

## **Play-based teaching practices of Turkish early childhood teachers**

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Play as a teaching approach is a contemporary research area in early years that needs to be clearly defined. Early childhood teachers support the use of play, however the implementation of play as a teaching tool lacks clarity. This phenomenological study aimed to investigate early childhood teachers' perceptions and experiences of play-based teaching. The data for the study were gathered from six teachers through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Teachers' perceptions on the role of play in early years, play in teachers' implementations, and place of play in teachers' daily routines are presented in a detailed manner within the study. The findings revealed that there are differences among teachers' play-based teaching strategies and most of the teachers observed as implementing play-based teaching practices. The participants believed in the importance of play-based teaching; however shortcomings were observed in some of the teachers' practices.

### **Introduction**

Today's early childhood classrooms put an emphasis on academic standards whilst also recognising the role of play in early years (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Whilst the value of play to learning is acknowledged at a theoretical level, however teaching through play lacks clarity (Whitebread & O'Sullivan, 2012). It is reported that practitioners encounter difficulties when integrating academic standards with play-based teaching (Danniels & Pyle, 2018). Given the increased focus on meeting academic goals through teacher-directed instruction, contemporary research indicates the critical role of play supporting early academic and social skills (Pyle, 2018).

Different forms and types of play foster children's developmental areas, particularly cognitive, academic, social and emotional (Bubikova-Moan, Næss Hjetland & Wollscheid, 2019). It is asserted that children construct knowledge about the world and experience problem solving skills during child-led play (Fredriksen, 2012). Learning through play enables children to experience academic goals in an engaging and developmentally appropriate manner (Balfanz, Ginsburg & Greenes, 2003; Sarama & Clements, 2006; Pyle, 2018). Play provides children with the ability to apply newly learned skills in a variety of situations by encouraging flexibility and creativity, making their learning pleasurable, and keeping children internally motivated. It therefore remains at the centre of early childhood curriculum with both educational and entertaining outcomes (Johnson, Christie & Wardle, 2005). When children learn through play, learning becomes more meaningful for them and they develop positive attitudes toward academic learning in early childhood (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). Play-based teaching fosters children's social skills and self-regulation (Berk & Meyers, 2013; Diamond, Barnett, Thomas & Munro, 2007). Play helps children to

regulate their behaviour and understand others' feelings (Savina, 2014; Bodrova & Leong, 2005).

Early literacy (Wohlwend, 2008), early mathematical skills (Presser, Clements, Ginsburg & Ertle, 2015) are supported through play activities. Understandings of abstract concepts such as spatial relations and motions is improved through play (Andrews, 2015) and it helps children develop critical thinking skills (Miller, 2005). Encouragement of positive growth (Tal et al., 2008) and the development of a strong sense of wellbeing are also supported through freedom, pleasure, and satisfaction experienced via play (Gordon, O'Toole & Whitman, 2008). It is argued that in early years play and learning cannot be separated and suggested that child-led play tends to be more effective than teacher directed instruction or free play (Chien et al., 2010). Such results suggest that there are many benefits to integrating play as a teaching strategy in early childhood education. Furthermore, the results of such research provide valuable information for early childhood practitioners about the importance and necessity of play, both as an activity type and a learning tool.

In the Turkish context, studies focusing on play in early years have investigated play using a number of methods. Varol (2013) conducted observations in early childhood classrooms and found that 23% of the time spent in the classroom was free play and 5% was structured play under the direction of the teacher. The study also indicated that teachers did not realise the importance of hands-on experiences in early years. Gülay Ogelman's (2014) study spanning 44 preschool class observations found that most teachers became preoccupied with other jobs or duties during the free play time, and a few of them left the classroom altogether. Ivrendi (2016) also observed children's play during free play and reported that peer play significantly improved children's number sense and self-regulatory skills. Tuğrul et al. (2014) conducted interviews with 89 children attending kindergarten and found that only 1% of the children stated that they played with their teachers. Durualp and Aral (2010) investigated the positive outcomes of a play-based program for social skills acquisition and found that the children made progress in terms of listening, sharing, helping, understanding and expressing emotions. When Turkish studies are examined from the perspective of the scope of play for learning, it is seen that only a few such studies have been conducted and the topic needs more research.

Yet we know that play-based teaching is a pedagogical approach that uses play as an instructional tool in early childhood contexts. Practitioners who approach play-based teaching provide children with opportunities to collaborate with their peers (Danniels & Pyle, 2018), to negotiate and to reach compromises (Berk, Mann & Ogan, 2006), allow children to make choices among the materials or strategies they use during their experiences, and act with agency (Thomas, Warren & DeVries, 2011; Berk, Mann & Ogan, 2006). Teachers take into account what children bring to the learning moment (Thomas, Warren & DeVries, 2011). Children construct their own knowledge in interaction with a well-designed environment and effective teacher assistance (Hedges, 2000). Teachers facilitate and extend children's learning through systematic observation, effective feedback, and purposeful questioning.

Although play is a legitimate right for young children, recent research indicates that children find fewer opportunities to play (Lynch, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009). The increased attention towards academic development and school readiness have placed little emphasis on playful activities. Considering that play is the most developmentally appropriate way of learning in early years and children learn best with play, play-based learning should be an inherent aspect of early childhood learning environments (Pyle, 2018). As a teaching strategy, how and to what extent play is included in early childhood learning environments remains limited in terms of national literature. International research also seeks further studies on play pedagogies of early childhood teachers (Fisher et al., 2008; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Rentzou et al., 2019). Thus, this study aimed to further investigate early childhood teachers' perceptions and implementations of play-based teaching. The findings aim to contribute data about how play-based teaching is perceived and used in the Turkish early childhood context.

### **Research questions**

1. How do early childhood teachers perceive play-based teaching and learning?
2. What is the place of play in early childhood teachers' practices?
3. How do early childhood teachers practice play-based teaching in their classrooms?

### **Research design**

A phenomenological research design was used, being appropriate for investigating individuals' perspectives and experiences regarding a phenomenon or essence (Merriam, 2009). Phenomenology explores structure and essence of experiences of a phenomenon for a group of people (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The researchers aimed to "be completely open, receptive, and naïve in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated" (Moustakas, 1994, p.22). In this study, the researchers sought to investigate early childhood teachers' perceptions and experiences of play-based learning and teaching. Phenomenological studies provide a holistic description of what individuals experience and how is understood through observations and interviews (Creswell, 2013). This method enabled the researchers to find out the place of play in early childhood teachers' practices.

### **Participants**

The participants were six early childhood teachers in Ankara, Turkey. The participants were selected through maximum variation sampling as the aim is to maximise diversity and gather data from different teachers with different backgrounds. Patton (2014) stated that the maximum variation method enables purposive sampling to find commonalities by combining the differences between environments or cases. Table 1 presents demographic information for participant teachers, identified by pseudonyms.

Table 1: Demographic information for participant teachers

| Pseudonym | School type       | Years teaching | Age group | Teacher's age |
|-----------|-------------------|----------------|-----------|---------------|
| Gamze     | Public preschool  | 10 years       | 5         | 38            |
| Defne     | Public preschool  | 10 years       | 5         | 33            |
| Yasemin   | Private preschool | 3 years        | 5         | 24            |
| Dilek     | Private preschool | 2 years        | 4         | 24            |
| Melis     | Public preschool  | 8 years        | 4         | 32            |
| Mina      | Public preschool  | 10 years       | 5         | 34            |

### Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through observations and semi-structured interviews conducted with teachers. Participant teachers' play-based implementations were observed in their classrooms and those observations were video-recorded. We asked the teachers to observe the play-based implementations and provide us with the appropriate time frame to conduct observations. One of the researchers observed teachers' practices and recorded the observations via video-cameras. After completing the observation process, each participant was interviewed to deeply investigate their perceptions and experiences. Interview questions focused on teachers' perceptions and definitions of play-based teaching, play-based practices in their classrooms, their experiences on how and how often they place play in their classrooms as a teaching approach, and their practices on how and how often they use play in academic activities.

Data were analysed through interpretative phenomenological analysis. This qualitative technique enabled us to explore the experiences of the participants with the acknowledgement that the interpretation of the researcher plays a role in the analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2004). Researchers have analysed initial codes by reading the transcriptions of interviews and observation notes. Then, the relation of the obtained codes with each other was examined and the analysis process was ended by unifying codes under more inclusive themes (Saldana & Omasta, 2016).

### Trustworthiness and credibility

We followed the peer inquiry and researcher variation strategies proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Merriam (2009) to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the data. Besides, in order to support the transferability of the data obtained from the research, rich descriptions were included as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). In particular, the views of the participants about their experiences were recorded in detail.

The approval of the Ethics Committee of the relevant university was obtained beforehand. Thereafter teachers were approached by the researchers to participate voluntarily in the study, subject to their prior consent.

## Findings

### The role of play in early years

Participant teachers advocated for play as the only appropriate way for developing young children's skills. Interviews revealed that teachers considered play as an effective strategy while teaching young children. Teachers generally defined play as an essential activity for children. They stated that play is a real life setting in which they experience great learning moments. Defne defined that she believed that children do not learn when they do not play. She also shared that "[When a child says that] 'My teacher, I was so bored ...' and then I realised that what I was doing at that time was not a play." Yasemin expressed a similar notion toward play and learn: "Play is the tool that takes us directly to our purpose."

The teachers had similar definitions of play but some of them emphasised certain aspects. Dilek and Melis believed that play helped them to understand children and their feelings. Dilek claimed that "In my opinion, play is actually the basic building block throughout the early childhood period. Because I think play is the best way and method to solve the problem behaviour of the child." Melis also had similar perceptions. She emphasised that play is the best strategy to understand children's experiences: "I can understand everything related to children through play." Gamze also gave a similar definition for the critical role of play in early years in these words: "There is nothing more than a play, or even a play. I mean, it's life for children."

All participants noted that play-based implementations are critical for young children's learning and development. Three of them asserted the importance of play for the child as a whole. They believed that play supports children's social-emotional skills, cognitive development, language development and psychomotor development. Melis and Mina shared their views on importance of play on children's development as follows:

Play contributes to all developmental areas like mental, physical and cognitive. (Melis)

I think the role of play is very important in terms of both social and language development. During play, the child's psychomotor skills develop. Alongside the development of fine and gross motor skills, socialisation skills are growing too. (Mina)

Dilek emphasised the attention of children during play and shared that:

Play gives an opportunity for the child to focus carefully. It supports all their social, emotional and cognitive skills. I think play contributes to all areas of development. (Dilek)

Some teachers emphasised the benefits of children's participation in play and its effect on learning. Teachers noted that play-based implementations provide crucial opportunities for early learning and promote learning across domains. Defne stated that "I think lasting learning takes place with the play." Gamze mentioned the enjoyable experiences that play provides for children and stated that:

The most importantly, the child has fun. S/he learns while having fun; learns without being noticed. Giving information does not interest them in the classic way or by presentation or by telling them. (Gamze)

The data of the study revealed that participants believed on the importance of play on early learning processes. Although teachers focused on different dimensions of play, they generally found play as a valuable tool for supporting young children's development.

### **Play-based teaching in teachers' implementations**

When teachers were asked about the strategies and methods that they use during play-based implementations, most of the teachers stated that they provide opportunities for children to make them actively participate in activities that involve learning through concrete materials. Some of the teachers stated that teacher-centred practices do not address children's developmental characteristics.

There were times when I left the activity because the children weren't interested in it. In accordance with the needs of children, I moved on to other activities. (Defne)

If I give the information to the children in a classic way or by demonstration, I cannot get their full of attention. For example, you cannot give information about numbers or geometrical shapes to children in front of the board. (Gamze)

We are doing mostly hands-on activities. Instinctively, I find that I almost always use concrete materials in the activities. (Yasemin)

Observations conducted in classrooms revealed that teachers used different strategies in their play-based activities. Gamze and Defne provided opportunities for exploration with semi-structured activities. Children were observed to become deeply immersed in the activity. Children were provided a learning opportunity with a challenge and became fully engaged during the activity. Gamze, during the interviews, noted that:

I care about giving activities that children can be active in it or can do the activity directly. These activities contribute to their child development. (Gamze)

The teachers were ready for the activity and had set the environment for play. Defne interacted with the children by wandering amongst them and questioning the children. During the observations it was seen that this teacher interacted with all children during their exploration process, gave clues when children were faced with a difficulty, and responded to children's questions.

The activity in Yasemin's classroom was a literacy activity. Children were asked to create their own stories with the help of the story cubes. Children were free while writing their stories, but the teacher was providing scaffolding when they need help. There was intense interaction among children and the teacher. The teacher stated the role of interaction in play during interviews as:

When we are in the process of the activity and when we interact with children, which is the most comfortable through play, all learning is easier. (Yasemin)

The play-based activity in Dilek's classroom was open-ended, and inquiry based. The teacher's strategies included argumentation and problem-solving. The activity was also open to peer collaboration and intense interaction was observed among children. The teacher scaffolded children's play through feedbacks and open-ended questions. The teacher was responsive to children's curiosity. Children were provided choices in terms of materials and strategies in their play. Children were also using materials in different ways and combined materials in different ways. The teacher defined her play-based activities during the interviews in the words:

I give the children an instruction before starting the play process; hey children, we have this play activity and materials. But I never introduce the activity or materials to the children as this is played as follows or this material is used for this. In this way the child is able to discover the activity or material in an active way themselves. (Dilek)

Observations revealed that two of the teachers' play-based activities were quite different from the other teachers. The implementations were didactic and highly-structured. Children were expected to follow a set of pre-determined rules for the activities. The activity in Melis's classroom was a game with rules. At the end of the activity there was a winner child who was presented with a sticker by the teacher. Similarly, Mina presented children with a structured play in which decisions were made only by the teacher. The teachers only monitored if children were following the rules without giving any clues or feedback. The interview conducted with the teacher was parallel to her practices as she noted that she used play as a warmup activity. In her words:

That's our play thing, normally half an hour a day. A warming up activity is happening in the beginning. You know, in terms of preparing kids for play, yawning. You know, before that gymnastics, you've been doing some kind of action, like that. Warming up before doing a few moves. Then they play the real game. After that we have a relaxing activity because they are tired. So what we see here is a warming, play and relaxing activity. (Mina)

During the interviews, teachers were also asked to exemplify their play-based practices. Examples from most of the teachers included characteristics of play-based teaching methods. However, the examples obtained from Melis and Mina were more like a structured play in which the rules are pre-determined, and children are expected to follow the rules explicitly.

### **Place of play in teachers' daily routines**

Participant teachers noted that they always use play in their daily routines. The excerpt that most of the teachers used during the interviews was that they try to integrate play with all the activities they implement in their classrooms. Teachers were also asked about their practices of play during maths, science and literacy activities. The interviews revealed

that play was at the centre of the teachers' practices. Some of the excerpts from teachers' interviews are as follows:

We do a lot of play, quite often, in all our activities. We give a place to play in all our activities, including mathematics. We are adapting themes to play, whatever the concept. (Gamze)

Some teachers mentioned that activities designed with a play-based strategy promote children's participation, so they prefer play in their daily routines. They asserted that play brings the element of fun to the activities and children like engaging in pleasurable and enjoyable activities. Defne stated that:

Mostly through play, so we are trying to teach them via play. In my classroom, kids are five years old and with the other five year-olds teachers, we are preparing our activity plans always turning to play. Mostly, we try to create mystery like finding hidden things, searching for places to hide things, etc., and increase the operability of play by creating curiosity in children. Usually we use play in our daily activities, however I just feel that I should turn to paper even though I try to use play in read and write activities for aged fives. So I'm trying to use paper too. (Defne)

One of the teachers, described her play-based practices quite differently from other teachers. She asserted that she uses play because of the age of children. In her words:

In my classroom, we use play in all activities because I am a young child-teacher. Believe me, even our cut-and-paste activities are undertaken with play. Play is everything we have. This is because I'm a teacher of young children. Otherwise, if my children's age is older, we can do our activities more by sitting and instructing them, but at a young age, unfortunately it does not happen. (Melis)

It is an important finding that two of the participant teachers often referred to free play time activities when making definitions about play and giving examples of their play implementations. As the teachers stated:

Afterwards, the play time moves to the activity centres in the classroom. I really care about the play time in the centres. Because the kid is really playing here, I care about that time in that place and I'm trying to keep it really long. (Defne)

When they come to class we start with free play time in the learning centres. (Gamze)

In addition to the play-based activities, it is seen that their emphasis was on the free time period. Teachers stated that they started the day with their free time activities. When teachers were asked about their play-based experiences, they stated that they always allowed time for free play activities in their classrooms.

## Discussion

This study aimed to investigate play-based teaching practices of Turkish early childhood teachers. In the current study, six early childhood teachers' practices were examined



through interviews and observations and the findings were presented under the themes of the role of play in early years, play in teachers' implementations, and the place of play in teachers' daily routines. The findings reveal that teachers believed in the importance of play and that it contributes to the development and learning process of children. The study showed similarities in the way play is defined across teachers. Participant teachers believed that children get more benefit from play than from teacher-directed implementations. It is also revealed in the literature that children engage in more effective problem-solving behaviours in freely chosen play settings than in more structured and teacher-directed settings (Gmitrová & Gmitrov, 2004; McInnes, Howard, Miles & Crowley, 2009). Similarly, it was found by Sharp, Escante and Anderson (2012) that children in classrooms following a play-based maths curriculum performed better in general assessments of mathematical skills, compared with children who experienced teacher-directed maths games.

A category that the participant teachers mentioned in defining the play and explaining contributions of play is about the fun and pleasure children feel while at play. Similarly, most of the participants in the study of Doğan Altun (2018) considered play as a fun activity. Literature points to this attribute, that play, as a pleasurable experience, promotes positive feelings, which in turn encourages further exploration and novelty. (Pyle, 2018; Burghardt, 2005; Meire, 2007). In another study conducted with early childhood teachers from different countries, it was found that Turkish teachers mostly emphasised the fun and entertaining aspect of play (Rentzou et al., 2019). Besides, child-directedness and fun are common elements of most definitions on play in international contexts. (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016).

Teachers described the use of play as an important part of their implementations and an important way to introduce new concepts and skills. Observations revealed that play has been valued in most of the participant teachers' classrooms. This finding is quite different from previous research conducted with early childhood teachers in Turkey. Previous studies have indicated that teachers use play in their daily programs only after they complete academic activities such as maths, science and art (Rentzou et al., 2019; Tuğrul, et al., 2014). In this study, both observations and interviews revealed that four of the participant teachers used play-based strategies during their implementations. Observational data indicated that those teachers provided opportunities for exploration, organised semi-structured activities, used argumentation and problem-solving as strategies, fostered peer collaboration, and provided choice for children in terms of materials and strategies in their experiences.

However, two of the teachers' practices were directed by themselves in which children were observed as passive listeners. Their implementations were structured and children were expected to follow the rules explicitly. Teachers were the only decision-makers where children did not have enough opportunity to make choices or decisions. This finding is substantiated by findings from Varol (2013) that teachers do not allow adequate time for play in their practices. This situation is encountered in a similar way in the international literature. It is asserted that using play as a learning tool has been far from clear for early childhood teachers (Vu et al., 2015; Rentzou et al., 2019; Pyle, DeLuca & Danniels, 2017;

Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). Although those two teachers defined play as a cornerstone in early years, the observations did not reflect their definitions. As Fesseha and Pyle (2016) argued, the differences that currently exist in the implementation of play-based learning in these cases may lie in the differentiations between play and play-based learning. Early childhood research needs more discussion on the critical role and definition of play-based learning. This exploration will help early childhood practitioners to conceptualise and implement play as a teaching pedagogy.

Interactions between the teacher and children during play, which is highlighted by researchers as a critical predictor for successful play implementations (Vu et al., 2015), was mentioned by only one of the teachers who participated in our study. One of the elements that make play important is the interaction between teacher and child (Ivrendi, 2017). These interactions create incredible learning moments. Effective teacher questioning and feedback during these interactions contribute to children's learning processes. Appropriate and correct teacher participation during play will maximise the potential of play in early years.

Beside play-based activities, two of the teachers emphasised the place and value of free play in their practices. They asserted that free play hours provide legitimate learning opportunities for children. Free play offers children a learning context to be engaged freely chosen play experiences with or without assistance from teachers (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2013). Research discussing the use of free play in early learning environments asserts that free play is a legitimate part of play-based learning strategies (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013; Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011). As research findings demonstrate, free play activities provide fundamental opportunities for children; however, it is also argued that play-based approach is quite different and more than free play.

Proponents of play-based learning for academic growth have argued that play-based strategies can be used to teach prescribed academic goals in an engaging and developmentally appropriate manner. From this perspective, free play alone is often considered to be insufficient to promote academic learning, and so active teacher involvement in play is critical. (Danniels & Pyle, 2018, p.3).

Practitioners need to provide enough time for free play in their classrooms, but they should also introduce and extend academic content by using play as a teaching strategy during their practices.

## **Implementations and conclusions**

Many benefits of play have been recognised by researchers; however, it is also reported that there is a decrease in the amount of time devoted to play in early childhood learning environments. The emphasis on academic skills drives teachers away from play. However, we know that play is a developmentally appropriate way of supporting a wide variety of early academic and social skills. Thus, play-based pedagogy in early years needs to be investigated within different research contexts in order to draw attention to this critical

issue. We need more studies on teachers' play-based strategies in order to describe what their existing practices are, and to recognise their needs in this era. Especially in a national context, this study aimed to reconsider play as a teaching approach, rather than free play or structured play with pre-determined rules. It is important to draw attention to this issue in order to increase the play-based teaching practices of teachers. It is important for the decisions to be taken in this direction that teachers already know, and to know how much they use play as a teaching method. Repeating this study in different contexts will renew our perspective on play in the light of all these studies. In addition, this study revealed that teachers have different implementations regarding play as a pedagogy, thus it would be valuable to study the reasons behind the differences observed among the practices of teachers in a fully detailed context.

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