked participants about their perceived impact of play-based learning on the children's development. The interview questions were asked as probing questions so that I could understand in more depth the thoughts and experiences that early childhood education teachers encountered while implementing play-based learning to young children (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

After transcribing the interviews and having read them over for the first time, I proceeded with memoing to record thoughts that appeared in the data (Patton, 2002). The reason for this procedure was to allow me to receive an understanding of the data to investigate commonalities and differences. Memoing allowed me to identify emerging themes. When the first interview was completed, I began reviewing interview transcripts. Transcripts were reviewed throughout the data collection process; it allowed me to constantly compare the participants' perspectives and the information that they provided. When the first initial memoing process was completed, I began coding the participants' transcripts to identify themes. The process of coding helped me capture the phenomenon that was being studied (van Manen, 2014). AtlasTi software was used to code the data. The data was analyzed for subthemes. Once the themes and subthemes were analyzed and chunked together, major themes were formed. The use of coding helped me to identify and discuss patterns that the data reveals (Patton, 2002). Because coding is a cyclical process, there were several cycles of coding of the data (Saldana, 2013). Multiple codes were assigned during the data analysis process which focused on what themes align the closest to the

data. The coding process consisted of open coding in which the data was coded for prominent

categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Emerging from open coding comes axial coding in which I

identify information from a category to focus on which can be referred to as the core

phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After open coding and axial coding had been conducted, I

interrelated the themes that explain the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Focus Groups Data Collection Approach

When the personal interviews were completed, I invited the teachers to a focus group to

discuss and share experiences of implementing play-based learning in their classrooms (see

Appendix F). There were two focus groups offered that will be comprised of six participants in

each group. The intention of having two focus groups and keeping the groups smaller was to

promote more interaction and conversation. The focus group lasted up to 60 minutes and the

participants were told this information along with the purpose of the focus group at the time of

the invitation. The teachers had the opportunity to share and discuss ideas, strengths, and

challenges with implementing play-based learning with one another. The focus group was

recorded for further examination during the data analysis process. The teachers were aware at the

time of the invitation that the session was recorded so that they were prepared ahead of time. I

started the focus group with open-ended questions for introduction and followed up with other

questions regarding the phenomenon if needed. These follow-up questions were formulated from

the information that was gathered from the personal interviews. The purpose of the follow-up

questions is to help with any clarification from the responses of the interviews and provide more

information for deeper data for analyses.

Focus Group Questions

      1. Please introduce yourself to the group and share your teaching experience. CRQ

2. Please share your experiences with implementing play-based learning in your classroom. SQ1

3. What ways do you believe educator support influences play-based learning? SQ3

4. What successes have you experienced with implementing play-based learning in your classroom? SQ1

5. What challenges have you seen with implementing play-based learning in your classroom? SQ3

6. What disappointments if any have you have had with implementing play-based learning? SQ2

Question one of the focus group questions was designed to allow each early childhood educator an opportunity to share with the group their teaching experiences with young children which will answer CQ. It will also put the participants at ease to share and be more transparent with one another (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Questions two and four helped me understand the participants' thoughts on implementing play-based learning and the successes, if any, that they have had while facilitating this specific teaching pedagogy. Question three supported learning participants' thoughts on educator support if any that they faced when implementing the play-based learning instruction. Question five was designed to allow the participants an opportunity to share challenges, if any on implementing play-based learning with young children. Question six was designed for participants to share any disappointments in implementing play-based learning in the classroom. The information obtained by asking these questions will help me with the data analysis to identify themes and a better understanding of participant experiences with the implementation of play-based learning.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

After transcribing the focus group participant responses and reading them over for the first time, I proceeded with memoing to record thoughts that appeared in the data (Patton, 2002). The reason for this procedure allowed me to receive an understanding of the data to investigate commonalities and differences. Memoing allowed me to identify emerging themes. I began reviewing focus group transcripts after each group was completed. Focus group transcripts were reviewed throughout the data collection process; it allowed me to constantly compare the participants' perspectives and the information that they provided. When the initial memoing process was completed, I began coding the focus group transcripts for identifying themes. The process of coding helped me capture the phenomenon that was being studied (van Manen, 2014). AtlasTi software was used to code the data. The data was also analyzed for subthemes. Once the themes and subthemes were analyzed and chunked together, major themes were formed. The use of coding helped me to identify and discuss patterns that the data reveals (Patton, 2002). Because coding is a cyclical process, there were several cycles of coding of the data (Saldana, 2013). Multiple codes were assigned during the data analysis process which focused on what themes align the closest to the data. The coding process consisted of open coding in which the data was coded for prominent categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Emerging from open coding comes axial coding in which I identify information from a category to focus on which can be referred to as the core phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After open coding and axial coding were conducted, I interrelated the themes that explain the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Observation Data Collection Approach

When the focus group was completed, I conducted a single in-person observation of each teacher in the classroom setting following the interview and the focus group discussion. I

obtained written approval from both the school and the participant during the IRB process. I

contacted the principal or director of the preschool and the teacher to set up a day and time to

conduct the observation. The director and teacher were told that the observation was 60 minutes

in duration and that I would be an active participant as much as possible with few notes taken so

as not to be a distraction to the teacher or the children. The in-person observation focused on the

purpose of the study and the interview questions. The observation involved the researcher

watching the teachers, physical setting, interactions, activities, and conversations, and being

aware of the researcher's perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data was collected by the

researcher and field notes were taken with the use of a designed observational protocol that was

both descriptive and reflective. The observational protocol form included notes from the

observation and a diagram of the environment. As much as possible and allowable, I engaged in

being an active participant in the observation for relationship building with the teacher and the

students to create a more natural environment (van Manen, 2016).

Observations Data Analysis Plan

After each observation, I coded the observation protocol field notes using the AtlasTi

software to identify emerging themes and subthemes. The subthemes and themes were chunked

together to communicate patterns or ideas. Analyzing the observation protocol notes allowed me

to identify themes with the environment of the classroom that were implemented by the

participating teacher (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2002). The analysis of the observation data

allowed me to triangulate with the information from the other sources of data collection in the

study (Patton, 2002).

Data Synthesis

Upon completion of the data analysis, I analyzed the data by reviewing the AtlasTi

software coding report and memoing documentation from all three sources, chunking subthemes into main themes from patterns identified from the themes that reoccur most often. The process of synthesizing all the data collected from the data collection sources will reinforce triangulation to provide collaboration of evidence for study accuracy validation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The information was condensed into a qualitative writing report of the identified themes and findings from the data (van Manen, 2016).

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Trustworthiness

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Trustworthiness in a qualitative study addresses the authenticity, reliability, and validation of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers in a qualitative study utilize strategies so that the data can be accurately represented and interpreted. For trustworthiness to be achieved in a qualitative research study, these four components must be considered; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Shenton, 2004).

Credibility

Credibility refers to the internal validity of the study that focuses on the researcher's accuracy and demonstration of the interpreted meaning of the data that is documented by the participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Shenton, 2004). Lincoln and Guba (1985) note that the most important factor in securing trustworthiness is through establishing credibility. To establish credibility a researcher must include the following components: established research methodology, researcher knowledge of participants classroom culture and environment, criterion sampling of participants, triangulation that includes a variety of source types for data collection, and a variety in the range of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Shenton, 2004).

I kept a reflective log of my emotions, feelings, and thoughts to guide me through the analysis process. To avoid my personal experiences creating bias when interpreting the data, the reflective log was utilized (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2002).

Creswell and Poth (2018) encourage qualitative researchers to conduct member checks to ensure and increase the credibility of the study so that the data of the participant's experiences are communicated accurately (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2002; Shenton, 2002). To increase credibility, participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts from the interviews and the focus group. The participants can review the findings to validate the accuracy of their feelings and thoughts.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the external validity of the study which focuses on the findings of one study that can be transferred to other situations and settings (Shenton, 2004). Creswell and Poth (2018) discuss the components of transferability to include transferred findings to situations and settings, the data from the findings that include thick and rich descriptions, and the specific methodology used that explains the organizations involved, the participants, specifics on data collection and analysis of the data. Shenton (2002) discusses the importance of the components to be met in qualitative research so that other researchers can transfer the data to study other areas. Throughout the study, I kept a reflective log that documented my emotions, feelings, and thoughts. I kept a memo log for documentation of what happened throughout the research process.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the reliability of the study in which if another researcher used the same techniques, within the same context, implemented the same methodology, and with the

same participants, the results of the study would be similar (Shenton, 2002). Dependability in the study focuses on the researcher documenting the study process in detail so that researchers in the future can implement the same work and receive similar results. Dependability focuses on the process in detail of the research. I reported in comprehensive detail the process of the research. Due to the comprehensive detail of the process of this research study, other researchers will be able to apply the methodology to other situations or settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A memo log was kept throughout the study that recorded the process in its entirety and included descriptions in detail. An inquiry audit was conducted by the dissertation committee and the Qualitative Research Director of Liberty University through the review process and the products of the research.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the concept of the qualitative researcher's objectivity within the study (Shenton, 2002). Therefore, triangulation for data collection is important to reduce researcher bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Shenton, 2002). I implemented triangulation sources and member checks to ensure that the study met confirmability for accuracy, reliability, and validity. I incorporated an audit trail through memoing to reflect on the process that caused me to come to conclusions within the study. An audit trail is another form of validation strategy for documenting and clarifying thought processes and researcher understanding during the data process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Within qualitative research, ethical considerations need to be considered and followed. Ethical considerations include Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, participant consent forms signed before the study begins, participants' awareness of the option to leave the study at

any time, and data and passwords to be stored in a secure place. The researcher must seek IRB approval before starting the study. Creswell and Poth (2018), explain that IRBs of colleges and universities are careful to follow policies and guidelines that protect the participants' respect, welfare, and justice.

Consent forms were signed by all participants and study guidelines were signed before the study. Participants were told that the study was completely voluntary, and participants understood the study before participating. Participants were aware that leaving the study at any time is an option if they no longer wanted to participate no matter what the reason (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To protect the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were used. The final document did not include any information that could identify the participant to honor the anonymity within the study. The participants were aware that interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded. Data of electronic copies and copies of data are stored securely. Passwords are stored securely to protect the electronic data on the researcher's laptop. The physical data is stored and secured in a locked cabinet in my home office. The data will be disposed of after three years.

Summary

When considering the methodology for this study, the design is appropriate because it includes a variety of data collection and data analysis methods which were explained in detail in this chapter (van Manen, 2014). The hermeneutical phenomenological research design gathered data through interviews, focus groups, and observations of the specific phenomenon being studied. Memoing and coding were used to analyze data for this study (van Manen, 2014). Key components that were considered to assure trustworthiness in the methods designed for this study included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical considerations were used to ensure that the study's methodology contains integrity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within the hermeneutical phenomenological approach, this study sought to describe the phenomenon of ECE teachers' lived experiences in implementing play-based learning in the early childhood classroom. In this chapter, the research design, research questions, setting, participants, researcher personality, researcher's role, procedures, data collection and data analysis, data synthesis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations were described and explained.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to understand the early childhood education teachers' lived experiences implementing play-based learning in any of the early childhood classroom settings servicing 3-to-5-year-olds in the Maricopa County region in Arizona. This chapter consists of an overview of the participants who participated in the study. Results from the study are discussed and organized by themes based on how they relate to the research question. Themes are discussed of the participants' experiences integrating play-based learning, challenges that may arise when implementing play-based learning, and the teachers' role in the play-based learning experience with the children. The research questions are answered after the themes are discussed.

Participants

The study consisted of 12 participants. Every participant identified as an early childhood education teacher who integrated play-based learning in their early childhood classroom settings. The participants ranged from two years to 45 years of experience teaching in the early childhood field. The participants work with children from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds in the early childhood settings in this study. Participants' experiences and teaching backgrounds are discussed in more detail and to ensure the participants' anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant.

Table 1
Participant Overview

Name	Age	Years of Experience	Age of Children Currently Teaching	Education
April	50	32	Multi Ages 3-5-year-old	CDA
Betty	55	22	Multi-Age 3–5-year-old	CDA
Charlotte	63	45	4-year-old	Associates in ECE
Daniel	21	2	4-year-old	Associates in ECE
Elizabeth	48	29	3-year-old	ECE Certification
Felicia	48	25	3-year-old	ECE PDT
Grace	20	8	3-year-old	ECE PDT
Heather	27	8	4 –year-old	Bachelor Elem Ed.
Iris	30	7	3-year-old	Bachelor Child Psych.
Julie	37	5	4-year-old	PDT
Kari	33	11	3-4-year-old	Bachelor Child Dev.
Lily	22	2	3-year-old	PDT

CDA	Child Development Association Credential
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ECE PDT	Early Childhood Education Professional Development Training

April

April works at an in-home childcare that consists of mixed ages. She has worked in the early childcare setting for over 32 years in school districts, Head Start programs, and now at in-home childcare. Her education consists of several early childhood education college credits from two different colleges in Arizona and has obtained a Child Development Associate credential. April uses play-based learning with the children in the in-home childcare setting every day because she believes that it is more developmentally appropriate when trying to guide children's learning at a variety of ages and individual approaches to learning.

Betty

Betty has experience working in the early childhood education setting for 22 years. She currently works in an in-home childcare. She has had many years of experience as a preschool director, assistant preschool teacher, and lead teacher. Along with all the years of experience in the early childcare field, she has a Child Development Associate credential. Betty has seen the positive impact that play-based learning has had on the children that she teaches and looks at play-based learning as an opportunity for children to learn through experiences of play activities that interest them individually.

Charlotte

Charlotte attended college 45 years ago and at that time earned a certificate in early childhood education. Years later she went back to school and received her associate degree in early childhood education. She has had experience working in the field of early childhood education for 45 years now as a lead teacher. Currently, she teaches four-year-olds in a faith-based early childhood setting. She has implemented both traditional teaching methods and play-based learning in the classroom with young children. She believes that play-based learning makes more of an

impact on children's learning as they learn through hands-on experiences instead of the traditional method where she implemented worksheets for children's learning.

Daniel

Daniel has an associate degree in early childhood education and is currently pursuing his bachelor's degree in early childhood education. He has worked at a faith-based early childhood education setting for two years as a lead teacher in the four-year-old classroom where he is currently teaching. He implements play-based learning pedagogy in his classroom every day and believes that this way of hands-on learning has a positive impact on all of a child's development including social, emotional, physical, and cognitive. He was eager to share all the ways he implements play-based learning in the classroom and the ways he guides children's learning.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth has had experience working in the early childhood classroom for 29 years. For 20 of those 29 years, she has worked at the same preschool as a lead teacher to the three-year-olds. She obtained an early childhood certificate and has over 400 professional development hours in early childhood education. Elizabeth discussed how most of her teaching experience with young children has been implemented with the play-based learning model. She believes that at the age of children that she teaches learning is sustained longer and children have fun while they are learning when it can be hands-on and something that they are interested in.

Felicia

Felicia has had experience in the early childhood setting for over 25 years. She has worked in both the in-home environment with multiple ages, district preschool, and currently in a privately owned preschool facility as the three-year-old lead teacher. She implements the play-based model to teach children. She expressed the enjoyment that she gets from guiding children's learning

through conversations while they play and seeing them be proud of the things that they learn when they feel like they accomplished the learning process on their own. She believes that play-based learning is the only way to teach young children and that it is the most developmentally appropriate method for children to learn.

Grace

Grace has had eight years of experience with working with young children in the early childhood field. As she was growing up, her mother had an in-home childcare in which she worked with young children. She explained that her mother implemented the play-based learning model as she taught the diversity of ages of children. Currently, she is working in the three-year-old classroom at a privately owned preschool. She shared how she enjoys modeling for children how to learn through play as she mentioned that she has noticed that not many children know how to play with the learning materials provided for them in the classroom.

Heather

Heather started working in the early childhood field in Mexico in an in-home setting when she was 16 years old. In Mexico, she obtained her bachelor's degree in elementary education. She moved to Arizona where she is currently a lead teacher for four-year-olds in a privately owned preschool. Like Grace, she discussed in length how children do not know how to play and the importance that play-based learning has in teaching children and role modeling how they can learn while they are playing. She talked about how she guides learning by talking to the children through several open-ended questions and scaffolding. She believes that play-based learning positively impacts children to recall the things that they learn from day to day.

Iris

Iris has been working in the early childhood setting for seven years. She has a bachelor's degree in child psychology from birth through adolescence. She believes that this degree has helped her understand the children that she teaches and how best to implement the play-based learning model. Currently, she is teaching three-year-olds in a faith-based preschool. She uses the play-based learning model with the children every day and shares the impact that she sees with the children that she teaches in improving their relationship with others, communication, problem-solving, and physical and cognitive skills. Like the other participants, Iris was very adamant about play-based learning being the only way to teach young children and the best way for them to sustain what they have learned.

Julie

Julie has experience working in the early childhood field for five years. She started working in the early childhood field in another state and then moved to Arizona where she is working as a lead teacher to the four-year-olds in a privately owned preschool. She shared that she implements play-based learning with the children she teaches in the classroom every day. She believes that young children learn best through hands-on play experiences and her role as the teacher is to guide their learning through conversations while they utilize the learning materials that they choose to play with. She shared several instances where children learned through their play and the enjoyment that they had accomplishing tasks from which they were learning.

Kari

Kari has had experience teaching in an early childhood setting for the past eleven years. She has been a preschool teacher and director. She has a bachelor's degree in child development and many hours of professional development in the early childhood field. She is currently working in the three- and four-year classrooms at a privately owned childcare. She implements play-based

learning with any child that she teaches. She shared that she believes that play-based learning allows the child to have the autonomy to choose where they would like to play and then the teacher can guide learning through conversations with the child about their play activity. She shared the positive impact that play-based learning has on the whole child's development and how the teacher's guidance in the learning process is preparing the child to be ready to enter Kindergarten.

Lily

Lily has had two years of experience working in the early childhood setting. Currently, she is a three-year-old lead teacher in a privately owned preschool. She discussed the ways she implements play-based learning in the classroom by the way she sets up the environment with, the learning materials that she offers the children to play and learn from. She explained that she implements play-based learning every day. She mentioned how she sees the impact on the children's learning by what they can talk to her about while using the learning materials and the fun that they seem to be having while they are learning.

Results

The study was based on one central research question and three sub questions that discussed participants' experiences integrating play-based learning, challenges that may arise when implementing play-based learning, and the teachers' role in the play-based learning experience with the children. Described below are the themes and subthemes that were identified from this study. Following is a discussion on how themes answered each of the research questions.

Theme Development

I first conducted the in-person interviews with the participants and then once they were transcribed, I analyzed the data. After the interviews were completed, the participants were

invited to attend a Zoom focus group. After the focus group was completed, I immediately analyzed the data. I conducted an hour of in-person observation in each of the participant's classrooms taking notes on an Observational Protocol tool that allowed me to document what the teacher and children were doing in the classroom. I typed the findings and analyzed the data memoing after each observation thought themes, and subthemes ideas. I analyzed the data as soon as it was collected to see if any new themes or subthemes were emerging. As I analyzed each transcript, I used memoing for notes of reoccurring themes, ideas, and thoughts centered on the themes. I read the transcripts, and the Observational Protocol notes numerous times so that codes could be assigned to the data. I then used Atlas. Ti software to assign a variety of codes to the data for depth coding. Continually, I analyzed the data and coded for subthemes to support the themes. In Table 2 the themes, subthemes, and codes are listed that emerged from the analyzed data.

Table 2

Themes and Codes

Theme	Subtheme	Codes
Learning Through Play	Child Engagement	Free centers Children interest Children Choice Learning experience
	Child interactions	Interaction w/peers Peer socialization
	Hands-on learning	Learning materials Learning interest Exploration Creativity Discovery Imagination

	Student-led instruction	Free choice Student interests Flexibility
Play-Based Learning Impacts On Children	Academic School Readiness	Learning materials Children's choice Children interest Intrinsic motivation
	Problem-solving	Self-taught Self-regulation skills Self-confidence
	Relationship-building	Free centers Communication Peers Social skills Teachers Interactions
Guided Learning Strategies	Goals	Specific outcomes Observations Evaluations
	Free play exploration	Free centers Child choice Child interest Child-directed
	Communication	Conversations Open-ended question Back & forth exchanges Listening Word repetition Talking
Role of the Teacher in Play-based Learning	Classroom environment	Free centers Flexibility Child choice Learning materials
	Intentional instruction	Developmentally appropriate practices Age appropriate

		Lesson planning
		Preparation
		Role modeling
		Assisting
	Communication	Child affirmation
		Conversations
		Relationship building
		Scaffolding
	Goals	Specific outcomes
		Observations
		Evaluations
	Teacher preparedness	Education
		Professional development
		Awareness
		Standards
Challenges with Implementing Play-based Learning	Developmentally appropriate	Mixed ages
		Approaches to Learning
		Child interest
		Student expectation
		Student needs
	Time	Free centers
		Adjustments to activities
		Challenges
	Classroom environment	Adverse behaviors
		Learning materials
		Child interest
		Other responsibilities
Development of the Child In Play-based Learning	Developmentally Appropriate	Activities
		Approaches to learning
		Age appropriate
	Intentional instruction	Social
		Emotional
		Cognitive
		Physical
		Language

	Motivation
	Interactions
Communication	Scaffolding
	Questions
	Continuous
	conversations

Six main themes emerged through the data analysis process. Within the six main themes, 21 subthemes were identified. The main themes identified were learning through play, play-based learning's impact on children, guided learning strategies, the role of the teacher in play-based learning, challenges with implementing play-based learning, and the development of the child in play-based learning.

Theme One: Children Learning Through Play

The first theme correlates to the first research question, "How do early childhood education teachers describe the importance of play in the classroom." The teachers described the importance of play in the classroom by defining what play-based learning entailed, their experiences of implementing play-based learning, and the impact that play-based learning had on the children. From the data, many subthemes emerged from the main theme of learning through play such as child engagement, child interactions, hands-on learning, and student-led instruction. Iris said, "I describe play-based learning as a whole as children learning through play and classroom setting with scaffolding and or modeling from adults".

Child engagement. The first subtheme in children learning through play was the child engagement in which all 12 participants stated that children seemed more engaged with learning when they had free choice and followed children's interests in activities offered to them in the classroom. Betty said, "Different things teach different children so when they are playing, they're already engaged. They're already involved. There's something that they want to do".

Elizabeth said, "Play-based learning is when a child comes into a classroom and is invited to play with whatever's available. And they can be learning through blocks, you can be counting, you can be stacking, and you can be sorting, it's all learning but you're playing at the same time".

Julie said, "I will let them choose what center they want to pull out so that they feel like they have a choice in what they want to do and I'm just not telling them we have to do this, you have to do that". Julie expounded on this subject by saying, "They feel like they're making their choices for themselves instead of somebody making it for them. Kari said, "Children have the autonomy to pick and choose where they would like to play in the manner of which they'd like to play in". Iris said, "They get to choose what they're interested in; they get to play with that, or they can choose to do whichever thing that piques their interest". When conducting the observations, it was observed in all 12 classrooms during free center time that children had the option of choices of what they wanted to play with.

Child Interactions. The second subtheme that correlates with learning through play is child interactions. The participants discussed how they observed that while children had increased engagement in learning many child interactions were taking place between their peers and the teachers. There can be a variety of interactions with peers both in talking and actions. The participants mentioned how children learn to interact while learning through play by problem-solving. Elizabeth said, "Learning how to share and learning how to use our words, waiting patiently". Felicia discussed how as a teacher she is constantly interacting with children while they play. Felicia said, "When we're playing, I'm always asking like their colors, their numbers, all the basic educational stuff, and then try to incorporate live stuff". Heather said, "So with their communication that they're doing, they are learning from each other". Heather

elaborated by saying, "They get better at something as well, like if that little child didn't know how to do something, but the other one showed how to do it".

Hands-on learning. All 12 participants discussed the importance of young children learning through hands-on learning. Betty said, "Everything that they see and that they touch becomes that learning experience". Betty said, "They're still allowed to explore and to learn". Charlotte said, "Children learn best as we know with hands-on experiences". Charlotte said, "I truly believe that it makes them more creative. They can think more abstractly. I feel like they become more creative; that creativity is fostered". Iris said, "They are playing however, through that playing they are learning different tools, they're learning different life skills, they're learning how to solve problems, how to work things out, how to communicate, just a lot of different things that they can learn from playing". Iris said, "I think it improves their communication, it improves relationships, it improves their problem-solving, it improves their cognitive skills, it improves their physical skills". Felicia said, "It helps them to be creative and constructive". Grace said, "I think it's pretty easy because the kids honestly do it themselves and a lot of our kids have a really good imagination".

Student-led instruction. The teachers shared how they believe children learn through play-based learning from the concept of children leading their learning. April said, "I definitely think it is children who learn through play. So, it's self-chosen, where children's interests are, and what they enjoy doing, and then this brings opportunity and experiences for children". Charlotte said, "Just letting them choose what they're wanting to play so you can see what their interests are, and then using that to guide the play and certain outcomes that you're looking for". Daniel said, "They have the freedom to guide themselves through their academic journey". Elizabeth said, "It's like they're having fun and they're learning at the same time. They're not

put into a mold or not sitting at the table having to do a worksheet. It's just that they're playing and having fun and learning at the same time". Elizabeth expounded by saying, "They're teaching us how we know they want to learn".

Theme Two: Play-Based Learning Impact on Children

The second theme that correlates with the first question of this study discusses how play-based learning impacts children. The participants discussed the effects of learning they witnessed when children were given the opportunity to learn through play and hands-on activities. The participants noted that through play-based learning children enhance language skills, and communication, build imagination, build sensation ability, encourage curiosity, and motivation, increase social development, and relationship building with teachers, and peers. Daniel said, "The biggest part that I really appreciate about play-based learning is the real relationships that the child and the teacher make through the learning itself". Heather said, "They learn from each other. So, with their communication that they're doing, they learn from each other". Three subthemes were identified within this theme which include academic school readiness, problem-solving, and relationship building between peers and the child with teacher.

Academic school readiness. Academic school readiness involves both the children and the teacher. Teachers provide learning materials in the classroom to enhance children's choice of interest to learn and be intrinsically motivated learn. Betty said, "I know I will always teach this way because I see the benefits, I see the difference". Daniel said, "Play-based learning is that they have the freedom to guide themselves through their academic journey".

Problem-solving. Within the play-based learning pedagogy, children consistently have to learn how to problem-solve either with the learning idea that is taking place, the learning materials they are utilizing, or the interactions with peers. Charlotte said, "Making choices about

what they are doing also helps them later in life as a need to make choices. It helps them to have self-regulation skills", Iris said, "They are playing, however through that playing they are learning different tools, they're learning different life skills. They're learning how to solve their problems, how to work things out, how to communicate". Julie said, "I let them all go where they want to go so, they don't feel like I'm just telling them to do it. They feel like they're making their choice for themselves instead of somebody making it for them".

Other teachers discussed other aspects of problem-solving, not only are children making decisions about what they want to learn from in the classroom but also learning to problem-solve with peers during the learning process. Elizabeth said, "If they learn how to talk to their peers, they've learned how to problem solve". Felicia discussed the use of language between peers when problem-solving during play. Felicia said, "Be able to talk to your friends and say what they feel. A lot of them do not know how to say no, that hurts, that bothers me". During the classroom observation, problem-solving with teacher guidance was observed to happen in three of the classrooms during the observation. For example, when children were fighting over learning materials, the teacher observed the situation first, then intervened by scaffolding the children through the problem for it to be solved. In another classroom observation, a child was observed to hit another child in which the teacher guided the learning with the children. It is inevitable when working with young children that adverse behaviors are going to occur since the children are learning how to interact with others.

Relationship building. Relationship building happens between peers and child with the teacher. For play-based learning pedagogy to be successful for children's learning, the teacher and the child must build a relationship so that guided learning from the teacher can be positively implemented and received by the child. The teachers shared a variety of aspects within

relationship building that they believed to be important to them. Betty discussed not only the importance of having conversations with children but the importance of listening. Listening to what children are talking to peers about or talking loudly while they play to prepare for guided teaching. "I'm listening to how they are making all these connections. Real education is just like alive for them". Daniel said, "The biggest part that I really appreciate about play-based learning is the real relationships that the child and the teacher make through the learning itself". Elizabeth said, "I think it really just comes down to loving them. Just listening, listening to them, and making it a fun environment for them to walk into". Heather said, "They learn from each other. So, with their communication that they're doing, they learn from each other". Lily said, "Create like a little community like just friends and it just brings like the class together".

Theme Three: Guided Learning Strategies

The third theme identified in the study that answered the first study question focused on the guided learning strategies that teachers used to instruct children while they played with the learning materials. Guided learning strategies encompass teachers choosing materials, and activities that bolster learning concepts, and guide children's play through demonstration or as one that plays with children. Teachers in this study discussed the importance of the environments, learning materials and interactions with children within guided learning. Charlotte said, "Creating environments where children can make choices of different activities to play that are teaching at the same time is how I would set up play-based learning". Charlotte elaborated more on the classroom environment with child interactions. Charlotte said, "Setting up the environment is huge. And then observing, interacting when you need to, and playing with them, you know sitting on the floor playing with them. My role is to enhance the play, observation, setting up the environment". Betty said, "My role is to scaffold, support and also to create and

facilitate learning opportunities". Three subthemes emerged from this theme which are goals, free-play, exploration, and communication.

Goals. Although children are learning through play, teachers have goals and benchmarks that are developmentally appropriate for the children to achieve. In Arizona, the early childhood goals and benchmarks are correlated with the Arizona Early Learning Standards. Teachers use the standards to guide children's learning to enhance school readiness. Charlotte said, "Things that I would set up and implement in the classroom would tell me where they are developmentally and what they're learning". Daniel said, "Sometime one student is on track and hitting every milestone, every standard, perfectly throughout the whole year. This is the beauty about play-based learning is that they might hit five or six, in a span of one week because they just had that motivation to explore those different aspects throughout their play or maybe they had an interaction with another student that really expanded their mind on how they can resolve a certain problem". During one of the classroom observations, it was observed that one of the teachers was writing what they observed the child doing while the child played. In a later conversation with that teacher, she noted that she was documenting a specific goal that the child achieved to add to the individualized portfolios that she keeps for each child.

Free play exploration. During free play exploration, which can also be referred to as free center time, the child can play in the different centers that are offered in the classroom and choose learning materials to play with. Daniel said, "Play-based learning in my classroom is student-led. And it's a way for children to develop naturally and learn about the real world in a way that a child should, through play, through typical interactions with other classmates, with adults, and with themselves. Using the environment that they have available to them and really expanding their mind". While children are engaged in play, the teacher can have conversations

with the children. The conversations are used to guide the child's learning in the center areas or with the learning materials. The conversations consist of open-ended questions, scaffolding, and back and forth exchanges for the purpose of children's higher order of thinking and learning.

Communication. Communication is crucial to implement for play-based learning to be successful. Teachers guide the learning through continuous conversations with the children while they are utilizing their learning materials or center play. Teachers can ask open-ended questions, scaffold, and engage in back-and-forth exchanges which enhances problem-solving and expansion of learning. Felicia said, "They'll ask me questions and I'll ask them questions. When we are playing, I'm always asking them like, their colors, their numbers, all the basic learning educational stuff, and then try to incorporate live stuff". Iris said, "My role is scaffolding, modeling, assisting". During the classroom observation, it was observed in five of the twelve classrooms that teachers talked with children for the whole hour. The teacher would look around the room and move from center to center to engage in conversation with the children. Teachers were observed to be showing genuine interest in what the children were creating and assessing the children's thought processes for support or guidance in learning.

Theme Four: Role of the Teacher in Play-Based Learning

Within the play-based learning environment, the teacher's role is an important aspect of the play-based learning pedagogy. This fourth main theme answers the third research question, "How does the early childhood education teacher view their role in the play-based learning experience with the student's learning?" The teacher's role is to not only guide learning but also prepare the classroom environment to be inviting for learning, prepare for intentional instruction for goal achievement, think through conversation strategies to have with the children, and overall be prepared through awareness for teaching opportunities. The play-based learning model

requires teachers to know what each child needs to learn and to provide learning opportunities through materials, activities, and/or conversations while the child is engaged in the free-choice play. Elizabeth said, "I think my role is to facilitate the children that they could have fun, that I put out things, I listen to them. I listen and we talk. I put out things that they want to do". Felicia said, "Being a role model showing them how to play".

Classroom environment. A crucial component of the play-based learning model is the classroom environment. It is the teacher's responsibility to set up the environment with learning centers that are inviting for the children to play in and pique excitement for the children to want to play in that area. The teacher knows the children well enough to provide learning materials that the children will enjoy playing with and can also provide guided learning opportunities. Charlotte said, "Creating environments where children can make choices of different activities to play that are teaching at the same time is how I would set up play-based learning". During the classroom observation, all 12 of the classrooms comprised of learning centers that included, manipulatives, blocks, art, library, dramatic play, sensory table, science, and math. A variety of learning materials were available to the children in each of these centers for the whole hour of observation. Children were observed to move freely from one center to another.

Participants shared that they gained knowledge of children's interests through observations. April said, "I think through observation, if you observe the children and see what their interests are and follow through with your lesson plans and keep the child's interest in mind". Betty said, "Play-based learning is a freedom for the teacher and the children to be able to express and to learn on multiple levels. They're going into kindergarten confident, they're going into kindergarten more than ready". Charlotte said, "Scaffolding their learning and also emergent curriculum, so thinking about observing, doing a lot of observations, seeing what they are

interested in, what they like to play with, asking questions to see what direction to go in to implement the learning environment". Charlotte went on to say, "Setting up the environment is huge. And then observing, interacting when you need to, and playing with them, you know sitting on the floor playing with them. My role is to enhance the play, observation, setting up the environment".

Intentional instruction. The role of the teacher in the play-based learning model requires the teacher to have goals and benchmarks for the children to achieve. This is accomplished through thoughtful planning of the classroom environment and lesson plans. April said, "It takes a lot of lesson planning, looking at different ideas to keep the children motivated to want to learn". Along with free choice learning centers and learning materials, the teacher provides activities for the children to choose to participate in that will be specific learning concepts that the teacher is aware that the children need. Elizabeth said, "It's like I do for my lesson plan, I have a plan. But it doesn't mean that that's the plan. She elaborates on involving children to be part of the lesson planning. Elizabeth says, "Ask them what they want to do, and have them involved and make them part of the experience, part of the planning, and watch them teach all the other kids and play with them as well".

Communication. Communication is an important component for play-based learning to be effective. When the children are engaged in playing, communication can happen between peers or between the teacher and the child. With communication between peers, the children are advancing language development, increasing back-and-forth exchanges skills, and learning from each other through sharing ideas. Charlotte said, "They're learning social-emotional skills. They're interacting.". Teachers communicate with children while they play through the form of why and how questions, questions that involve problem-solving ideas, prediction, and

experimentation questions, and/or classification and comparisons. Teachers can also involve children while they play in conversations that consist of brainstorming, planning, producing, connecting concepts, and real-world connections. Betty said, "My role is to scaffold, support, and also to create and facilitate learning opportunities".

Goals. In the play-based learning model, teachers must set learning goals for each child according to the learning standards. The developmentally appropriate goals are individualized and cover not only academic achievement but also social, emotional, cognitive, and physical aspects of the child. Teachers are aware of the individualized goals that children need through observation and documentation. Charlotte said, "Letting them choose what they're wanting to play so you can see what their interests are and then using that to guide the play and certain outcomes that you 're looking for". Charlotte expounded on the achievement of the child's goals by saying, "Setting up those different types of activities that we just talked about, interacting with the children during those activities, to guide the play, so that I can see what they know and what they're learning". Elizabeth said, "It's all about listening to the child. Listen and just know that they are being heard".

Teacher preparedness. Teachers must be prepared in the understanding and knowledge of what play-based learning requires for it to fully impact children's learning. Early childhood teachers can obtain knowledge through research, training, and formal early childhood education at colleges and universities. Ongoing professional development for teachers is needed to stay current with the research on brain development and how play-based learning can successfully be implemented. Betty said, "Learning what I was doing. Learning you know how to reach these children, learning about conversations, open-ended conversations, how to scaffold children and how to do all these things without paper, you know, and how to do all these things without

knowing what the child is going to do". Charlotte said, "How much more we know about brain development and how children learn. Daniel learned about play-based learning through college courses he was taking. Dainel said, "I originally learned about it through college courses that I had taken".

Theme Five: Challenges with Implementing Play-Based Learning

Early childhood teachers do face challenges when implementing play-based learning in the classroom. This main theme answered the second research question "What challenges do early childhood education teachers experience when implementing play-based learning?" The participants discussed that one of the big challenges is the parent's understanding of play-based learning and the impact that it has on children's school readiness. Charlotte said, "Probably one of the biggest challenges is parents not understanding why they're just playing and why aren't they learning and why am I not getting worksheets at home?". Daniel said, "The biggest one that I've noticed is that parents don't always understand why play-based learning. They think why my child is playing all the time, why they are not learning anything?". Daniel explains how he responds to parents' concerns about play-based learning. Daniel said, "They've grown in their relationships with others and they're more responsible and they are able to have longer more in-depth conversation with you. That is the beauty of play-based learning". Heather said, "Parents when they do come in, they only see them playing". Julie said, "Parents feel like the kids are just playing all day long and they're not really learning anything".

Three subthemes were identified in the challenges of implementing play-based learning which are developmentally appropriate, time, and classroom environment.

Developmentally appropriate. The participants discussed that children come from a variety of backgrounds in academic knowledge when entering the preschool classroom. There

are a variety of approaches to learning amongst the children. Participants discussed that even though they are teaching in a four-year-old classroom, some children are younger fours and older fours which can cause some challenges in instruction. Iris discussed the lack of early childhood education can be a challenge in developmentally appropriate practices. Iris said, "So, coming up with those ideas and activities and all those things especially ones that include playing and learning".

Time. The participants shared that providing successful play-based learning takes time. Time is spent on observation, documentation, set-up in a classroom environment, and learning materials needed for the children to enhance learning. Many hours of teacher preparation are needed from day to day due to the individualized learning process in play-based learning in comparison to working from a curriculum that provides detailed instruction and learning materials needed for that lesson. Participants discussed flexibility with guided learning for the children and that lesson plans change according to the children's interests. Iris discussed the lack of time that she must prepare the environment and learning materials because of all the other responsibilities that she has. Iris said, "I have other teacher things to do. I have potty training to do". During the one-hour classroom observation, in three of the classrooms, it was observed that the teacher had to clean off tables, clean floors where paint was spilled, and change a child who had an accident. While the teacher is having to do these tasks, there were missed learning opportunities through conversations that the teacher could have been having with the children.

Classroom environment. The play-based learning environment requires a classroom that is set up to meet the individual child's interests with a variety of centers and learning materials for the children to learn. Teachers are aware of children's interests and provide activities that meet the objective of guided learning for the day. Participants discussed how this can be a

challenge due to the lack of materials available, center furniture, or aesthetics of the classroom.

Elizabeth said, "Not having enough of one item". Felicia said, "Sometimes I have a new teacher.

It makes it a little bit difficult because they don't know the routine". Iris said, "Finding the tools

to keep them engaged".

Theme Six: Development of the Child in Play-Based Learning

The sixth theme identified within the study was the development of the child in play-

based learning. This theme correlates with the first question in the research "How do early

childhood education teachers describe the importance of play in the classroom?" The

development needs of the children in the early childhood setting include cognitive, social,

emotional, and physical. The participants discussed how the play-based learning model

addressed all the categories of needs when implemented properly. Three subthemes emerged

from the study which include developmentally appropriate practices, intentional instruction, and

communication.

Developmentally appropriate. Participants discussed the need for the teacher to be

aware and have knowledge about best practices and developmentally appropriate practices for

the expectation of children's age and approaches to learning. Due to the vast variety of

approaches to learning within a classroom, teachers need to make expectations for learning

appropriate and offer learning materials and/or activities that meet the four categories of

developmental needs. Offering a classroom environment and guided teaching strategies to meet

the developmental needs of the child, makes play-based learning successful for the children.

Charlotte said, "Fostering a love for learning is the most important thing you can do in an early

childhood setting and if they're playing, they're going to love learning so it kind of goes hand in

hand". Daniel said, "Play-based learning helps the students develop in their own way". Iris said,

"I think that it improves their communication, it improves their relationships, it improves their problem solving, their cognitive skills, it improves their physical like gross motor". Kari said, "They learn language development, they learn fine motor, gross motor, they learn self-autonomy to make their own choices and be decisive about it. They learn a lot through play-based learning".

Intentional instruction. The participants discussed the need for planning and preparation for intentional instruction for each child to meet the developmental needs in the play-based learning environment. Teachers need to observe and document often to provide learning materials and activities that interest the children and then to think through conversations to have with the children to guide and extend learning concepts. April said, "I'm working the rest of that evening to find out through the observation what was the next thing and maybe something different that we can do the next few days to keep the interest so you're always following the child's direction on the play-based learning". Betty said, "Through play-based learning, they're still allowed to be children. They're still allowed to be individuals; they're still allowed to explore and learn. And to receive information and to give information and in the end exchange both. They're still allowed to be with their friends to have the social aspect of everything. So, it feeds the whole child". Daniel said, "What I like about play-based learning is that as an educator, I don't have to follow a specific set curriculum. It allows me the flexibility to really cater to what my children are interested in, what they are needing review on, what I feel like they can handle. It allows me the flexibility within the content".

Communication. All 12 of the participants shared that communication through open-ended questions, how, what, and why questions, questions that included analysis and reasoning, creating, integrating, and connection to the real world were essential to guiding learning in the

play-based pedagogy. Participants discussed how all these questions could be used when addressing the developmental needs of the children. The participants discussed the increased language development that occurred when children were playing with each other and conversations that teachers had with the children while they played. Felicia said, "Parents also have said that they've talked a lot more". The teachers discussed the importance of constantly using language through repeating words and the use of advanced vocabulary that children could identify with from ideas or other words that were familiar to them. Daniel said, "Play-based learning allows the children to express their feelings and emotions throughout the lesson and the day. They're able to grow socially-emotionally, with problem-solving, personal responsibility. Developing friendships. Play-based learning allows the children to express themselves in a unique way".

Research Question Responses

Central Research Question: What are the lived experiences of early childhood education teachers when implementing play-based learning in any of the early childhood classroom settings servicing 3-to 5-year-olds in the Maricopa County region in Arizona? The purpose of this question was to understand the early childhood teacher experiences that they face when implementing play-based learning. The three sub-questions address the overall central research question. Twelve participants gave a variety of answers during interviews to this question. From this question, six main themes emerged.

SQ1: How do early childhood education teachers describe the importance of play in the classroom?

The first sub-question was intended to learn from the teachers their experiences with play-based learning implementation and how they described the importance of learning through

play in the classroom. The themes of learning through play, play-based learning impact on children, guided learning strategies, and development of the child in play-based learning emerged from this question. Out of the four main themes, several subthemes were identified. All 12 of the participants discussed the play-based learning time to be during free center time that was offered to the children for most of the day. Designated centers such as dramatic play area, block area, library, art area, fine motor area, math, and science area were centers that were available for the children to choose from. A variety of learning materials were available for the children to utilize in the different centers.

The participants discussed the importance of play-based learning to be successful, teachers needed to guide the children's learning through conversations and communication while they played which led to building relationships. Daniel said, "The biggest part that I really appreciate about play-based learning is the real relationships that the child and the teacher make through the learning itself".

SQ2: What challenges do early childhood education teachers experience when implementing play-based learning?

The second sub-question was intended for the participants to share any challenges that they experienced while implementing play-based learning in the classroom. One main theme of challenges with implementing play-based learning and three subthemes emerged which included developmentally appropriate practices, time, and classroom environment. Three participants shared that the biggest challenge that they encounter is parents' lack of understanding of the play-based learning model and what children are learning from it. Charlotte said, "Probably one of the biggest challenges is parents not understanding why they're just playing and why aren't they learning and why am I not getting worksheets at home?".

Participants discussed that children come from a variety of backgrounds and academic knowledge when entering the classroom. Knowing what activities and learning materials to offer for the children can be a challenge. Time was also discussed as a challenge. The lack of time in the classroom for guided instruction. Iris said, "I have other teacher things to do. I have potty training to do". Teachers discussed the many jobs that they perform which can impede the time that they can have meaningful conversations with the children.

Another challenge that the participants discussed was the classroom environment and the lack of a variety of centers or learning materials that they could make available to the children. Elizabeth said, "Not having enough of one item". For the play-based learning model to be effective for the children's learning, teachers need to have the materials available. For directors of the center, this can be difficult if the funds are not available.

SQ3: How does the early childhood education teacher view their role in the play-based learning experience with the student's learning?

The third sub-question was intended for the participants to share what they believed their role was in the implementation of the play-based learning experience with the students learning. One main theme was identified from the study that addressed this question which was documented to be the role of the teacher in play-based learning. Five subthemes were discovered from the main theme that discussed the classroom environment, intentional instruction, communication, goals, and teacher preparedness.

Many of the participants discussed and elaborated in length on their role in the play-based learning model. There were a variety of answers from participants from which the subthemes are derived from. Charlotte said, "Creating environments where children can make choices of different activities to play that are teaching at the same time is how I would set up play-based

learning". Charlotte elaborated more on the classroom environment with child interactions. Charlotte said, "Setting up the environment is huge. And then observing, interacting when you need to, and playing with them, you know sitting on the floor playing with them. My role is to enhance the play, observation, setting up the environment".

Another role discussed by the participants was intentional instruction. Some of the participants discussed that although the children are playing, they are still learning through guided instruction and intentionality of what the teacher has prepared for them to learn. Participants discussed the need for goals and assessment for the children within intentional instruction. Charlotte said, "Letting them choose what they're wanting to play so you can see what their interests are and then using that to guide the play and certain outcomes that you 're looking for". Charlotte expounded on the achievement of the child's goals by saying, "Setting up those different types of activities that we just talked about, interacting with the children during those activities, to guide the play, so that I can see what they know and what they're learning".

Many of the participants discussed in length the importance of language, conversation, and communication within the play-based learning model. Betty said, "My role is to scaffold, support and also to create and facilitate learning opportunities". Teacher preparedness was also important for the participants' discussion in their role of play-based learning. Betty said, "Learning what I was doing. Learning you know how to reach these children, learning about conversations, open-ended conversations, how to scaffold children and how to do all these things without paper, you know, and how to do all these things without knowing what the child is going to do".

Summary

The focus of this study was to understand the early childhood education teachers' lived experiences implementing play-based learning in the early childhood classroom settings. The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to understand the early childhood education teachers' lived experiences implementing play-based learning in any of the early childhood classroom settings servicing 3-to-5-year-olds in the Maricopa County region in Arizona. This chapter discussed the results of the study that identified six main themes from the data analysis of the study that correlated with the three research questions that led the study. Discussed and identified in this chapter were the experiences of the participants implementing play-based learning, the importance of play in the classroom, the challenges that teachers experience when implementing play-based learning and the teacher's view on their role within play-based learning experience with the children's learning.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The focus of this study was to share the experiences that early childhood education teachers experienced when implementing play-based learning in the classroom. The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to understand the early childhood education teachers' lived experiences implementing play-based learning in any of the early childhood classroom settings servicing 3-to-5-year-olds in the Maricopa County region in Arizona. The literature pertaining to the purpose of this study shows a gap between premise in theory and practice. Within this study, early childhood education teachers participated in interviews, focus groups, and observed in the classroom. Data was collected, analyzed, and coded to identify themes and subthemes. Memoing was utilized during the data analysis process to help identify and organize themes. Interpretation of findings, implications for policy or practice, theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations and recommendations for future research will be addressed in this chapter.

Discussion

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to understand the early childhood education teachers' lived experiences implementing play-based learning in any of the early childhood classroom settings servicing 3-to-5-year-olds in the Maricopa County region in Arizona. With the use of interviews, focus group, and classroom observation, the data analysis and research gave understanding into the experiences that the early childhood education teachers have had with implementing play-based learning in their classrooms. Interpretation of findings, implications for policy or practice, theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations and recommendations for future research will be addressed in this chapter. Themes

were identified within the research that related to experiences that the teachers had such as participants experiences integrating play-based learning, challenges that may arise when implementing play-based learning, and the teachers' role in the play-based learning experience with the children.

Empirical

This study's research corroborated with other research that has been conducted regarding play-based learning. Past research substantiated the idea that when children learn through play motivation is increased, students are more engaged, and the learning experiences are more meaningful (Zosh, 2022). The participants in this study discussed the experiences they had with the implementation of the play-based learning pedagogy and confirmed what Zosh, 2022 discussed about the increased motivation, student engagement and the meaningful learning experiences. The participants discussed the impact on children's learning and the benefits that they gained in all areas of development. Previous research showed the benefits that children acquire through play-based learning, a holistic development which includes social, emotional, physical, and intellectual aspects (Hesterman & Targowska, 2020; Lunga et. al., 2020; Wishart & Rouse, 2019; Zucca et. al., 2022). The participants discussed the importance of providing learning materials and activities that were developmentally appropriate to the children's needs within the classroom. They discussed that if the learning materials or activities did not interest the children or were not developmentally appropriate then children would not be motivated or engaged to learn. The participants all agreed that play is a developmentally appropriate practice in the classroom (Zosh et. al., 2018; Ward & Wilcox Herzog, 2019).

The participants believed that communication and conversation between peers and children with the teacher was an important aspect of guiding children's learning and for play-

based learning to be successful. The participants discussed strategies and ideas for increasing children's learning through observation, scaffolding, and listening as children play. The participants discussed how observing the children and listening helped with preparation in lessons for further individualized learning with the children. To increase children's learning and to help them to get to a higher level of thinking, participants discussed scaffolding questions for problem-solving, creating, analysis and reasoning, and integrating new concepts while building on the ones that were previous learned. The research of this study added to prior research that confirmed the need for play-based learning to be successful, communication and conversations must be implemented (Coelho et. al., 2019).

Another area of the play-based learning model that participants found to be important is the learning environment. Hesterman and Targowski (2020) discussed the need for learning materials and classroom layout should be conducive to inviting children to actively explore and connect their experiences to the real world in which they live. Therefore, participants discussed the variety of centers and learning materials that were available to the children to utilize during free center time in which most of the play-based learning took place for the children.

There are several benefits listed that this study addressed such as social, emotional, cognitive, physical and children's increased language. Previous research discussed cognitive benefits to include effects on brain functioning and structure, executive functioning improvements which include cognitive flexibility, inhibitory control and working memory, self-control, self-regulation, problem-solving, relationship with peers and physical and social development (Devi et. al., 2021; Goble & Pianta, 2017; Hesterman & Targowska, 2020; Smolucha & Smolucha, 2021; Yogman et. al., 2018). This study affirmed previous research

regarding children's benefits of learning through play and added the understanding of what teachers are learning from the children while engaged in play.

Theoretical

Through this study, confirmation of Vygotsky (1978) theory of cognitive constructivism is being utilized in early childhood classrooms today. Vygotsky (1978) cognitive constructivism theory focused on individuals construct of their own learning and understanding (Schunk, 2020; Smoulcha & Smoulcah, 2021; Taylor & Boyer, 2019). Educators that follow cognitive constructivism believe that social interaction and classroom environment play an important role in Vygotsky's (1978) theory. All the participants in this study discussed the impact and value that both components had on the children in the classroom. Teachers discussed the importance of communication and conversation that peers had with each other and teacher with children while children engaged in play. Teachers explained how preparing the classroom environment was important for guided learning to take place and for play-based learning to be effective for the children.

Vygotsky believed that although children are engaged and learning through hands-on activities and play, teacher observations, assessing, scaffolding, and listening were crucial components of cognitive constructivism theory (Schunk, 2020). Vygotsky (1978) believed that a child's zone of proximal development (ZPD) is centered on the child's independent actual development level of learning through problem-solving with guidance from adult and capable peers. The participants discussed the importance of observation and assessing to plan for the classroom environment or scaffolding questions that might be asked while children were engaged in play to promote a higher level of thinking or to create individualized goals to achieve. This study's findings revealed that Vygotsky's theory and practices are being implemented in the

early childhood classroom with success in children's individualized learning and teacher's intentional instructional format.

Interpretation of Findings

One central research question and three sub-questions were addressed in this study. Six main themes and 21 subthemes were identified from the data that addressed the questions from this study. Themes one through three and six derived from the first question of this study "How do early childhood education teachers describe the importance of play in the classroom?" Themes one through three and six were identified as learning through play, play-based learning impact on children, guided learning strategies, and development of the child in play-based learning. Thirteen subthemes emerged to answer this question.

All 12 of the participants that were interviewed shared that play-based learning took place during the time of the day that free-play occurred or when the children were playing on the playground. Child engagement was the first subtheme discussed from the main theme of children learning through play. The teachers explained that for children to be engaged, the classroom environment needs to be arranged to pique the children's interests along with learning materials to enhance the children's learning experience. Teachers discussed the importance of children having free choice within the classroom during free center time to choose where to play, what materials to play with, and who to interact with whether that be a peer or a teacher.

The second subtheme that emerged from the main theme of learning through play was child interactions. One hundred percent of the participants discussed how important it is for child interactions to occur for play-based learning to be successful and make an impact on the child. The participants shared how they observed children learning from each other while

playing together. Two of the participants mentioned in their interview that they assessed the increase in language development with the children in the classroom when they interacted with one another while they were playing. Two of the participants noticed an increase in peer socialization with children who were shy or fearful to engage with others when they had the opportunity to engage in play with others. Children were observed to invite children to play with them.

All 12 participants noted that hands-on learning was essential to children's learning during the free center time where play-based learning for the children occurred. The participants discussed that hands-on learning required enough and a variety of learning materials to be available to the children. The teachers explained the importance of observing and listening to the children while they played to know what each child's interests were so that they could provide learning materials that they would be interested in using. All the participants discussed the impact that hands-on learning had on the child through exploration and discovery. Some participants used words to describe what they observed from the child's play such as creativity and imagination.

All 12 of the participants discussed the impact that play-based learning had on children. Three subthemes emerged from the main theme of play-based learning's impact on the children which is the second main theme derived from this study. Academic school readiness, problem-solving, and relationship building were the subthemes that came from the participant's response to the first question. Four of the participant's shared in detail their thoughts on the activities and learning materials that they provided for children to learn specific learning objectives throughout the year to follow state learning standards to prepare children for kindergarten. Although play-based learning pedagogy prepares children for school readiness earlier than four years old, the

teachers share the responsibility that they must make sure that children are meeting expectations for the state standards in the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical areas.

Eighty percent of the participants discussed that one of the impacts that play-based learning has on children is problem-solving. Children have to problem solve to make decisions of what they want to play with, where they want to play in the classroom, and who they want to interact with. When a child chooses what interests them, they go through a process in their brain to think through making choices. During play-based learning time, it is common to see a child play with a variety of different learning materials and with different peers. Therefore, problem-solving can occur several times during play-based learning time. The child can also problem-solve while doing an activity such as building blocks or putting a puzzle together. One participant shared the importance for a child to learn to problem-solve at a young age as they will be using that skill for the rest of their life. Three of the 12 participants discussed how problem-solving increases children's self-confidence and self-regulation skills.

The seventh subtheme identified was relationship building which occurs during play-based learning. All 12 participants discussed that strong relationships make the biggest impact on children's learning. Relationship building does not just occur amongst the children as they engage with one another but also with the teacher and the child. The teachers discussed that the strategy that they use to build relationships with the children is through conversations and showing interest in what they are interested in. The teachers expounded on the components of the conversations that involved a variety of open-ended questions for the children to share their thoughts and what they could be learning. The teachers noted that the conversations that they have with the children are considered guided learning strategies which is the next main theme that answers the first sub-question on children learning through play.

Theme three of guided learning strategies comprises three subthemes that were identified in this study. All 12 of the participants that were interviewed believed that this is a major component for children to learn while they play. The three subthemes that emerged were goals, free-play exploration, and communication.

Nine of the 12 participants specifically expounded upon the need for goals and specific learning objectives for each child. The teachers shared how they observe children at play or have conversations with children with the use of open-ended questions to determine what the children know and to note specific learning objectives and outcomes for each child. The play-based evaluation and assessment are conducted through conversations with the children and observations of the children while they play.

The next subtheme discussed earlier in this section of the importance of children engaging in free play exploration. All 12 of the participants noted that it is important for children to have free choice during free center time with learning materials, centers, and who the children engage with. The participants' viewpoints were all the same in this area of children learning through play when it is child-directed and child-led. Teachers explained that while children are playing with what interests them, the teacher is available and looking for opportunities to communicate with the child through conversations, open-ended questions, and back-and-forth exchanges for the purpose of enhancing learning.

In the sixth main theme that answered the first sub-question of this study about play and learning, three subthemes were identified which are developmentally appropriate practices, intentional instruction, and communication. Six of the participants discussed the need for the learning materials and the activities in the classroom being offered to the children to be developmentally and age appropriate. One teacher discussed that although they may be the same

age in the classroom, they come from different academic backgrounds. Therefore, a variety of learning materials need to be offered to address the children's academic level and approaches to learning. One participant discussed the diversity in approaches to learning that the children possess. The teacher posed a good question "Do we really know how many approaches to learning there are?"

For the last two subthemes in the main theme of the development of the child in the play-based learning pedagogy, the participants discussed intentional instruction and communication. The teachers noted the importance for there to be intentional instruction in child development. All 12 of the participants elaborated on meeting the needs of the whole child through play-based learning that included social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and language development. The intentional instruction included teachers providing learning materials and guided learning strategies for the children to learn and develop in these areas. The teachers discussed the need for continuous conversations with the children through scaffolding and questions to increase their higher level of thinking and learning.

Theme five with challenges of implementing play-based learning correlates with the second sub-question of this study which is "What challenges do early childhood education teachers experience when implementing play-based learning?" From the main theme, three subthemes emerged which include developmentally appropriate, time, and classroom environment. Six of the participants discussed the big challenge with implementing play-based learning is with the parents understanding how play-based learning works. Parents are used to seeing children's progress in learning through tangible work such as worksheets or projects. Teachers must educate parents on how play-based learning is implemented, assessed, and documented. One participant discussed the importance of individualized portfolios for each child

where parents can see children's tangible work, pictures, developmental checklists, and documentation from the teacher of specific goals that children have achieved.

Another challenge that teachers discussed was meeting the academic needs of the children as each of them has a different approach to learning or interests. Three participants discussed that although the class may be comprised of all four-year-olds, not all children are on the same level in their academic knowledge. Two participants have mixed ages of three- and four-year-olds which makes it a challenge to meet the academic needs of each child.

The second subtheme in this theme of challenges is time. Three of the participants specifically discussed the time that it takes to prepare the classroom for children's learning in the play-based learning environment. Along with physically preparing the classroom with centers, learning materials, and activities, teachers are preparing for conversations or assessment opportunities that they can have with the child to enhance or assess the learning. Two teachers discussed that they prepare learning materials and activities, but the children have other interests in mind for that day. The teachers then talked about the flexibility that they must have to rearrange or substitute the learning plan for the day since the premise behind play-based learning is learning that is child-driven.

The participants in the study discussed the important role that the classroom environment plays in the play-based learning model physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively. If learning materials are not available that pique children's interest or there are not enough of them, it can cause adverse behaviors and be a challenge to implement successful learning. Two teachers discussed that there have been times in their classroom when they did not have enough learning materials or several of the same learning material that were the children's favorite. This challenge caused adverse behavior in the children in which the two teachers discussed that they

used it as a problem-solving strategy through scaffolding with the children. Four of the teachers discussed another challenge within the classroom, which is all the other responsibilities that they carry out during free center time when children are learning through play. The teachers discussed the missed opportunities that they noticed because they have to do housekeeping duties or potty-training children in which they are in the restrooms and not near the other children while they are playing.

The fourth main theme of the role of the teacher in play-based learning addressed the third sub-question of this study, "How does the early childhood education teacher view their role in the play-based learning experience with the student's learning?" All 12 of the participants answered this question with a variety of answers. Five subthemes emerged from this theme which are classroom environment, intentional instruction, communication, goals, and teacher preparedness. One hundred percent of the teachers believed that this was the most important concept for play-based learning to be successful for the children. Several of the teachers talked about the subthemes in length and were very descriptive for each one discussed.

All 12 of the participants stated that for children's learning to be optimized the classroom environment was one of the most important components of play-based learning. The teachers discussed the physical aspect of the classroom including centers, furniture arrangement, and learning materials that need to be inviting and motivating for the children to engage in play but also the emotional aspect that comprises a calm, nurturing, and empathetic environment from both the teacher and the peers. Four of the teachers discussed the flexibility that is needed within lesson planning and preparing for children's interest in learning daily.

Although play-based learning is child-directed, the participants of this study discussed how they prepare activities and learning materials that are developmentally and age-appropriate.

The teachers expounded on the idea that since play-based learning is child-directed they needed to be prepared to change the lesson plan for the day. The teachers discussed that the intentional instruction that they had planned for the child for the day is still carried out differently than was planned according to the children's interests. Teachers talked about how some children do not know how to play so the teacher becomes the role model in teaching children how to play with the learning materials and how to learn from them.

One hundred percent of all the participants talked about the most important aspect of the role of the teacher in play-based learning with the child is guided learning through conversations and constant communication while the children play. Several of the teachers discussed the enhancement of children's learning while they played with conversations of open-ended questions and scaffolding. Teachers mentioned that they used affirmation while the children played to increase participation which led to an increase of learning. Overall, all 12 participants talked about the relationship building that happens when a teacher shows interest in what is important for the child and then talks to the child about it. The teachers noted that children are more receptive to learning when the relationship has been established.

Another subtheme to the main theme of the role of the teacher is on goals that the teacher has for children's developmental needs physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively. One-third of the teachers discussed that intentional instruction during play-based learning comprised individualized goals that teachers assigned to the children. Classroom environments, learning materials, activities, lesson planning, and conversations were prepared by the teacher for the children to achieve goals in all areas of children's development. The teachers discussed how they observe, assess, and document during children's play to see if children are reaching specific outcomes.

The participants of this study believed that teacher preparedness, which is another subtheme to the fourth main theme, was imperative for play-based learning to be successfully implemented for children's learning. Three teachers discussed the importance of formal education on play-based learning was essential for the teacher's knowledge of how it works, how it affects children's brain function in the learning process, and ideas for implementation. Other participants shared that they have learned about play-based learning through many hours of professional development and practice. Two teachers discussed that they use resources that they find on the internet to help them understand play-based learning and ideas to implement play-based learning in the classroom.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Although there has been research conducted discussing play-based learning pedagogy, there is a gap in understanding the lived experiences that early childhood educators experience when implementing play-based learning in the classroom. The primary stakeholder in the play-based learning pedagogy's voice needs to be heard. The following information addresses the study's theoretical, empirical, and practical implications regarding the early childhood educators' lived experiences implementing play-based learning.

Theoretical

Within this study, there are several implications for early childhood teachers working in the early childhood classroom. The research data from this study showed that Vygotsky's social constructivism theory is still being used in early childhood classrooms. The participants shared that they provide hands-on activities, scaffolding, and guided learning to the children every day which is the premise of Vygotsky's theory. Early childhood teachers need to continue to keep the social constructivist theory instructional format of play-based learning as they make decisions

around lesson planning and curriculum. When considering expectations of teacher instruction and children's learning, administrators and those making policies need to understand the social constructivist theory and how it works. This study showed that early childhood education teachers are using Vygotsky's theory for children's learning in the classroom every day.

Empirical

There has been a significant amount of literature on studies discussing play-based learning with young children, the benefits children experience when involved in play-based learning, and teacher/child interactions within the learning pedagogy but the gap exists that there are not many studies that address the early childhood teachers' experiences with implementing play-based learning or the benefits that children experience long-term with the play-based method of instruction. This study provided an understanding of teacher's lived experiences of implementing play-based learning in the classroom through teacher's thoughts, practice, and views on roles and challenges they shared which explains the gap in previous studies and literature. Although teachers shared that they enjoy play-based learning, the challenges they face in implementation can be daunting and therefore not addressed properly. It is advantageous for administrators and stakeholders to be aware of the challenges that early childhood teachers face when implementing play-based learning to meet the developmental needs and academic needs of the children. Administrators and stakeholders can support early childhood education teachers by understanding the play-based learning pedagogy and expectations to prepare children for school readiness in developmentally appropriate practices and early learning standards.

Practical

The participants in this study shared that the biggest concern that they face is preparing children for school readiness while implementing the play-based learning pedagogy. Some of the

participants shared that there is a high expectation from administrators, parents, and stakeholders for children to learn in a more traditional format to ensure that children are prepared to enter Kindergarten. Early childhood teachers must balance instruction between the expectation of school readiness and the play-based learning pedagogy. This requires teachers to be educated in the play-based learning model to ensure that children are receiving the instruction needed to meet the school readiness expectations. It also requires teachers to have more time in the day for preparation, to set up the classroom environment, and to be intentional in the learning materials that the children enjoy learning from. The other challenge that teachers face is parents understanding of the play-based learning model and how children learn from it. Administrators and stakeholders need to support early childhood teachers as they prepare parents to understand the play-based learning model, how it is implemented, and how it positively affects the child's development.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study was limited in that it only addressed early childhood education teachers in the Maricopa County region in Arizona instead of in different areas of the state. Arizona has a variety of cultures and ethnic groups that were not included in the study. Furthermore, the study was limited to only 12 participants whereas more participants would have brought more experiences for understanding the play-based learning teacher's experiences. The study was limited in that there were no participants from franchised early childhood education settings.

One of the delimitations of this study is the design of the hermeneutical phenomenological approach that allowed for a certain participant selection, data collection and themes to be identified. Another delimitation was that the participants were already implementing the play-based learning pedagogy in their classrooms. The early childhood

educators in this study had prior knowledge of play-based learning pedagogy, familiar with developmentally appropriate practices and the Arizona Early Learning Standards for early childhood education. These delimitations were requirements to be selected as participants for this study.

Recommendation for Future Research

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to understand the early childhood education teachers' lived experiences implementing play-based learning in any of the early childhood classroom settings servicing 3-to-5-year-olds in the Maricopa County region in Arizona. The focus of this study was to share the early childhood teachers' experiences when implementing play-based learning in the classroom. From the data of this study, they gave more areas in which to study regarding play-based learning. One of those areas is a study on play-based learning pedagogy versus traditional classroom instruction in the early childhood classroom. Traditional instruction would include rote memory, flashcards, worksheets, teacher-led learning, etc. Another research for consideration could be to duplicate the study and have more early childhood teachers involved in the study from more regions in Arizona and more of a variety of preschool settings such as in-home, faith-based, privately owned, and franchised.

Summary

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to understand the early childhood education teachers' lived experiences implementing play-based learning in any of the early childhood classroom settings servicing 3-to-5-year-olds in the Maricopa County region in Arizona. Several understandings from early childhood educators emerged from this research. Early childhood educators need support in professional development and implementation of the play-based learning model. From this research, six main themes and 21 subthemes were

discussed. Early childhood educators had the opportunity to share their lived experiences of implementing the play-based learning pedagogy in the classroom with three- and four-year-olds.

One of the main topics discussed was the need for administrators, directors, and supervisors to understand the importance of early childhood education teachers implementing play-based learning to receive education and/or professional development in play-based learning pedagogy. Teachers discussed how education was not always feasible due to a lack of funds for education or time to receive professional development. Teacher education and professional development would greatly benefit the teachers and the students.

Another major finding from this research is the expectations for children to be ready to enter kindergarten. Early childhood educators are trying to balance play-based learning pedagogy with academic school readiness along with meeting the needs of the children. Through this research, teachers discussed the need for support from directors and parents to understand the play-based learning model and how children learn. Teachers discussed the need for the materials required for children to be successful in learning.

The teachers shared the numerous benefits that children learn from play-based learning not only through academic achievement but also through relationships with peers and teachers. Teachers observed children having fun while they were learning, increasing language development and problem-solving which is an important concept used throughout life.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Consent Form

Title of the Project: Early Childhood Education Teachers' Experiences with Implementing Play-Based Learning I the Classroom: A Phenomenological Study

Principal Investigator: Lori Lee Wagner, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years old or older and an early childhood education teacher actively working in a 3- to 5-year-old classroom setting that implements play-based learning instruction. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to understand the early childhood education teachers' lived experiences implementing play-based learning in any of the early childhood classroom settings servicing 3- to 5-year-olds in the Maricopa County region in Arizona. This study will examine the early childhood teacher's role in implementing play-based learning instruction, possible challenges or struggles with implementing play-based learning and the value that early childhood education teachers place on the play-based learning pedagogy. The significance of this study can help supervisors, administrators, and directors better support the teachers as they implement play-based learning pedagogy in the classroom. Participation in this study is voluntary and participants can leave the study at any time.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in a one-hour, audio-recorded, in-person interview.
2. Participate in a one-hour, audio-recorded focus group session with other participants in the study. There will be two dates in which participants may attend a focus group session, and the session will be conducted via Zoom.
3. Participate in a researcher-conducted, one-hour observation in your classroom.
4. Upon completion of the written study, you will have the opportunity to examine the findings before the publication is final. Participants will be given the transcriptions

and notes to review within two weeks after the study takes place. Participants will have one week to return the transcriptions and notes to me with any revisions made.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit form taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include providing directors, administrators, and supervisors with an understanding of the benefits that play-based learning has on young children and added support to teachers that implement the play-based learning pedagogy.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with people outside of the group.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a locked cabinet at the researcher's home office. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and then deleted. The researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or the childcare center with which you are employed. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you apart from focus group data will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Lori Lee Wagner. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or by phone at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Alexandra Barnett at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix B

IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

October 23, 2023

 Lori Wagner
Alexandra Barnett

Re: IRB Exemption • •RB-FY23-24-63 Early Childhood Education Teachers' Experiences with Implementing
Play-Based Learning in the Classroom: A

Phenomenological Study Dear Lori Wagner,

Alexandra Barnett,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you *may* begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number In the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the study Details bar on the study details page. Finally, click

Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@ljberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele
Baker, PhD,
CIP
Administrative
Chair **Research**
Ethics Office

Appendix C

Study Permission Response Letter

Dear Lori Wagner:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Early Childhood Education Teachers' Experiences with Implementing Play Based Learning in the Classroom. I have decided to grant you permission to contact the teachers at the center to participate in the study and to conduct your study at Kids Incorporated.

I will provide the list of teachers to Lori Wagner, and Lori Wagner may use the list to contact the teachers to invite them to participate in her research study.

Sincerely,

Center Director

Bright Minds Childcare Center *LLC*

September 7, 2023

Dear Lori Wagner,

 After careful review of your research proposal entitled Early Childhood Education Teachers' Experiences with Implementing Play-Based Learning in the Classroom. I have decided to grant you permission to contact the teachers at the center to participate in the study and to conduct your study at Bright Minds Childcare Center LLC.

I will provide the list of teachers to Lori Wagner, and Lori Wagner may use the list to contact the teachers to invite them to participate in her research study.

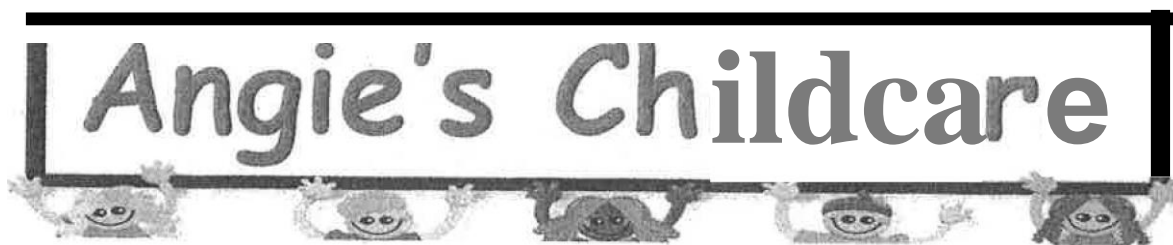Sincerely,

Study Permission Response Letter

Dear Lori Wagner:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Early Childhood Education Teachers' Experiences with Implementing Play Based Learning in the Classroom. I have decided to grant you permission to contact the teachers at the center to participate in the study and to conduct your study at Kids Incorporated .

I will provide the list of teachers to Lori Wagner, and tori Wagner may use the list to contact the teachers to invite them to participate in her research study.

Sincerely,

Director

Angie's Childcare

Study Permission Response Letter

Dear Lori Wagner:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Early Childhood Education Teachers' Experiences with Implementing Play-Based Learning in the Classroom. I have decided to grant you permission to contact the teachers at the center to participate in the study of Angie's Childcare.

I will provide the list of teachers to Lori Wagner, and Lori Wagner may use the list to contact the teachers to invite them to participate in her research study.

Sincerely,

Owner/Director

Study Permission Response Letter

Dear Lori Wagner:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Early Childhood Education Teachers' Experiences with Implementing Play-Based Learning in the Classroom. I have decided to grant you permission to contact the teachers at the center to participate in the study and to conduct your study at Risen Savior Early Childhood Center.

I will provide the list of teachers to Lori Wagner and Lori Wagner may use the list to contact the teachers to invite them to participate in her research study.

Sincerely,

Appendix D

Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about your educational background and current career.

2. What is your description of play-based learning in the preschool classroom?

3. What experiences have you had implementing play-based learning into your preschool classroom?

4. What impact has play-based learning pedagogy had on your students?

5. What challenges, if any, have you experienced implementing the play-based learning model in your classroom?

6. Please describe your role as the teacher in the play-based learning environment.

7. Describe how the play-based learning environment contributes to children's development.

Appendix E

Focus Group Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to the group and share your teaching experience.

2. Please share your experiences with implementing play-based learning in your classroom.

3. What ways do you believe educator support influences play-based learning?

4. What successes have you experienced with implementing play-based learning in your classroom?

5. What challenges have you seen with implementing play-based learning in your classroom?

6. What disappointments, if any, have you have had with implementing play-based learning?

Appendix F

Observational Protocol Tool

Explanation of items recorded and documented in the observational Protocol Tool Descriptive Notes

1. Dialogue observed between teacher and child during activity.
2. Physical setting description.
3. Drawings of classroom setting.
4. Accounts of specific activities or events that occur.

Reflective Notes

5. Personal thoughts of researcher recorded (Ex. Problems, ideas, feelings, speculation).

Date of Observation: -------
Time of Observation: -------
Place of Observation (Age of Classroom): _

Observational Protocol Length of Activity:	
Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes

Appendix G

Researcher's Reflective Log

11/1/23: I had the first interview with April today. I was nervous since this was my first interview in the research. She seemed nervous as she knew she was being recorded and because she wanted to answer the questions thoroughly. She was excited to share her experiences with play-based learning and what impact she has seen on the children's learning.

12/1/23: I interviewed Daniel today. Daniel was very enthusiastic to share his ideas and experiences with implementing play-based learning. He is currently going to school to get his bachelor's in early childhood education and shared several instances within the classroom while children are engaged in play-based learning. He shared several instances of guided learning and conversations that he had with the children to increase their order of thinking.

12/3/23: I have completed all my interviews. Multiple participants shared the common theme of the effectiveness of learning with young children when they learn through play. Many of them discussed the impact that hands-on learning had for children to remember concepts learned from day to day. It was interesting to see how excited that participants were to share with me the joy they have in teaching with the play-based learning model. The participants discussed in length the fun they had in the guided learning process and to see that the children were achieving individualized goals.

12/4/23: Today I attended my first in-person observation in an early childhood classroom of one of the participants. It was interesting to see that she implemented play-based learning as she stated in her interview. I was able to document conversations she was having with the children while they played and how she used those conversations to guide their learning. I noticed that as she asked questions and the children answered, the children started to ask her questions for higher order of thinking to take place.

12/8/23: I observed a class with mixed ages from one- to three-year-olds. When observing this teacher and children, it was amazing to see how she met the developmental needs in several areas of the child. The guided learning was complex to change the questions and conversations that she had with the different age groups. I observed her communicating with the children the whole hour I was there. She was sitting where they were playing and moved about the room to engage with all the children. I noticed that she was aware of when to approach children while they were playing and times when she just listened and observed.

12/15/23: Today was my last in-person observation. I noticed that the teacher, like all the others that I observed, sat in close proximity to the children and was available for opportunities to guide learning while the children were playing in centers and learning materials in which they were interested. The children were constantly talking to one another while they played. I observed this in all twelve of the observations I completed. I did see a situation where children were not getting along in which I observed the teacher helping the children problem-solve through scaffolding the situation.

Appendix H

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in a qualitative study addresses the authenticity, reliability, and validation of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers in a qualitative study utilize strategies so that the data can be accurately represented and interpreted. For trustworthiness to be achieved in a qualitative research study, these four components must be considered; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Shenton, 2004).

Credibility

Credibility refers to the internal validity of the study that focuses on the researcher's accuracy and demonstration of the interpreted meaning of the data that is documented by the participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Shenton, 2004). Lincoln and Guba (1985) note that the most important factor in securing trustworthiness is through establishing credibility. To establish credibility a researcher must include the following components: established research methodology, researcher knowledge of participants classroom culture and environment, criterion sampling of participants, triangulation that includes a variety of source types for data collection, and a variety in the range of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Shenton, 2004).

I kept a reflective log of my emotions, feelings, and thoughts to guide me through the analysis process. To avoid my personal experiences creating bias when interpreting the data, the reflective log was utilized (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2002).

Creswell and Poth (2018) encourage qualitative researchers to conduct member checks to ensure and increase the credibility of the study so that the data of the participant's experiences are communicated accurately (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2002; Shenton, 2002). To increase credibility, participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts from the interviews and the

focus group. The participants reviewed the findings to validate the accuracy of their feelings and thoughts.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the external validity of the study which focuses on the findings of one study that can be transferred to other situations and settings (Shenton, 2004). Creswell and Poth (2018) discuss the components of transferability to include transferred findings to situations and settings, the data from the findings that include thick and rich descriptions, and the specific methodology used that explains the organizations involved, the participants, specifics on data collection and analysis of the data. Shenton (2002) discusses the importance of the components to be met in qualitative research so that other researchers can transfer the data to study other areas. Throughout the study, I kept a reflective log that would document my emotions, feelings, and thoughts. I kept a memo log for documentation of what happened throughout the research process.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the reliability of the study in which if another researcher used the same techniques, within the same context, implemented the same methodology, and with the same participants, the results of the study would be similar (Shenton, 2002). Dependability in the study focuses more on the researcher documenting the study process in detail so that researchers in the future can implement the same work and receive similar results. Dependability focuses on the process in detail of the research. I reported in comprehensive detail the process of the research. Due to the comprehensive detail of the process of this research study, other researchers will be able to apply the methodology to other situations or settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A memo log was kept throughout the study where I recorded the process in its entirety, and

included descriptions in detail. An inquiry audit was conducted by the dissertation committee and the Qualitative Research Director of Liberty University through the review process and the products of the research.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the concept of the qualitative researcher's objectivity within the study (Shenton, 2002). Therefore, triangulation for data collection is important to reduce researcher bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Shenton, 2002). I implemented triangulation sources and member checks to ensure that the study meets confirmability for accuracy, reliability, and validity. I incorporated an audit trail through memoing to reflect on the process which caused me to come to conclusions within the study. An audit trail is another form of validation strategy for documenting and clarifying thought processes and researcher understanding during the data process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Within qualitative research, ethical considerations need to be considered and followed. Ethical considerations include Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, participant consent forms signed before the study, participants' awareness of options to leave the study at any time, and data and passwords to be stored in a secure place. The researcher must seek IRB approval before starting the study. Creswell and Poth (2018), explain that IRBs of colleges and universities are careful to follow policies and guidelines that protect the participant's respect, welfare, and justice.

Consent forms were signed by all participants and study guidelines were signed before the study. Participants were told that the study was completely voluntary, and participants understood the study before participating. Participants were aware that leaving the study at any

time was an option if they no longer wanted to participate no matter what the reason (Creswell &

Poth, 2018). To protect the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were used. The final

document did not include any information that could identify the participant to honor the

anonymity within the study. The participants were aware that interviews and focus groups were

audio-recorded. Data of electronic copies and copies of data will be stored securely. Passwords

will be stored securely to protect the electronic data on the researcher's laptop. The physical data

will be stored and secured in a locked cabinet in my home office. The data will be disposed of

after three years.

Appendix I

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of early childhood education teachers when implementing play-based learning in any of the early childhood classroom settings servicing 3-to-5-year-olds in the Maricopa County region of Arizona?

Sub-Question One

How do early childhood education teachers describe the importance of play in the classroom?

Sub-Question Two

What challenges do early childhood education teachers experience when implementing play-based learning?

Sub-Question Three

How does the early childhood education teacher view their role in the play-based learning experience with the student's learning?