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CONTENTS

South Korean early childhood educators' perceptions of North Korean defectors and unification education

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Abstract: This study investigates South Korean early childhood educators' perceptions of North Korean defectors, their national identity, reunification, and unification education (UE) to provide some suggestions for an effective integrated education between the children of the two Koreas and related teacher education. Fourteen educators participated in this research in which qualitative semi-structured interviews were employed. Key findings included that most educators regarded North Koreans as the 'Same Korean race', with the exception of young educators in their 20s, whose view was that North Koreans are not a member of the Korean people. In addition, the participants felt there were ideological, cultural, language, and economic differences between them and North Korean defectors and their children. Some participants argued that UE for young children is not inherently ineffective due to a lack of understanding of the concept of unification. Alternately, some educators addressed North and South Korean UE through multicultural educational approaches. Recommendations are made for the application of UE via multicultural education approaches at government level, in the class and teacher training.

Introduction

According to the Ministry of Unification of the Republic of Korea (2021), the total number of North Korean defectors who have entered South Korea since 1963 has continues to grow, reaching approximately 10,000 in 2007, 20,000 in 2010, and over 33,000 in 2020. More than a thousand defectors have been entering South Korea each year since the late 1990s (Ha & Jang, 2015; Walker, 2018). Consequently, the number of children in the 0–9 age group has also increased, with the total number of North Korean children reaching 1,209 since 2000 (Ministry of Unification, 2021). This phenomenon has created new challenges for South Korean educators (Park, 2016), and significant concerns about education have emerged regarding the potential unification of North and South Korea (Choi, 2022). The emphasis on the homogeneity of the Korean people, characterized by shared language, tradition, and values, has led to the belief in a "one-ethnicity-one-nation" concept, supporting reunification between the two Koreas since the Korean War (Chun, 2022). Consequently, the South Korean government has sought to maintain and promote a common Korean identity through education (Cho, 2021; Grzelczyk, 2014; Leem, 2021). This has been a primary role of the Ministry of Unification since its establishment in 1969 as the government body responsible for inter-Korean relations and reunification (Ministry of Unification, 2021). Given the specific circumstances on the Korean peninsula, North Koreans are regarded as citizens upon arriving in South Korea (Kim, 2016). However, many North Koreans who enter South Korea often lead lives like those of typical foreign migrants (Choi & Cho, 2010) due to significant ideological gaps, polarized economic and political systems (Chung, 2011), differing values, and distinct life experiences (Hyun, 2007). This situation arises from seventy years of differing political regimes and social institutions on each side of the Korean peninsula (Chun, 2022). For these reasons, North Korean families are categorized as multicultural families, alongside families of foreign migrant workers and those resulting from international marriage (Kim, 2006). According to Eriksen (2002), an ethnic group is defined as a community of people who share a common language, religion, customs, values, and historical memories, all of which form the core of culture. North Korean defectors, while sharing a similar appearance with South Koreans, exhibit distinct cultural traits, leading

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to their classification as ethnically the same yet culturally different (Chun, 2022). Consequently, North Korean defectors are often overlooked by South Koreans, who perceive them as coming from different backgrounds such as region, social class, education level, and gender (Chun, 2020). Interactions between North Korean defectors and South Koreans frequently result in negative perception from South Koreans towards defectors (Kim, 2016). Regarding teachers' perceptions, Watson et al., (2011) conducted a survey with 82 pre-service teachers and examined their national identity. The result indicated that about 70 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the notion of Korea's national identity as a single-blooded ethnic nation with North Koreans. Similarly, Lee and Kim (2022) conducted a study examining pre-service early childhood teachers' awareness of unification through a survey of 226 participants. The findings revealed that these teachers had limited awareness of unification, with the highest recognition of 'problems after reunification'- such as feelings of alienation due to cultural differences, social and economic conflicts, and issues related to discrimination - among the subcategories of unification perceptions. Furthermore, it was shown that early childhood in-service teachers from younger generations are generally opposed to unification, view North Korea as a hostile country, and lack awareness regarding the necessity of unification education (UE) in early childhood (Lee et al., 2015).

Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2005) emphasize the crucial role teachers play in the lives of young children. While teachers' beliefs significantly influence how they perceive, judge, and act in the classroom (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002), there is limited preservice and in-service teacher education related to North Korean defectors and their children in South Korea (Kim et al., 2015).

Although there is a significant body of research on the perceptions of early childhood in-service and pre-service teachers regarding reunification and UE, as well as the importance of implementing related educational programs (Choi, 2017; Kim, 2016; Lee, 2017; Lee, 2015; Yang, 2020; Yoon, 2005), few studies have addressed the need for support, including teacher education, that focuses on the embracing the differences between the two Koreas (Lee, 2013a).

Some Korean scholars have emphasized the need for education that embraces the differences in values and cultures of North Korean defector students, as well as the political and economic differences between South and North Korea, before prioritizing the concept of "one-ethnicity-one-nation" (Kang, 2011; Lee, 2017). In line with these claims, UE through multicultural educational approaches has gained attention in recent years (Lee, 2017). While there are studies on UE through multicultural educational approaches for primary and secondary school students (Jeong, 2011; Kim, 2011; Kim, 2010b; Lee, 2017; Park, 2009), there is a lack of research on the necessity of UE in early childhood education using these approaches. Therefore, this qualitative study aims to examine the perspectives of South Korean early childhood educators regarding North Korean defectors and their national identity, as well as their views on reunification and UE, to provide suggestions for effective integrated education for the children of both Koreas and related teacher education.

Role of Teachers and Directors in Early Childhood Education and Care

The early years are a critical period for child development, as every child thrives holistically when provided with opportunities for creative play (Froebel Trust, 2018); Ball (1994) emphasizes that young children develop emotionally, intellectually, morally, socially, physically, and spiritually with each area being interconnected. Moreover, children's experiences during these formative years significantly influence their lifelong outcomes (Murray, 2017).

Learning environments in early childhood settings must support all aspects of children's development in a fluid and child-centered manner, as the context in which children learn and grow profoundly affects their overall development (Neaum, 2010). Therefore, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) pedagogy should respond to and support children appropriately, guided by an understanding of their growth and learning processes, as well as a clear insight into the potential next steps in their development (Holland, 2010).

To fulfill these goals, the role of the teacher is crucial. Teachers utilize communication, problem-

solving, pretend play, and play routines to encourage young children to engage with the practical and learning functions of language. They plan activities that create a sense of stability, emotional engagement, and curiosity (De Haan, 2012). According to Murray (2018), early childhood educators must be sophisticated professionals who know when and how to intervene appropriately in young children's learning within early childhood settings. For instance, teachers should provide rich learning environments, engage in meaningful dialogue by asking appropriate questions, offer relevant provocations, and co-construct understanding with young children. In Korea, preschool teachers receive training at colleges, junior colleges, the Korea National Open University, and universities (Ministry of Education, 2019). These teachers employ structured, systematic, child-centered teaching methods and play-based curricula that align with children's developmental needs, enhancing their natural learning process through specialized knowledge gained from years of professional training (Lee et al., 2009).

Meanwhile, the directors of childcare centers hold a level 1 early childhood teacher certification or higher and have over three years of field experience (Korea Childcare Promotion Institute, 2019). In terms of their role, directors manage all operations within childcare centers, supervising and directing all staff (Korea Childcare Promotion Institute, 2019). They also consult with teachers on educational objectives, curricula, and activities. Additionally, they encourage teachers to take pride in their work when teaching and caring for young children (Lee, 2013b). In this way, directors play a key role in enhancing teachers' motivation and satisfaction in the workplace, which, in turn, significantly contributes to the quality of school life. Director support can empower teachers' teaching experiences and develop their competencies (Yuh & Choi, 2017).

Unification Education in Early Childhood

South Korea proposed unification education (UE) as part of the national curriculum to restore Korean homogeneity and consistently support the possibility of reunification (Han, 2020). UE aims to raise awareness of unification issues, strengthen preparation for reunification, foster confidence in liberal democratic values, cultivate democratic citizenship, promote the formation of a national community, recognize the importance of national security, and understand the reality of North Korea (Ministry of Unification, 2013). In line with this national purpose, the South Korean government passed the Unification Education Support Act in 1999 to emphasize the significance of reunification on the divided peninsula. (Han, 2020). An examination of the early childhood curriculum in South Korea (Ministry of Education, 2013) reveals that past curricula focused on anti-communist education and security education based on confrontation and boundaries against North Korea. The more recent curriculum shifts towards an interest in unification. Although unification is not explicitly mentioned, it includes contents related to UE, such as promoting "interest in and understanding our country" (where "country" refers to Korea as a whole rather than South Korea alone). The activity goals regarding UE in the teachers' manual were distributed as follows: "Peaceful UE" (9.52%), "National community UE" (6.59%), "Democratic citizenship UE" (5.05%), and "Multicultural UE" (3.08%) (Choi, 2017). This distribution indicates that limited areas are addressing the diverse norms, languages, and cultures related to North Korea and its people. According to a study of 400 preschool teachers conducted by Lee et al., (2015), 73% of respondents indicated that UE was not included in the annual class plan, and 60% stated that North Korea and UE were not addressed as a major issue. The study also found that early childhood teachers not only had low awareness and implementation of UE but were also unprepared to teach about it effectively. This demonstrates that early childhood teachers lack both awareness of the need for UE and the knowledge and skills necessary for its implementation (Cho & Lee, 2016). Additionally, Article 8 of the Unification Education Support Act in South Korea currently specifies that UE is intended for primary school students and above, and there are no specific guidelines on the content of unification education for young children (National Institute for Unification Education, 2018). Considering this policy, it is suggested that early childhood unification education should focus on forming the foundation of democratic citizenship through experiences that foster pride in being Korean, an interest in various cultures, and the development of values and attitudes conducive to living harmoniously with North Koreans (Lee, 2022).

Unification Education through Multicultural Educational Approaches

Multicultural education aims to ensure equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, or racial and cultural backgrounds (Banks, 2003). A multicultural curriculum design should include concepts such as historical and cultural events that enable students to understand the experiences of diverse groups (Banks, 2003; Bennett, 1986). This approach fosters empathy (Gay, 2010), encourages acceptance of different perspectives (Tiedt & Tiedt, 2010), promotes an understanding that addresses social issues rooted in oppression and inequality (Boyer & Babtiste, 1996), and helps develop friendships with marginalized groups (Banks, 2003). Multicultural education offers a framework for unification education by addressing cultural differences and promoting mutual understanding. It also demonstrates that the key elements of multicultural education, highlighted in recent unification efforts, are shared and can be effectively integrated (Lee, 2017).

Unification can be seen as a complex process that encompasses many aspects, as it involves not only politics, economics, and social systems but also the integration of consciousness and values between the two Koreas (Kim, 2010a). In this respect, the concept of unification includes both systemic and cultural dimensions. As the heterogeneity of the two Koreas intensifies, a new approach to UE must be introduced to resolve conflicts through understanding and acceptance of diverse views, cultures, ultimately fostering mutual respect between the two Korean student groups (Kim, 2010b). In other words, education that recognizes "differences" and promotes respect for "diversity" through a multicultural educational approach is essential for the new UE paradigm (Kim, 2010b). Based on this premise, several scholars have proposed content for UE through multicultural educational approaches. Oh (2008) identified five key factors: learning about the commonalities and differences between South and North Korea; understanding the concept of difference and discrimination; addressing prejudice and stereotypes against North Korean defectors; recognizing and respecting cultural diversity; and cultivating an open attitude toward other cultures. Additionally, embracing cultural diversity, understanding the North Korean language, and exploring the similarities and differences between the languages of the two Koreas are also recommended (Kim, 2010a). According to Kang (2011), a correct understanding of North Korea, the formation of open nationalism, and respect for cultural diversity are highlighted as critical components of the school curriculum. Overall, the common elements of UE through multicultural educational approaches include recognition and respect for cultural diversity, an understanding of the cultures of North and South Korea, and an exploration of their commonalities and differences.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study aims to explore South Korean educators' perspectives on North Korean defectors and their national identity, as well as their views on reunification and UE. This study seeks to provide suggestions for effective integrated education for the children of the two Koreas through the lens of multicultural educational approaches and emphasizes the necessity of teacher education related to this topic.

The following research questions were addressed:

Q1. What do early childhood educators who have experienced teaching children of North Korean defectors think about North Korean defectors and their national identity?

Q2. Regarding reunification, how do they think they can best educate children about it, and what are effective educational strategies for unification education?

Method

A qualitative research design was used to explore South Korean educators' perceptions of North Korean defectors, their national identity, reunification, and UE to provide suggestions for effective educational strategies for UE and related teacher training. In qualitative research, a semi-structured approach to interviewing is much more common than the more strictly structured forms because the more open nature of the data generation and analysis fits well with the overall aims of qualitative inquiry (Gibson

& Brown, 2009). Therefore, the data was gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews and conducting thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were also used in this study.

Participants and Procedures

In qualitative research, sampling is a very significant part and decisions about it are often taken on a concrete, substantial level rather than on a formal and abstract level (Flick, 2009). Purposive sampling is more commonly used as qualitative strategy in research (Newby, 2014), and this is in contrast with random sampling in quantitative studies (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). This research employed purposive sampling by choosing the members of a sample with a purpose to signify a type that related to a key criterion (Ritchie et al., 2014). The key criterion in selecting the site and sample of this study was gaining access to investigate early childhood teachers' and directors' perception of North Korean defectors, their national identity, reunification, and UE. Considering this, as one of sampling strategies in qualitative research, I first tried to use random purposive sampling which adds reliability to the sample when the purposeful sample is large (Punch, 2009). With the assistance of acquaintances, I contacted preschools in areas where most North Korean defectors reside. Additionally, I circulated an email containing information about the research to potential participants in these regions. However, during the time of recruiting participants, I discovered that there were few schools in my sample area that North Korean children attended so that I had to abandon this strategy for my study. Therefore, I thoroughly searched and selected areas in South Korea with a high density of North Korean residents, I then contacted teachers and directors who are working at pre-schools in these areas, through the federation of pre-schools, and asked for their permission to conduct this research.

During the time of recruiting participants, it was very difficult to collect larger numbers of educators due to their unwillingness to take part. For example, some educators did not want to reveal that their schools had North Korean children in attendance as they knew that many South Koreans were prejudiced against these people. In order to collect a bigger sample size, I also employed snowball sampling after interviewing, asking these participants to suggest friends, colleagues, or family members (Tracy, 2013) who were in different schools. This strategy is helpful for sampling a population where access is difficult, maybe because the topic for research is sensitive or where contact is difficult (Heckathorn, 2002). Through this process, seven pre-schools, which have children of North Korean defectors were recruited. Participants in this current study included seven directors and seven teachers and these are all women. The overview of participating educators is provided in Table 1.

Table 1
Overview of Fourteen Participants

		Gender & Age	Educational Background	Early Childhood teaching experience (At present school/In total)	Numbers of children from NK defectors taught
School A	Director1	F/60s	Nursery teacher training school	20/26	2
	Teacher1	F/30s	Bachelor of Social Welfare	5/11	1
School B	Director2	F/60s	Bachelor of Social Welfare	5/11	5
	Teacher2	F/40s	Bachelor of Early Childhood Education	5/11	3
School C	Director3	F/50s	Bachelor of Early Childhood Education	7/21	2
	Teacher3	F/30s	Bachelor of Early Childhood Education	4/4	2
School D	Director4	F/50s	Master of Early Childhood Education	7/21	3
	Teacher4	F/40s	Bachelor of Family and Child	6/14	1
School E	Director5	F/50s	Bachelor of Early Childhood Education	7/21	2
	Teacher5	F/20s	Bachelor of Early Childhood Education	4/4	1
School F	Director6	F/50s	Master of Early Childhood Education	13/25	2
	Teacher6	F/20s	Bachelor of Child and Welfare	1/2	1
School G	Director7	F/50s	Doctoral degree of Early Childhood Education	6/27	5

| Teacher7 | F/20s | Bachelor of Child and Welfare | 7/7 | 2 |

Data Collection

I initially intended to do observation, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews for my data collection methods. I asked participants with great anticipation whether I could observe their classes that can provide the opportunity to collect 'live' data from naturally occurring social contexts (Cohen et al., 2011). However, I was not given permission to do this by school directors because they said that North Korean mothers do not like their children to be observed by someone. Again, I asked my participants if I could conduct focus groups by asking questions that focus closely on their experiences with children of North Korean defectors and their parents to encourage discussion and the expression of varying opinions and viewpoints (Rossman & Rallis, 2017), but participants rejected my offer due to time available. Interview questions were designed from the literature on "Young Koreans' perceptions of North Korean defectors and their national identity" (Campbell, 2015) and "Early childhood educators' perceptions regarding reunification and UE" (An & Kim, 2018; Lee, 2017; Yang, 2020).

A semi-structured interview was used in this research as the primary instrument because it provides both a structured format and the flexibility needed for participants to discuss certain issues (White, 2008). Semi-structured interviews are typically employed in contexts where the interviewer establishes a general framework by deciding in advance which topics to cover and what main questions to ask (Drever, 1995). This approach led to the creation of interview questions such as: "What do you think about North Korean defectors living in South Korea?" "What are your thoughts on their national identity?" and "What differences do you observe between yourself and North Korean defectors?". Second, it offers some flexibility for interviewers. In this type of approach, the questions might be improvised in the research setting when new questions in relation to the interviews come into the researcher's mind (Gibson, 2010). For example, when talking about the questions of experience with a North Korean mother, during the interview the participant revealed a fact which was unknown before the interview that a North Korean woman who has two children used to work at the school as a cook. When this came to light impromptu questions were asked such as: "Could you share your experiences with the woman as a fellow worker?"

In addition, the interview questions were thoroughly checked by a professor who works at the College of Education before interviews. For example, before conducting the interviews, the interview questions were checked several times to see whether they have prejudice or not. The interview scripts were also examined after the interview to prevent researcher's bias.

Ethical Considerations

This research received ethics approval through the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work Ethics Committee at Queen's University Belfast. Before commencing the study, face-to-face meetings with the directors of the schools were held to introduce the researcher and highlight the researcher's role. The purpose of the study was also explained, a brief account of the interview questions was given, and the voluntary nature of participation outlined. The directors were also asked about teachers whom the researcher could approach. A two or three-days gap was designated between the initial visits and the commencement of the research to offer appropriate time for directors to think about participation and to contact the researcher. With the directors' permission, access to schools and staff was granted. The consent forms were designed into two types; one was for directors and the other was for teachers. For directors, they were asked for consent to access the school and the teachers in their school who would be interviewed and to use the school premises. Directors were asked to identify at least two teachers whom the researcher could approach to ensure that directors were not aware of who has/has not participated to mitigate power disparities and ensure confidentiality. Therefore, teachers did not need to feel under pressure to participate in the research. The researcher also asked the teachers for consent for their own participation by helping them to understand that they are doing so voluntarily. Once the teachers gave verbal permission, a consent form was given to them, and the researcher again stressed that there was no obligation to participate in this research as the researcher was aware of the disparities of status and power between directors and teachers. All participants who wished to take part then signed the consent form to be interviewed.

A comparatively quiet location was chosen for the interviews, as privacy for the interview settings was important. Each interview lasted one hour, and all interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants. Interviews for data collection from the participants were conducted over eight weeks in June to July 2017. The periods of time between site visits allowed for transcription of interviews, field notes and reflective journals, and preliminary analysis. At the end of the research, data collected from the interviews was analysed.

Data Analysis

The six phases of conducting thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were used in this study: data familiarisation; generating initial codes; constructing themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; producing the report. Through this process, two significant themes and five subthemes emerged from the analysis. An overview of the final list of themes is provided in Table 2.

Table 2
Final List of Themes

Themes	Subthemes
1. Educators' perceptions of North Korean defectors and their national identity	1-1 Educators' perspectives of North Korean defectors living in South Korea 1-2 Educators' perspectives of defectors' national identity 1-3 Educators' perceptions of differences with North Korean children and their parents
2. Educators' perceptions regarding reunification and Unification Education	2-1 Educators' perceptions of reunification and UE 2-2 Educators' thoughts of the effective strategies for UE

Results

The results reflect participants' perceptions of North Korean defectors, their national identity, reunification, and unification education (UE), and provide suggestions for more effective educational strategies for UE and related teacher training. Concerning the research questions and analyzing the data, two significant themes included: *Educators' perceptions of North Korean defectors and their national identity* and *educators' perceptions regarding reunification and UE*. Additionally, five subthemes emerged from the data: 1) Educators' perspectives of North Korean defectors living in South Korea, 2) Educators' perspectives of defectors' national identity, 3) Educators' perceptions of differences with North Korean children and their parents, 4) Educators' perceptions of reunification and UE, 5) Educators' thoughts of the effective strategies for UE.

Educators' Perceptions of North Korean Defectors and Their National Identity

Educators' Perspectives of North Korean Defectors Living in South Korea

Some educators acknowledged and mentioned that North Koreans who come over to South Korea to live have difficulty settling down in the society. Viewing this, the educators showed an empathetic view of North Korean families as people who have trouble adjusting to South Korean society. For example, Director One experienced a female North Korean who has a child attending her school stated

> It was very challenging for her to live in a capitalistic society. She seemed to find it very difficult to follow this way of life because she came from a communist country.

She also expressed empathy that these family groups required financial support as they are living in poverty.

> I think the South Korean government should help them to settle down well in this society in spite of the financial burden.

The data indicate that teachers are aware that North Korean defectors in South Korea may have a hard time due to financial difficulties.

Educators also shared what they experienced with North Korean defectors, which caused them to have negative or positive perspectives. In the interviews, Director One reported that her experiences with North Korean defectors had been negative, but she reflected on how she had turned these negative experiences into a positive mind-set that enabled her to demonstrate increased understanding and knowledge about North Korean defectors.

> I met the first one who was aged 30 at the church and she seemed as if she was not adjusted to society. It seemed that she came over to the South with the fantasy that many South Koreans would back her one hundred percent and she would live comfortably. Having experienced these things, I had a bad image about North Korean defectors at that time. The second one whom I met was Jumin's mother. To tell you the truth, I had a prejudice towards her, thinking she would be the same kind of person whom I met at first, but she was a very gentle and hard-working person. Therefore, I realized not all North Korean defectors are the same.

The data suggest that the director was prejudiced towards the first woman whom she met but her experience with Jumin's mother influenced her as an exception. The director acknowledged her initial stereotypical beliefs towards a female North Korean, but continued interactions with another female North Korean appeared to have influenced her biased beliefs and she was able to begin to change her beliefs and increased her understanding.

In contrast, Director Two's positive view changed to a negative one. For instance:

> At first, I was positive as I believe we are one nation, but I have discovered negative things from North Korean defectors. For example, they take it for granted that they should be well treated by South Koreans, for they have come here through a rough escape route journey.

These negative experiences also appeared to show some stereotypical beliefs surrounding North Korean defectors. For example:

> As they already experienced human trafficking through the rough escape journey, they tend to easily change their partners". (Director Two)

This is in line with previous research that when female North Koreans cross the border, they survive by relying on quasi-marital relationships as they have experienced a traumatic process of family dissolution and reorganization during the long journey from North Korea to South Korea (Lee et al., 2009). Consequently, the director's statements show that her beliefs based on her experience with female North Koreans may limit her ability to engage in respectful interactions. Similarly, another teacher stated:

> To be honest, I do not have a positive image of her because I felt she shut her heart towards South Korea. (Teacher One)

Also:

> As I experienced, North Korean defectors usually take an unfriendly attitude, and they do not trust people at first. (Director Five)

These findings indicate that educators viewed North Korean defectors with a negative image due to their distrust and wariness, and this circumstance has become the cause of their prejudice against them.

Educators' Perspectives of Defectors' National Identity

Despite the prejudice against North Korean defectors, it was also common to regard them as the "same Korean race". Some educators shared details about their perspectives on North Korean defectors. For example,

> I am positive toward them, and we need to live in harmony with the people who come over to the South as we are the same Korean race. (Teacher Five)

Also, Director Seven viewed them as those who could make a peaceful environment in the Korean Peninsula in the future:

> Personally, I am happy having North Korean defectors for it will create a good environment to prepare for reunification.

The data illustrate that some educators had strong convictions about "the Korean race" as they grew

up with that belief. It is acknowledged that such beliefs show ethnic nationalism, the concept of the single bloodline and the homogeneous nation to be core and predominant issue to the understanding of Korean identity.

In contrast to other interviewees, three educators regarded North Korean defectors as "other". For example, Director Three stated that

> I think people from the North are different for we have been living separately for ages and I consider North Korea as another country.

The other two teachers who are aged in their 20's also stated that:

> I have grown up learning that the North and the South are one nation, but it just did not appeal to me. Though my parents' generations firmly believed in the Korean race, I feel we are different due to ideology, social norms, and cultures. (Teacher Six)

and

> I considered North Korea as a different country in that we have a different accent and way of speaking. (Teacher Seven)

These outcomes confirm that young South Koreans usually define themselves as the southern part of the peninsula only.

Educators' perceptions of differences with NK children and their parents

When asked about the main differences, most participants appeared not to have any thoughts or images regarding NK children, but rather regarded them as the same as all the children in the school for they have common features. For example, Director Two stated:

> I considered these children the same as South Korean children due to the same appearance and language.

However, some educators acknowledged children's language difficulties in their schools. Director Two recalled Sujin who had a North Korean mother:

> She had a communication difficulty as she was born and brought up in China until the age of six. At the age of entering primary school, she was not accepted because she could not speak Korean. In turn, she enrolled and attended this school.

The following data also gave insight into Haein and Jinju who are siblings and were born to a Chinese man and a North Korean woman. Looking at their family background, the father only speaks Chinese, and the mother can speak both Chinese and Korean. Haein came to South Korea from China at the age of five. Because he graduated from the school the previous year and his teacher also left the school, Director Four did not recall much of his story but stated:

> Haein could not attend primary school due to the language problem. Therefore, he had to attend this preschool at the age of entering primary school. For example, he could not speak even a Korean word and used body language in communication. Consequently, he could not catch up with the class. Therefore, Haein had to observe the situation and tried to imitate other kids' actions. For instance, when the class teacher said, "*We are going out to play, could you line up in front of the door over there?*" He tried to observe other children and followed, doing the same things his friends did.

These comments indicate that the directors identified that the children born in China have language difficulties in their schools. The data show that there is a need to be aware of those children to provide an equal opportunity in education as they have trouble adapting to school.

In terms of North Korean parents, several participants identified some differences with them. Especially, the differences of educational system between the two Koreas were emphasized. Director One reported the differences and stated:

> At first, both Jumin's mum and Dongju's mum did not understand the programmes and the activities which were run in school.

Additionally, teacher One stated that:

> Though Dongju was too young to write letters, she asked me to teach him how to write in school. I explained the

appropriate age for children to begin writing and introduced her to the best method for helping early childhood children learn letters: reading storybooks. After that, she understood what I meant.

Teacher Two also reflected on their experiences with North Korean mothers.

She seemed unable to understand South Korean teaching methods with their emphasis on individual levels and respect for autonomy. I assume they might have been used to the standardized education system in North Korea.

The data show that educators' experiences with North Korean mothers have increased their understanding of the different education systems in the two Koreas. These remarks indicate that the contrasts between the two educational systems are quite apparent as the educators identified that North Korean mothers considered the most important method in education to be rote learning. It resulted from the standardized education system of the North and could cause difficulties when teaching these children in their South Korean classes. Director Four, who has faced challenges with a North Korean mother due to her non-participation in school events or activities, stated:

It seems as if she does not know the importance of partnership between home and school. For example, she never participated in a school event or a sports day.

The director expressed frustration with the mother's lack of involvement in school activities. The following two educators also showed acquired knowledge through experience with female North Koreans by illustrating the mothers' lack of knowledge regarding instant food and the difference in attitudes to cleanliness. Teacher One stated:

When she packed lunch for Dongju on the day of a picnic, she sometimes sent instant food which should be heated but without heating it. It seemed she had no knowledge about microwave instant food.

Also:

She does not bathe her children or take them to the hairdresser for haircuts. She reminded me of parents in South Korea in the 1970s and 80s, as many people at that time did not prioritize their children's cleanliness due to the challenges of earning a living (Director Four).

The educators mentioned the different style of living of North Korean families. Especially, Director Four seemed to consider not washing children well and keeping their hair neat as a backward or unsophisticated life. This cultural chauvinism may have been influenced by the Southern media which has incited negative perceptions of North Korean defectors as new residents who must be modernized to keep up with the living standards and norms of South Korea.

Educators' Perceptions Regarding Reunification and Unification Education

Educators' Perceptions of Reunification and UE

When the educators were asked about their perceptions of reunification and UE, most felt UE was important as preparation for a future unified Korea. According to eight participants, they expressed their positive views on UE based on the beliefs of "same Korean race". For example, Director One stated that:

As we are one nation, UE is necessary. Early childhood is a critical period, which can be described like a sponge because children usually accept well what they learn. Therefore, it is very important to teach these children that we were one country, and we can also live together again someday. For this, children can be educated as to how we can be ready to be united.

Also:

I feel the need for UE because the reunification of Korean peninsula will happen someday. (Director Seven)

These statements of Director One and Seven who are in 50-60s are the oldest of the participants demonstrated that the older generation is eager for the North and South to be united and this could affect their educational beliefs that UE is necessary.

Teacher Three also discussed her view regarding reunification and UE through interaction with a North Korean mother. The data below reported this:

I think that there is a need for UE because the last task that Korea must achieve is reunification. I have heard from Min's mum that North Korea is still a closed country, and it is illegal to watch other media besides North Korean

broadcasting, but I heard that young North Koreans secretly encounter South Korean dramas and K-pop through China because South Korean culture is receiving the attention from the world. Due to these phenomena, I think reunification will come true soon and a related education is necessary.

However, the teacher showed the error of hasty generalization, which viewed reunification as a necessity due to the reason of North Koreans' strong interest in South Korean culture. This perspective seems to put no requirement on many South Koreans to adapt to the cultures of people from different backgrounds.

Meanwhile, six participants expressed their negative views on reunification between the two Koreas. Some seemed to feel that there would be an economic burden. For example, Teacher Six stated that:

For me, I am very negative about reunification for South Korea would lose many things when two Koreas are united.

Also:

I feel burdensome regarding reunification because South Koreans must help them with the taxes that we pay, and it might be putting a burden on the next generation. (Director Four)

These views display greater sensitivity to the costs rather than the benefits of reunification. Director Six expressed her view that huge differences between the two Koreas lead to the impossibility of reunification:

This school has never taught about reunification because I, myself, believe that the North and the South would not be united in the future because there have been a lot of gaps between the two Koreas such as culture, norms, views, and economics.

The example above indicates that she was concerned about conflict and confusion caused by social and cultural differences. The director seemed to have a strong belief that those who have different cultures, norms, and views cannot be associated with South Koreans. This demonstrates that the director's strong belief, in which she regarded North Korea and its people as different, hinders her in implementing UE in the school.

The following data also reflect educators' perspectives that UE for young children is not necessary, citing young children's "incomprehension of the concept of reunification". For instance, Teacher One stated that:

I think children in early childhood would not understand what reunification means for them.

Director Three also expressed this:

Such education is not necessary because I think early childhood children do not understand the situation and relation between the North and the South. I believe that some children would not appreciate that the Korea peninsula is divided.

Director Six also commented:

UE is unnecessary at this age because they would not fully understand what reunification means. I am concerned that children at this age would have a bad image toward the North and the people by regarding them as "commies" if they learn about UE.

The data demonstrate educators' perceptions of young children's lack of comprehension regarding reunification between the two Koreas. Especially, Director Six's misperceptions regarding reunification between the two Koreas by using the negative term "commies" was possibly influenced by anti-communist education (North Korea and its people are enemies, not one nation or people) that she learnt when she was young.

Educators' Thoughts of the Effective Strategies for UE

Despite the controversy over the need for UE programmes in early childhood, some participants described the child-centred teaching methods of engaging in dialogue with children appropriately about inter-Korean relations. A School has been teaching UE since the children from North Korean defectors attended. The director stated that:

I think the North and the South can be united someday, and I have done this programme because I feel the necessity of it. When children at the age of five had lessons about their home country, they also learnt about inter-Korean relations. During the class, a song about "we are one nation" was introduced by explaining the meaning of the words. It was found that some kids sobbed while singing the song.

This indicates the director's strong belief that she regarded the two Koreas as one nation. This enabled her to implement UE in her school although the UE curriculum of South Korea has not been applied in the early years.

The following data show that some participants became aware of prejudice toward North Korean defectors by reviewing what they had said. They also highlighted the necessity of developing their understanding of North Korean defectors to increase their respect for them and to decrease their bias or prejudices and negative view of differences. For example, Teacher Two stated that:

Integrated education will be possible if educators are prepared first and learn about North Korea's culture and education system so that we can abandon prejudice against North Korea and North Korean defectors.

Director Four also commented that:

I think educators should have an unbiased attitude toward them because children learn from their attitudes. This is the first step to implement integrated education between the two Koreas.

Teacher Four suggested improving teacher education to complete an effective UE:

Teachers should first develop an attitude of understanding and respecting each other's views through teacher education. This is definitely necessary, I think.

These outcomes indicate the necessity of a teacher education programme that resists bias by reflecting on teachers' possible prejudice when teaching these children and that promotes ways of interacting with parents, because prejudice and bias are prevalent in South Korean society. Some participants acknowledged differences between the two Koreas which confirms the necessity of education related to embracing diversity. The data below show the importance of the teacher's role in the class as some addressed UE through multicultural approaches. For instance, Director Three stated that:

UE should provide children with a way to accept and understand the differences first. For example, when we introduce a North Korean child in the class, I would introduce him "Soo is from the Northern part of Korea, which is different from us". In the view of multicultural educational approach, children could learn about the North and get along with them and, I believe children could embrace the cultural differences. Through this, they could learn to live together with people from different backgrounds.

In the data, the director adopted a multicultural educational approach to acknowledge the cultural diversity between the two Koreas and to foster understanding of each other's differences. This indicates that unification should extend beyond mere geographic and institutional consolidation to embrace cultural integration, which is essential for multicultural education that acknowledges and respects cultural diversity.

Teacher Three also agreed saying:

I think we should proceed with a multicultural educational approach. In order to live as a citizen of unified Korea, I think it would be better to conduct education from an early age to coexist and learn about each other.

Director One commented that:

I think South Korean children should be educated first to embrace the differences of North Korean kids. Therefore, early childhood is the right time to become ready to embrace people from different backgrounds.

The educators emphasized the importance of a multicultural education approach in early childhood to help children from diverse cultural backgrounds be understood and embraced by their peers in the host country. This understanding fosters positive cultural identities in interdependent relationships.

Discussion

This study explores participants' perceptions of North Korean defectors, their national identity, reunification, and unification education (UE) to suggest more effective educational strategies for UE and

related teacher education.

Educators' Perceptions of North Korean defectors and Their National Identity

Some participants expressed empathetic views regarding North Korean mothers, recognizing them as individuals from a different country. As one director stated, "She came from a communist country." This finding highlights the need to examine teachers' perceptions of inter-Korean relations before implementing unification education in the class. Additionally, while most educators regarded North Koreans as part of the 'Same Korean race,' younger educators in their 20s emphasized differences, viewing North Koreans primarily as people from the North. Some even exhibited prejudices toward North Korean defectors. For instance, Director Six, who is in her 50s, regarded North Korea and its people as enemies rather than as part of a single nation. The data indicate that educators tend to consider North Korean defectors as "other", underscoring the necessity for teacher education that embraces the cultural differences and values of North Koreans. This approach should be prioritized over an emphasis on the idea of "one nation" between the two Koreas.

The data indicate that some educators recognized children's language difficulties in their schools. This finding underscores the need for multicultural approaches in interacting with and teaching Sujin and Haein, who were born in China. It aligns with previous research showing that early childhood teachers struggle to engage with children from North Korea or China (Kang, 2014). Although all North Korean children have been fully funded by the government since the educational policy changed in 2012 with the introduction of the "Nuri Curriculum", this funding does not extend to private education or extracurricular activities (Lee et al., 2015). Furthermore, the literature on local adaptation centers, commonly known as North Korean Refugees Foundation [i.e., 하나센터], reveals that while these centres provide language programmes for children from North Korea or China (third countries), early childhood children are often overlooked in these initiatives (Lee et al., 2012). Therefore, the government needs to consider providing appropriate support for children of North Korean defectors to ensure equal educational opportunities, as these children struggle to adapt to school.

The study also shows that educators faced difficulties because North Korean mothers did not understand the South Korean preschool curriculum and teaching methods, particularly regarding the emphasis on individual development and respect for autonomy. The data indicate that teachers struggled to communicate and discuss children's learning due to parents' lack of familiarity with the South Korean education system. This suggests that North Korean families may feel discouraged when trying to engage in their early education, but they have limited opportunities to access information on these topics (Lee et al., 2012). These findings align with previous research, which emphasizes that the government should provide North Korean families with effective parent education, including information on the different education cultures of South Korean society, to enhance their understanding of the educational ethos and philosophy (Lee et al., 2012).

Furthermore, some educators expressed difficulty due to parents' lack of involvement in school activities. This finding highlights the director's recognition of North Korean families' non-participation, underscoring the importance of home-school partnerships. The data indicate that the director seemed unaware of the reasons behind the mother's lack of involvement. This trend aligns with existing literature, which suggests that there is no home-school partnership in North Korea, as teachers are seen as solely responsible for educating children (Jo & Kwon, 2013). Therefore, teachers need to enhance their understanding of parental involvement, considering factors such as limited financial resources, past experiences with schooling, and linguistic and cultural differences (Jones, 2010).

Two educators also perceived female North Koreans' lack of knowledge about using microwaves, along with their inability to properly wash their children and keep their hair neat, as indicators of a backward or unsophisticated lifestyle. These instances of ignorance and prejudice highlight the need for teacher education focused on effective interactions with parents, emphasizing attitudes such as openness to other cultures and respect for diverse values.

Educators' Perceptions Regarding Reunification and Unification Education

Early childhood teachers' perception of unification is considered crucial for shaping young children's awareness and attitudes toward unification, as well as for the practice of early childhood UE (Lee & Kim, 2022). The data reveal that some participating directors in the older age group appeared to welcome reunification under the concept of one nation between the two Koreas and preferred UE in their schools. This aligns with findings from previous studies (Campbell, 2015; Yim, 2014). However, the results showed that six participants had negative perceptions of reunification, and one participant had not taught UE programmes in her school. These findings are supported by previous research indicating that the South Korean government perceives North Korea and its people not only as part of one nation but also as an enemy, which has shaped the attitudes of South Koreans (Yim, 2014). The data suggest that the influence of mass media on the political decision-making process regarding inter-Korean relations continues to subtly impact South Korean citizens. Both conservative and progressive Korean newspapers exacerbate the ideological and political conflicts affecting relations between the two Koreas (Akulova, 2015). Additionally, decades of political division have led many young South Koreans to view North Koreans not as fellow Koreans, but as a distinct out-group, similar to immigrants, with whom they do not share language, culture, or ancestry (Ha & Jang, 2016) as demonstrated by this research. These teachers' perceptions and attitudes may be also influenced by the National Institute for Unification Education (2018), which has determined that UE does not extend to early childhood. Consequently, this policy has contributed to ECEC practitioners' lack of awareness, knowledge, and positive attitudes toward North Korean defectors and their children. Therefore, the South Korean government should consider effective alternative curricula and related teacher training to build accurate awareness, knowledge, and unbiased attitudes toward North Korean parents through "true knowing" about North Korean defectors before teaching their children about North Korea and its people.

For these, teacher education should be conducted in a multicultural manner to enhance its effectiveness. Pre-service teacher education should be implemented in universities to increase their awareness and knowledge about the lives of North Koreans and the importance of reunification. It would also be effective to plan the curriculum by using cultural content such as films or literature. Such contents could be dealing with North Korean culture, perspectives, or human rights in North Korea. Various and high-quality strategies through cultural contents should be applied in the curriculum on a regular basis. For example, the 2023 film Beyond Utopia, directed by Gavin, depicts the reality of life for North Koreans and captures the entire process of their defection from North Korea. Pre-service teachers can gain insights into human rights issues in North Korea after watching the film. Over the past decade, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and United Nations human rights bodies have brought significant attention to egregious human rights violations in North Korea (Cohen, 2013). However, education systems across the country are failing to inform students about their rights and how to access them as global citizens (Gibson, 2023). Therefore, it is important to incorporate classes that focus on learning about and discussing North Korea's human rights within the regular curriculum. Through these films, trainee teachers can develop awareness and knowledge related to North Korea and its people, as well as the human rights issues they face.

Educators should also cultivate positive attitudes toward diversity through teacher education. As the data indicate, some participants show assimilative views toward North Korean defectors, and some demonstrated ongoing prejudice against them. Young children in the class could be influenced by teachers who hold negative attitudes toward diverse people so that it becomes easy for children to accept stereotypes. Therefore, educators should be reflective about whether they are biased or not and need to view the North Korean context objectively. They also need to get rid of assimilative views based on a perceived cultural superiority of South Korea. For this, trainee teachers should be trained in reflecting on their own prejudice against North Koreans and all people groups. It has been emphasized that the first and most significant task of a teacher-training programme is to help teachers to review their own beliefs, values, ideas, practices, and bias as they bring these into their learning and teaching (Yurtseven & Altun, 2015). Thus, trainee teachers should develop positive attitudes toward diverse families through designing pre-

service teacher education programmes which are embedded in experiential learning. For example, in guided exercises with their own class groups, trainee teachers would engage in role-play as North Korean defectors, and they would engage with their feelings and think about what they experienced. Other activities might be based on real scenarios, such as discussing the case of discrimination by local people. Through these activities, trainee teachers could get understanding of why North Korean women cannot help but experience human trafficking or why they close their minds, in turn trainee teachers could increase their ability to stand in another person's shoes to understand his or her feelings.

Other participants also argued that teaching UE to young children was unnecessary due to concerns about their comprehension. This perspective highlights teachers' lack of awareness regarding children's right to know about the background of division, the harmful effects of division, and the necessity of reunification. Young children are rights holders, yet their rights are often overlooked because of perceptions of immaturity (Theobald, 2019). It is essential to provide teacher education that enables educators to recognize and uphold children's right to know, as early childhood is a critical period of rapid development during which the foundations for communication, connection, and identity are established. Simultaneously, the government should implement UE curriculum in the early years to allow young children to exercise and experience their rights in their daily lives. Regarding this, some educators addressed unification education through multicultural educational strategies, recognizing that children may perceive ideological, cultural, linguistic, and economic differences between themselves and North Korean defectors and their children. Based on these research results, the necessity of a multicultural approach within early childhood unification education can be suggested as follows. Firstly, the growing number of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds in South Korean society indicates that unification education, which emphasizes the traditional concept of a single nation, needs to evolve. Since the 2000s, multiculturalism has rapidly emerged in Korea due to the influx of migrants, including migrant workers and women from international marriages, leading to a significant increase in the multicultural population. It was also found that among the children of married immigrants, 61.9% were under the age of six (Yang et al., 2014), underscoring the necessity for a multicultural education approach in ECEC.

Secondly, multicultural education is one approach that can address the limitations of unification education. Since the Korean War, South and North Korea have been shaped by distinct political, economic, cultural influences, and educational systems. These differences may lead to increased conflicts regarding unification. Especially, there are considerable differences in aims, teaching methods, and educational resources between the North and South Korean children (Han & Lee, 2014). For example, North Korean preschool education emphasizes 'rote learning' as this study indicated. A key difference between the curricula in North and South Korea is that North Korea prioritizes content over skills development (Jo & Kwon, 2013), while South Korea pre-school curriculums place greater emphasis on the balanced growth of the individual (Jin et al., 2023). Therefore, unification education should facilitate understanding of each other's differences and help resolve conflicts. A multicultural approach to unification education will be essential for preparing all members of the Korean Peninsula for social integration. To sum up, UE should be able to achieve social integration to embrace the difference of values in South Korean society so that recognizing the need for UE through multicultural education approaches should be increased. While there are currently studies on UE through a multicultural educational approach these are only for primary and secondary school students (Lee, 2017).

As suggested by some scholars in the literature review, this section will outline the common elements of UE through multicultural educational approaches. These elements include recognition and respect for cultural diversity, an understanding of the cultures of North and South Korea, and an exploration of their commonalities and differences. For young children, one effective approach is to allow both North and South Korean children to share their stories. Kidd et al., (2005) emphasize the importance of children sharing stories about their home and family lives in class. For example, children could present materials related to their typical language, food, and traditional games to foster mutual understanding. These stories help South and North Korean children become more culturally aware, leading to a celebration of diversity. When these stories are shared with all families in the classroom, they can promote a sense of community

(Araujo, 2003), creating a foundation for integration between children from the North and the South.

Preschool is also responsible for providing opportunities for programmes that allow children to experience different languages by exploring the commonalities and differences between the languages of the two Koreas. Play is an essential component of early childhood programmes, and all areas of academic learning should be integrated into play (Griswold, 2018). For example, children can explore Korean words illustrated by pictures and identify similar or different words in their own languages. Following this, they can participate in a game in which they form two groups and quickly pick up a card when the teacher asks them to find a word that is similar to or different from their own words. Experiencing Chinese language and culture is also necessary, as research shows that young children born in China face challenges in school. Korean shares many Sin-Korean words with Chinese, etymologically rooted in Chinese characters but pronounced in Korean (Wang et al., 2016). Additionally, both Korea and China share Buddhist and Confucian heritages (Gupta et al., 2002). Learning through media can significantly impact learners. For example, Kung Fu Panda, an exciting digital animation film suitable for all ages, features plots and elements, such as chopsticks, that help young children explore the commonalities and differences in language and culture between South Korea and China (Wang, 2023). Through these activities, young children will not only understand diversity but also enhance their sense of community by discovering commonalities with one another.

Limitations

There are certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, this study cannot be generalized to the larger population due to the small sample size (7 teachers and 7 directors) and the specific area where the study was conducted. Recruitment of a larger and more diverse sample would be necessary. Second, the results were obtained from small urban settings, so replication of this research in a variety of geographical contexts is needed.

Conclusion

This study examines participants' perceptions of North Korean defectors, their national identity, reunification, and unification education (UE) to inform more effective educational strategies for UE and related teacher training. The results of the study demonstrated that early childhood educators play a key role in fostering young children's awareness and knowledge about North Korea and its people, as well as developing positive attitudes towards them. Therefore, this study recommends teacher education aimed at enhancing awareness, knowledge, and positive attitudes toward North Korean defectors and their children. It also identifies that the unification education (UE) curriculum in South Korea has not been implemented in early childhood settings. Therefore, it is recommended to implement the UE curriculum through multicultural educational approaches for young children, who are rights holders. The study highlights implications for helping young children achieve social integration, embrace diverse values in their classrooms, and exercise their rights in daily life.

Despite its limitations, this research provides a new and significant perspective by suggesting specific measures on how to raise young teachers' awareness of the importance of reunification, how to provide related teacher education, and focus on UE through multicultural educational approaches in early childhood education fields.

Declarations

Author's Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate: This research received ethics approval through the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work Ethics Committee at Queen's University Belfast. Participants received written information about the study, which was voluntary. All participants agreed to participate in the study and provided written consent.

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Publisher's Declarations

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A longitudinal case study of a preschool-age child's acquisition of writing

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Abstract: This article refers to a longitudinal case study, the main aim of which was to depict the development of the writing skills of a child from a high social class background, called Andreas, during the phase of his emergent/early literacy. The writings Andreas produced during literacy events that took place in his family environment from his birth until his entrance in primary school were assessed using the child's intended purpose and text characteristics as the main axes, while a series of supplementary data was also examined. The results of the in-depth analysis of the written productions provided a satisfactory outline of the process for Andreas' acquisition of the writing code as this developed over time, and they also brought to light the reasons that prompted him to write.

Introduction

Recent decades have seen a consensus of opinion amongst members of the academic community that the roots of literacy are to be found in the first years of life (Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 2020), and this is supported by a significant body of studies (Ahmad & Share, 2021; Morgan et al., 2009). However, the kind of research that examines the development of the phenomenon of literacy during its emergence is somewhat one-sided since, for practical reasons, it has been limited to children attending kindergarten, or who are looked after in nursery school (Hand et al., 2024; Puranik & Lonigan, 2011). Research approaches of this type provide important data, at the same time though they fail to capture holistically the phenomenon under investigation, leaving significant aspects of it hidden from view. A more suitable method for the holistic investigation and adequate depiction of early literacy, is the case study.

The capital importance of the case study in the amplification of scientific knowledge surrounding natural literacy has been highlighted by a large number of researchers (Whitmore et al., 2005). Nevertheless, little of this kind of research is to be found in the international literature (Bissex, 1980; Kress, 1997; Martens, 1996; Stellakis, 2009; Trushell, 1998). In the light of this, we proceeded to the planning and implementation of our study, focusing on an aspect of early literacy that hasn't been studied adequately so far, the development of writing skills.

The Present Research: Aim and Questions

The main objective of our research was the in-depth study and detailed depiction of the developmental course of a child's writing abilities during the phase of his emerging/early literacy. Within this framework, we attempted to answer two main questions:

1) In what way does a preschool age child's writing abilities develop towards the conventional way of writing?

2) What are the reasons that prompt the child to write?

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Method

The method that was preferred and adopted was the longitudinal, descriptive, single case study of one individual. Within this context various qualitative techniques were used, although in certain instances quantitative techniques were used as well (Mukherji & Albon, 2022; Yin, 2014).

Data Processing

The empirical research was conducted over two different time periods: The first period lasted five years and ten months, starting essentially from Andreas' birth and ending when the child began attending primary school at the age of five years and ten months (5;10). It involved the data collection, which was carried out by Andrea's parents, the father being an academic with knowledge on early literacy. The method for collection and archiving of research data was determined by the academic first researcher, who adopted an ethnographic approach (Baynham, 2004; Gillen & Hall, 2013) that enabled the parents to gather a significant body of data through the utilization of various techniques. The parents continuously observed Andreas during his involvement in *literacy events* (Heath, 1982) (communicative instances with any kind of reading or composition of text), sometimes participating themselves or not. In this way, the parents managed to systematically gather the child's written productions, taking care to record field notes regarding the date each was produced, anything the child said about his production, the circumstances of the communicative instance and any other information they judged necessary for the adequate recall of the literacy event within the context of which the production took place. Besides the written productions, the parents gathered a lot of Andreas' oral productions, recording them word for word in notebooks, and keeping notes on them. Where possible, they used additional methods for recording, either sound recording, photographing and/or videoing Andreas during his interactions with them, with his brother or with other individuals from their wider family environment (grandmothers, godmother, cousins, etc.). In any case, implementing the research design guidelines, parents collected the data in a strictly objective manner, making sure that no subjective comments or other opinions were included in their field notes.

The second period endured nearly one year, from Andreas' age of (6;10) to age of (7;10). During this period, the inquiry was planned and carried out by the first researcher and one of his MSc students (hereafter, he will be referred to as "second researcher"). Starting from Andreas' age (6;10) and ending at age (7;6), the second researcher paid a series of nine (9) visits to the family home, as well as visits to other places they frequented (beach, playground), during which it was made possible to observe Andreas, to get to know him, as well as to collect data on the pedagogical views and literacy practices of the family through unstructured interviews in the form of informal conversations (Johnson, 2010). Throughout those visits, no data were collected directly from the interaction with Andreas, since he had already begun attending primary school. The processing of the latter data by the second researcher made possible the determination of the social background Andreas comes from and the highlighting of his family's theoretical assumptions on literacy. At this certain period, Andreas' written productions were archived and thoroughly analyzed in depth by the second researcher, as following. During this process, the first researcher was closely following the progress, keeping notes for any disagreement or reflection, but avoiding intervening. Before exporting the final results, the first researcher gave the second researcher a body of literature, relevant to the issues he had identified that he was concerned about. After the necessary changes were made by the second researcher, the results were scrutinized by both the researchers, with the first intervening only for expressing reflections and never taking the initiative for expressing opinions straightforwardly. Finally, the conclusions were extracted by the second researcher, were discussed by both the researchers and, after an agreement between them, the final text was compiled.

Ethical considerations were taken into account since the research subject was under-age (British Educational Research Association, 2011; Flewitt, 2005). Furthermore, the protection of the child's rights was guaranteed during the research and when writing the text of the publication, utilizing a range of strategies (Huser et al., 2022). In this context, parental informed consent had been ensured by obtaining a letter of consent from both of them, on conditions of confidentiality and anonymity. Additionally, operating under the guidelines of EECERA's Code of Ethics (Bertram et al., 2016) and of Ethical Research Involving Children

(Graham et al., 2013), we provided Andreas the opportunity to provide his informed assent, too. In particular, he was informed from the outset that the visitor (i.e. the second researcher) was conducting research about young children's writing and he would like to meet him, to get to know him and use manuscripts produced by Andreas when he was younger. Andreas, already familiar with the concept of "research" as part of his father's job and because similar actions had taken place in his school, manifested no objection and willingly gave his permission. The agreement was sealed by a warm handshake, after Andreas' initiative. During the visits, the second researcher had the chance to gain the child's trust while participating in his everyday interactions (Corsaro, 2003). Moreover, the second researcher was vigilant in ensuring Andreas' informed assent was constantly negotiated and reaffirmed throughout their interactions. For example, Andreas reassured his assent by asking to be photographed with the second researcher during their interactions or by asking him to pay more visits soon. Although the second researcher chose the places of the visits based on avoiding restrictions of Andreas' freedom of movement and often reminded Andreas of his right to withdraw, Andreas never expressed any discomfort or signs of dissent during the visits, verbally or non-verbally (Broadhead & Burt, 2012; Huser et al., 2022; Markström & Halldén, 2009).

The need to define the body of texts that would be included in our study led us to the use of the term "*written production*" for any **depiction** by the subject of our study that met cumulatively the following criteria: first, it either had a permanent character on paper or had a non-permanent character on some other surface but had been recorded/captured by the parents; second, it included one or more symbols that could be recognized as letters or which the writer referred to as letters; third, its content, whether legible or not, could be considered to be a message.

The written productions were classified based on two main criteria: the purpose that the writer wished them to serve and the characteristics of the text. Using the criterion of the writer's desired objective, the written texts were divided into four categories (Cairney & Ruge, 1998): i) Texts for establishing or maintaining relationships, ii) Texts for accessing or displaying information, iii) Texts for pleasure and/or self-expression & iv) Texts for skills development (Table 1).

Table 1

Model for the Categorization of Written Productions Based on the Criterion of the Intended Purpose of Production (based on Cairney & Ruge, 1998)

Category of Written Production	Purpose of Written Production	Examples	Correlated Communication Factor
Category (i)	Establishment/maintenance of relationships	• letters • greetings cards • invitations • notes to someone else	Receiver
Category (ii)	Access to information/presentation of information	• menu • recipes • lists (*for shopping, toys, etc*) • maps • homemade newspapers • scoring	Transmitter or receiver
Category (iii)	Pleasure/self-expression	• practice writing his name • drawing • story writing (*together with drawings*) • personal diary • comics • favourite labels - logos	Transmitter
Category (iv)	Skills development	• exercise books • writing letters of the alphabet (*after being shown by others*)	Code

Similarly, the writings that Andreas produced were placed in categories, ranging from the more primitive emergent writing systems to closer to conventional writing, according to a tool that was constructed based on that proposed by Stellakis (Kondyli & Stellakis, 2005):

A) the Pre-Alphabetic phase, which includes the sub-categories:

A1) repeated linear/circular "scribbling", A2) Pseudo-letters & A3) Random acceptable letters.

B) the Partial Alphabetic phase, which includes the sub-categories:

B1) Initial letter, B2) Syllabic spelling & B3) Some letters of the word.

C) The Full Alphabetic phase and

D) The Consolidated Alphabetic or Partial Orthographic Phase (Table 2). Representative examples of Andreas' productions, following the aforementioned categorization, are listed in the Appendix IV.

Table 2

Model for the Categorization of Written Productions Based on the Criterion of Text Characteristics (based on Stellakis, 2009).

Spelling Phase	Category of Written Production	Text Characteristics	Chief Characteristic Features
Pre-Alphabetic (Absence of alphabetic knowledge)	A1	Linear/circular repeated "scribbling"	a) scribbles, mimicking continuous linear writing b) continuous repetition of the same symbol (usually /O/) or repeated loops - Linearity in the arrangement of symbols (rows across the page), without a distinction between them
	A2	Pseudo-letters	Formal resemblance of the majority of symbols to acceptable letters In some cases integration of other symbols is observed (latin letters, numbers, hearts etc) in the sequences of pseudo-letters - Linearity in the arrangement of the symbols and an attempt at their internal (at the level of 'word') qualitative differentiation
	A3	Random acceptable letters	Random quotation of acceptable letters, either individually or in sequences, which lacks awareness of graphophonemic conventions
Partial Alphabetic (Ability to represent some, but not all, the sounds of the word using letters)	B1	Initial letter	Representation of words using either only their initial letter, or their initial letter followed by other random acceptable letters
	B2	Syllabic spelling	Representation of each syllable of the word with a letter
	B3	Some letters of the word	Representation of the word with some letters that correspond to sounds of it, without an attempt to match each letter to a syllable
Full Alphabetic	C	Full alphabetic or entirely phonetic spelling	Words made up of letters that represent all their sounds but denote an absence of knowledge of the spelling rules
Consolidated Alphabetic or Partial Orthographic	D	Partial or transitional orthographic spelling	Realization of the existence of, and attempt to apply, grammatical (morphological) and etymological/historical rules that, together with phonological rules, determine the conditional/acceptable written form [spelling] of the words

Finally, a series of supplementary data was examined, such as directionality, the existence of elements of multimodality (numbers, arrows, music notes, logos etc), the type of letters (upper-lower cases), the direction of the letters, the use -or not- of letters from the Latin alphabet, the use of punctuation, spaces or other means for leaving a gap between words.

It should be pointed out that the analysis of Andreas' written productions, which was conducted for each of our study's two main questions, was structured on two levels: On the first the data were approached quantitively and on the second a qualitative approach was selected, while the ensuing attempt to combine these approaches creatively was designed to achieve the greatest degree of incisiveness (see the relevant appendices I to III).

Data Analysis

Andreas was born in 2008 and grew up in Greece, in a suburb of the city of Patras, together with his parents and a brother eight years his senior. Greek, Andreas' mother tongue, was used exclusively for the purposes of communication in the family home. His physical and linguistic development can be described as typical one while his family's social background was assessed to be high (Hasan, 1989; Hasan & Cloran, 1990; Williams, 1999), given that his father had been working as a member of the teaching-scientific staff at the University of Patras since before Andreas' birth, and his mother is also a graduate of a Greek higher education institution.

At the same time, the analysis of the unstructured interviews-discussions revealed Andreas' parents' views on literacy, which are clearly oriented towards the ideological or sociocultural model of literacy as opposed to autonomous model (Street, 2003). Their approach casts aside the usual concern for the acquisition of the written symbols of the written code and avoids direct teaching of the code. Instead, it gives priority to the sociocultural dimension of literacy, promoting the development of cognitive skills integrated into the communicative events of everyday life and makes use of authentic, child-initiated and text-centered literacy events. Based on this, and together with their older son who held the same view, they implemented a series of targeted and non-targeted actions and practices (purely indicatively, mention is made of the presence of books and other forms of written texts and writing material in the house, shared/joint book reading, the utilization of the environmental print outside the house and so on) aimed at reinforcing Andreas' ability to develop his literacy skills.

Results

Results Regarding the Text Characteristics

Pre-Alphabetic Phase

The first attempt to handle a writing implement was manifested by Andreas at the age of one year and four months (1;4). Several similar attempts to handle writing/drawing materials followed, and these helped him to become familiar with their use. His first attempt to use symbols was observed at the age of one year and eleven months (1;11) and was an attempt to write his name with circular/repeated "scribbling" after prompting from his family. The first attempt to write on his own initiative came at the age of two years and two months (2;2) and, again, was an attempt to write his own name, once more in this case using symbols of the same category. Reaching the age of two years and ten months (2;10) Andreas wrote something other than his name, on his own initiative for the first time, using circular/repeated writing once again in this case too. This is when the first indications appeared that Andreas understood that writing is characterized by linearity and is arranged horizontally. The awareness of linearity and the horizontal arrangement of writing was consolidated by the age of three years and seven months (3;7), when Andreas was still exclusively using undifferentiated (circular/repeated) writing in his texts. This specific form of writing, a typical sample of which is presented in Figure 1 of Appendix IV, dominated until the age of three years and nine months (3;9), when he wrote his first recognizable, conventional letter (uppercase), which was none other than the first letter of his name, in other words the capital letter -A-. The letters he wrote immediately after his initial letter were the -O-, -X- and -I- of the word "OXI" (meaning "no" in Greek),

which he learnt at the age of three years and eleven months at the nursery school, which he had begun attending approximately one month earlier. The first use of pseudo-letters is observed shortly afterwards, at the age of four years and three months (4;3) (Figure 2 of Appendix IV). A few days later Andreas, on his own initiative, attempted to copy his whole name for the first time, in the conventional way, to sign one of his art productions. For the same reason, and while still four years and three months old (4;3), he makes his first attempt to write his name conventionally, without copying it from somewhere, with the result being far from acceptable. At the age of four years and four months (4;4) the first digits from the decimal arithmetic system make an appearance in Andreas' written texts (the digits -0-, -1- and -9-), and these also constitute the first elements (excluding his drawings) which indicate multimodality in his writings. At the same time Andreas has learnt to write his name in the conventional way, although at this phase he does it from memory (logographically) and not phonologically. From then until the age of four years and eleven months (4;11) Andreas' writings are dominated by his name, written in a logographic way, and random acceptable letters, in other words, letters of a conventional form that do not constitute representations of the sounds or phonemes of the spoken word but are written randomly. Even so, the repertoire of letters that Andreas is able to write up to this time include seventeen (17) capital letters, five (5) of which are vowels (-Α-, -Ε-, -Η-, -Ι-, -Ο-) and twelve (12) of which are consonants (-Ν-, -Δ-, -Ρ-, -Σ-, -Γ-,-Κ-, -Λ-, -Μ-, -Ξ-, -Π-, -Τ-, -Χ-), with the most frequently used being those from his name (-Α-, -Ν-, -Δ-, -Ρ-, -Ε-, -Σ-). Figure 3 of Appendix IV constitutes a typical example of this period, containing the ten capital letters (-Χ-, -Ο-, -Λ-, -Ι-, -Π-, -Α-, -Ν-, -Δ-, -Ρ-, -Σ-). During this time Andreas incorporates symbols from various semiotic systems, such as arrows, crosses, and digits from the decimal arithmetic system in his writings a number of times, using this multimodality to extend his ability to communicate meaning, given that his writing abilities are not at a level to permit him to express all the meanings he wants to express in a more conventional way. In addition, the first indications that Andreas is aware of the particular characteristics of certain types of texts, chiefly those of the letter and the greetings card also make an appearance at this time, confirming that knowledge of genres develops before the acquisition of the skill of conventional writing (Donovan & Smolkin, 2006).

From a quantitative point of view, it is ascertained that until the age of four years and eleven months (4;11), Andreas had created fifty-seven (57) written productions (Appendix I: From A/N: 1 to A/N: 57), in most of which (33) the exclusive element of writing was his name, while in the others his name either co-existed with more writing symbols (scribbles, pseudo-letters or random acceptable letters), or was missing and there were only some of the aforementioned writing symbols. Of these however, only seventeen (17), in other words a percentage of them (29,8%) fulfilled the categorization criteria based on the text characteristics, they included at least one (1) writing symbol excluding his name and were not the result of copying.

Partial Alphabetic Phase

At the age of four years and eleven months (4;11), Andreas produces his first writing utilizing the *alphabetic principle,* which refers to the awareness that certain phonemes are represented by certain letters. Driven by this realization, Andreas uses his –still early– phonological knowledge (phonemic and syllabic division, grapho-phonemic correspondence) to write. Hence, for the following seven (7) months, until the age of five years and six months (5;6), he produces texts in which he applies the alphabetic principle, that every phoneme corresponds to one letter. On the other hand, despite having discovered the mechanism of the *alphabetic principle* and being able to use it to some extent, Andreas still hasn't acquired it completely as he still is unable to represent all the sounds of each utterance that he wants to write in letters. In particular, the analysis of the writings according to text characteristics revealed that in some of them the word was represented only by its initial letter (e.g. Figure 4 of Appendix IV: He writes the initials -Α- for -ΑΓΙΟΣ-, -Γ- for -ΓΕΩΡΓΙΟΣ-, once again -Α- for -ΑΓΙΟΣ- and -Δ- for -ΔΗΜΗΤΡΙΟΣ-), in some one letter was used for the representation of each syllable (e.g. Figure 5 of Appendix IV: He writes -ΣΓΠΜΜΜΜΠΑΔΡΦΛ- instead of the correct -Σ' ΑΓΑΠΩ ΜΑΜΑ ΜΠΑΜΠΑ ΑΔΕΡΦΟΥΛΗ-) and in some others the words were represented by certain letters, which corresponded to speech sounds or phonemes in a manner that revealed no attempt to link each letter to a syllable (e.g. Figure 6 of Appendix IV: He writes -ΣΑΜΙΝΑ-

instead of the correct -ΣΑΛΑΜΙΝΑ-).

In fact, the realization that words are separated into syllables (syllabic awareness) and their multiple handling, understood as analysis and composition, doesn't seem to be especially difficult for him, and certainly not as difficult as the acquisition of phonemic awareness, a finding that is in agreement with the conclusions of similar research (Aidinis & Nunes, 2001; Manolitsis, 2000; Panteliadou, 2001; Sykioti & Kondyli, 2008). In addition, in this period too, Andreas uses elements of multimodality (digits from the decimal arithmetic system, mathematical symbols, "speech bubbles", arrows, logos or even elements that represent those of the Braille semiotic system) in order to transmit meaning on paper.

During this same period, Andreas produced a total of twenty-six (26) writings, the vast majority of which (20 texts or 76.9%) were coded in terms of text characteristics (Appendix I: From A/N: 58 to A/N: 83). In fact, as displayed in Appendix II, a quantitative comparison of the number of texts from this period (it lasted only 7 months, from the age of 4;11 to 5;6) with those from the previous one (from birth to 4;11), as much in terms of absolute values (20 as against 17), as in terms of percentages of the total number of written productions that were ranked based on the criteria of text characteristics (45.5% as against 38.6%), shows that Andreas increased the production of texts that were not restricted to writing his name once he discovered the *alphabetic principle.* This fact seems entirely logical as it expresses his desire, on the one hand, to apply his discovery in order to derive pleasure from his achievement and, on the other, to try out the mechanism so as to become more familiar with it. At the same time, given that Andreas has extended the dynamic meaning-giving that he has at his disposal, it is to be expected that he will want to utilize it to produce messages.

Full Alphabetic Phase

When he turned five and a half (5;6), Andreas arrived at another turning point in the development of his writing skills, the full acquisition of the *alphabetic principle.* For three (3) more months his written productions included words that met the criteria of phonological but not grammatical (morphological) and/or etymological spelling (Gerasis, 2010), that is to say words whose letters represent all the sounds (phonemes or speech sounds) of their spoken form, but at the same time the way they are written reveals ignorance or non-implementation of the grammatical (morphological) and/or etymological rules that determine their orthographically correct writing (e.g. Figure 7 of Appendix IV: He writes -KOKINO MAPΓPITAPI- instead of the correct -KOKKINO MAPΓAPITAPI-). Here too Andreas uses elements of multimodality, such as digits from the decimal arithmetic system and logos, to supplement his writing. In addition, the repertoire of letters that Andreas is able to write up to this particular time period has increased to twenty (20) capital letters, in other words it lacks two capital consonants (-Θ- and -Ψ-) and two capital vowels (-Υ- and -Ω-) and doesn't include any lowercases either.

The number of texts written by Andreas at this period amounted to seven (7), five (5) of which (71.4%) were categorized in terms of text characteristics (Appendix I: From A/N: 84 to A/N: 90). This percentage, as can be observed, is similar to the corresponding percentage for the previous period (76.9%) and both are almost equally and noticeably higher than the corresponding percentage for the first period (29.8%). Consequently, as a result of the quantitative analysis, it appears that Andreas' interest in the production of texts in which the writing isn't restricted to depicting his name and isn't the product of copying remains at roughly the same levels as in those which emerged during the time period that followed the discovery of the *alphabetic principle.*

At the age of five years and nine months old (5;9) Andreas started primary school and the texts composed after that time extend the scope of this paper.

The Acquisition of Writing as a Transitional Process. The examination of the data above provides adequate indications in favor of the view that Andreas' acquisition of writing takes place as a transitional process for him from the lower towards the higher levels of a hierarchical scale of phases, passing in order from the Pre-Alphabetic, through the Partial Alphabetic to the Full Alphabetic phase. Not even one of his writings was found that could be ranked, even just in transitional terms, in the Consolidated Alphabetic or

Partial Orthographic Phase, which is due to the fact Andreas started primary school "early". It should be noted, though, that the phases are not strictly demarcated from each other but, rather, the co-existence of elements for two or more phases is possible in the same time period in the child's life, as from a total of forty-four (44) productions seven (7) were found that simultaneously contained elements from two different phases. In addition, it was ascertained that, in a few cases, written productions that were classified in one of the first two phases included elements from two or more sub-categories from the same phase as during the Pre-Alphabetic Phase five (5) such pieces of writing were noted, while during the Partial Alphabetic Phase three (3) pieces of writing were noted.

Knowledge of More Conventional Rules of Writing. At the same time, the scrutiny of more elements in each of the written productions highlighted further interesting data regarding Andreas' knowledge of the conventions that govern the composition of the written world. The first indicators of awareness of the conventional direction of writing (directionality) at word level appeared shortly before Andreas was four and a half, at the age of four years and five months (4;5), during the logographic writing of his name and before the discovery of the *alphabetic principle.* If one excludes his name, which constitutes a special case and as such received separate investigation, it is observed that already from the first textual productions using the alphabetic principle, at the age of four years and eleven months (4;11), Andreas seems to write his words in the conventional direction (from left to right). Meanwhile, when he is called on to solve the problem of lack of space that prevents completion of the writing of the word on the same line, Andreas demonstrates flexibility by arranging the letters in a different way each time, depending on the space available to him. Hence, we observe the depiction of words or phrases written in an irregular direction (e.g "boustrophedon", from left to right and then right to left and so on), as much between different written productions as, in certain cases, within the same production. At the same time though, we did not come across words or phrases written back-to-front or vertically. From the age of five years and two months (5;2) directionality appears to have become consolidated as it dominates fully in all the written texts that were produced from that time. In addition, it was noted that all the acceptable letters that Andreas produced up until he started primary school were capital, while their direction was, in most cases, the conventional one. However, there were still cases where letters were written in reverse (as in a mirror) or were written on a noticeable slant (usually 90 degrees). Besides letters, digits of the decimal arithmetic system were also written in non-conventional directions in certain cases. The use of gaps or other symbols for the separation between words was not observed, although in some cases the writing of different words on different lines could be perceived as an indication of the awareness of the distinction between them. In addition, no punctuation marks or letters from the Latin alphabet were observed, even though, according to the parents' field notes, Andreas recognised some of them.

Finally, the analysis of the writings that were produced from the discovery of the *alphabetic principle* and on revealed some first indications of the patterns of letters omitted during the writing of words. It appears Andreas omits letters from within words, the vast majority of which are vowels and in fewer cases consonants, while in rare cases he fails to depict the initial and last letter of the word. It should be emphatically noted, however, that the observations regarding the letters that were omitted are not the result of systematic investigation and, as such, do not permit tenable interpretation and, consequently, the extraction of generalizable conclusions.

Results Regarding the Writer's Desired Objective

As emerged from the in-depth analysis of the written productions that were scrutinized, in combination with the results of the quantitative analysis that are presented in Appendix III, Andreas' main motive for learning and using writing was the pursuit of his own entertainment and/or self-expression, which led him to the production of the vast majority of his texts (74 out of 90, or 82.2% of all the written productions). Andreas' writings reflect his interests (history, mythology, children's literature, religion, etc.), which in fact seem to be determined to a significant degree by his social gender: we observe him writing, among other things, comics about superheroes (Superman, Spiderman) and aliens, the names of pirates and pirate ships, names of heroes from the Greek revolution against the Ottoman Empire, battle

cries and so on. Conversely, the reason that appears to have the least influence on Andreas' motivation to spend time writing, is located in the category of practising for learning skills, to which only a very small number of his written productions (2 out of 90, or 2.2%) was assigned. In between the extremes of these two forms of motivation, we find the influence of objectives that are linked to the establishment and/or maintenance of relationships as well as the presentation of information, given that the first were found to have prompted Andreas to write texts that correspond to 10% (9 out of 90) and the second to 5.6% (5 out of 90) of the total number of his written texts (9 and 5 out of 90, respectively) (Appendix III).

Bearing in mind that the goal of entertainment and/or self-expression is oriented, for the main part, towards the writer himself (transmitter), we conclude that Andreas seems to write mainly because he finds the activity of writing interesting and pleasant, first of all for himself. Correspondingly, and since the reasons that are related as much to the establishment/maintenance of relationships as those that concern the presentation of information are oriented towards the reader (receiver) of the texts, it appears that Andreas' very next goal when learning and using writing is communication with his family and his wider social environment (relatives, friends, godmother). Finally, Andreas does not appear to find motivation to write in cases where writing is not linked to some communicative context but is oriented towards learning the code per se. This last conclusion is extracted from the discovery that the only texts with this target that he produced are located in the pre-school classroom and emerged after prompting by the pre-school teacher and not on his own initiative.

Finally, it was noted that the reasons that motivated Andreas to write texts do not appear to change significantly over his pre-school years (Appendix III). Consequently, those motives do not appear to be related to the developmental level of his writing skills, which develop from levels distant from the conventional text characteristics to levels much closer to it.

Conclusion and Discussion

The importance of case studies to the field of emergent literacy lies primarily in the fact that they place children in the position of the pivotal informants for their own language development and, also, they render evident the ways in which children are actively constructing knowledge about literacy from birth (Whitmore et al., 2005). In this particular one, the first to be published for a child who masters the Greek alphabetic system, the analysis of the results showed that the research achieved its main objective as it satisfactorily outlined the process for the acquisition of the writing code by Andreas as this developed over time, depicting all the crucial and significant points over its course and shedding light on all the qualities that characterize his writing during the emergence of his literacy.

At the same time, the study highlighted that Andreas' main motive for spending time writing was for his personal enjoyment, followed by the wish to communicate with his family and his wider social environment, while it became clear that he wasn't motivated at all by activities oriented exclusively towards the learning of the code, disconnected from any communicative context, a conclusion that seems to come in agreement with numerous findings of the existing literature (Rodriguez Leon, 2024). Andreas' motives seem to have had a significant effect on the evolutionary process of his writing skills. It should not be disregarded, though, that the motivating factors differ between children, they are subject to each one's interests and eventually, as happened in Andreas' case, they form distinct pathways to writing development by prompting every child to exert agency and to take control of their own learning process (Rowe & Neitzel, 2010).

Furthermore, the in-depth overview of Andreas' route towards the acquisition of the written code could enable early childhood educators to understand the theoretical approaches of emergent literacy and, at the same time, to gain awareness of what is emerging through literacy events and how this emergence occurs. Instructors with this type of sophisticated knowledge about early writing are more likely to provide high quality early writing instructional opportunities in their classes (Bingham et al., 2022).

It should be noted, however, that the restrictions regarding the length of the article did not permit the presentation of the total of the issues that were investigated during the case study of Andreas, some of

which have been mentioned only briefly. The most important (the significance of learning to write his name, the weightiness of the role of the family, the way in which each written production was examined in depth and analyzed) will be the subjects of future publications and, in conjunction with the content of the present article, will allow the fuller understanding of the methodology used for carrying out the research and, chiefly, the deeper understanding of more aspects of the development of Andreas' writing abilities and factors exercising significant influence on it, through the use of "*thick descriptions*" (Geertz, 1973; Gregory et al., 2004).

Limiting Factors – Proposals for Further Research

Apart from the problem of the generalizability of the conclusions extracted (Rule & John, 2015), there was difficulty in handling the large mass of empirical data, while the fact that Andreas began primary school at a relatively young age also had a limiting effect: on the one hand, it made it impossible to determine the point in time when the –new– change in Andreas' text characteristics occurred, or to examine the text characteristics that he would adopt next and, on the other, it didn't allow us to observe the development of his emergent writing skills over a longer time period, at a time in fact when this development appears to speed up. What's more, we can't ignore the fact that the written productions that made up the research data constitute the majority, but not all of Andreas' written productions as some were lost, some were given away and others were torn up or colored in by Andreas himself and were not legible anymore. Nevertheless, the material that was examined is indicative of the course Andreas followed while learning to write as it includes most of his writings, as well as the most characteristic samples of each time period, and covers all his pre-school years.

Concluding with a reference to proposals for further research, there are a number of possibilities and directions. We would suggest the extension of the study of Andreas to include more expressions of the phenomenon of his literacy such as the development of his reading skills over the same time period and the examination of the importance of play (Christie, 2021) and the use of video games and the computer (Burnett & Merchant, 2013) and, moreover, the conduct of similar research with children from families with different pedagogical beliefs and educational background. In any case, the multifactorial nature and the essentialness of the phenomenon of literacy demand that the study of it be continued.

Declarations

Authors' Declarations

Publisher's Declarations

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Appendix 1: Classification of written productions based on the criteria of text characteristics and the writer's intended objective

A/N	Age (Year;Month)	Category of Text Characteristics	Category of Writer's Intended Purpose
1	1;11	-	iii
2	2;2	-	iii
3	2;10	A1	iii
4	3;0	A1	iii
5	3;0	A1	ii
6	3;1	A1	i
7	3;3	A1	iii
8	3;3	A1	iii
9	3;7	A1	i
10	3;9	-	iii
11	3;11	-	iii
12	3;11	-	iv
13	4;0	-	iii
14	4;0	A3	iii
15	4;0	A1	i
16	4;3	A2	iii
17	4;3	-	iii
18	4;3	-	iii
19	4;4	A3	ii
20	4;4	-	iii
21	4;5	-	iii
22	4;5	-	iii
23	4;5	-	iii
24	4;5	-	iii
25	4;5	A3	i
26	4;5	-	iv
27	4;5	-	iii
28	4;6	A3	iii
29	4;6	-	iii
30	4;6	-	iii
31	4;7	-	iii
32	4;7	-	i
33	4;7	-	iii
34	4;7	-	iii
35	4;7	A3	iii
36	4;8	-	iii
37	4;8	-	iii
38	4;8	-	iii
39	4;8	-	iii
40	4;8	-	iii
41	4;9	-	iii
42	4;10	-	iii
43	4;10	-	iii
44	4;10	-	iii
45	4;10	-	iii
46	4;10	-	iii
47	4;11	-	iii
48	4;11	A3	iii
49	4;11	A3	iii
50	4;11	A3	iii
51	4;11	B1	ii
52	4;11	-	iii
53	4;11	-	iii
54	4;11	-	iii
55	4;11	-	iii
56	4;11	-	iii

57	4;11	-	iii
58	4;11	B3	iii
59	5;0	B3	iii
60	5;0	-	i
61	5;0	B3	iii
62	5;1	B2	iii
63	5;1	B1	iii
64	5;1	B2	iii
65	5;1	B3	iii
66	5;1	B3	i
67	5;1	B2	iii
68	5;2	B3	ii
69	5;2	B1	ii
70	5;2	-	iii
71	5;2	B2	i
72	5;2	B3	iii
73	5;2	B2	iii
74	5;4	-	iii
75	5;4	B2	iii
76	5;4	-	iii
77	5;5	C	iii
78	5;5	B2	iii
79	5;5	B2	iii
80	5;6	B3	iii
81	5;6	B3	iii
82	5;6	B3	iii
83	5;6	-	iii
84	5;6	C	iii
85	5;7	-	iii
86	5;8	C	i
87	5;9	C	iii
88	5;9	C	iii
89	5;9	C	iii
90	5;9	-	iii

*The highlighted lines (A/N: 58 & 84) indicate the points where a change of phase occurs.

Appendix 2: Written productions (not classified based on any criterion) and written productions that were classified based on the criterion of text characteristics, per phase

Phase	Number of Written Productions	Number of Written Productions (Classified Based On Text Characteristics)	Percentage of Written Productions (Classified Based On Text Characteristics) On Written Productions, Per Phase	Percentage of Written Productions (Classified Based On Text Characteristics) On Total Number Of Written Productions (Classified Based On Text Characteristics)
A	57	17	29,8% (17/57)	38,6% (17/44)
B	26	20	76,9% (20/26)	45,5% (20/44)
C	7	5	71,4% (5/7)	11,4% (5/44)
D	-	-	-	-
UNCLASSIFIED WRITTEN PRODUCTIONS	-	2	-	4,5% (2/44)
TOTAL NUMBER	90	44	-	-

Appendix 3: Number of written productions by category of writer's objective, in relation to the phases that cover the time period during which they were produced and percentage of these in each phase

		Category of Writer's Objective				
		i	ii	iii	iv	Total Number (Per Phase)
Phase	A	5 (8,8%)	3 (5,3%)	47 (82,4%)	2 (3,5%)	57 (100%)
	B	3 (11,5%)	2 (7,7%)	21 (80,8%)	0	26 (100%)
	C	1 (14,3%)	0	6 (85,7%)	0	7 (100%)
	D	-	-	-	-	-
Total Number (Per Category of Writer's Objective)		9 (10%)	5 (5,6%)	74 (82,2%)	2 (2,2%)	90 (100%)

Appendix 4: Samples of productions (classified on the criteria of text characteristics)
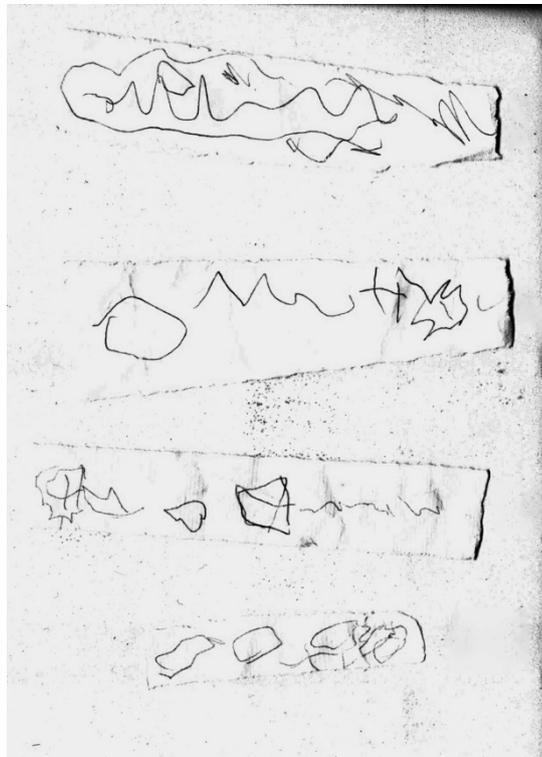
Figure 1: Sample from the Pre-Alphabetic Phase (Category A1: Linear/circular repeated "scribbling") [A/N written production: 15]
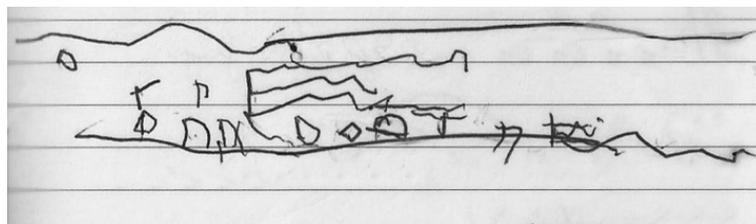
Figure 2: Sample from the Pre-Alphabetic Phase (Category A2: Pseudo-letters) [A/N written production: 16]

Figure 3: Sample from the Pre-Alphabetic Phase (Category A3: Random acceptable letters) [A/N written production: 25]

Figure 4: Sample from the Partial Alphabetic Phase (Category B1: Initial letter) [A/N written production: 63]

Figure 5: Sample from the Partial Alphabetic Phase (Category B2: Syllabic spelling) [A/N written production: 71]

Figure 6: Sample from the Partial Alphabetic Phase (Category B3: Some letters of the word) [A/N written production: 61]

Figure 7: Sample from the Full Alphabetic Phase (Category C) [A/N written production: 87]

Exploring Hong Kong student teachers' perspectives on children's play and learning

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Abstract: The concepts of *learning through play and a play-based curriculum* have gained widespread recognition and popularity in the 21st century. However, in Hong Kong (HK), parents, teachers, and other stakeholders still exhibit limited confidence and capacity in applying these notions to the field of early childhood education (ECE). Moreover, how ECE student teachers perceive and understand these concepts remains largely unknown. To address these issues, this research adopted the ecological system theory as a theoretical framework to 1) investigate HK ECE student teachers' views on implementing a play-based curriculum and 2) understand the associated difficulties they encounter in the HK context. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, including a Play Belief Survey and a qualitative focus group interview. In total, 200 survey responses and 100 minutes of interview data were collected from a group of ECE student teachers from teacher education institutes in HK. The findings revealed a salient contradiction and concern among student teachers, who expressed positive beliefs about a play-based curriculum yet faced insufficient support in terms of its practical implementation in local ECE settings. This finding underscores the need to closely scrutinise a play-based curriculum in terms of the uniqueness of the HK ECE context. In addition, the implications of this research for the wider Asia-Pacific region are discussed.
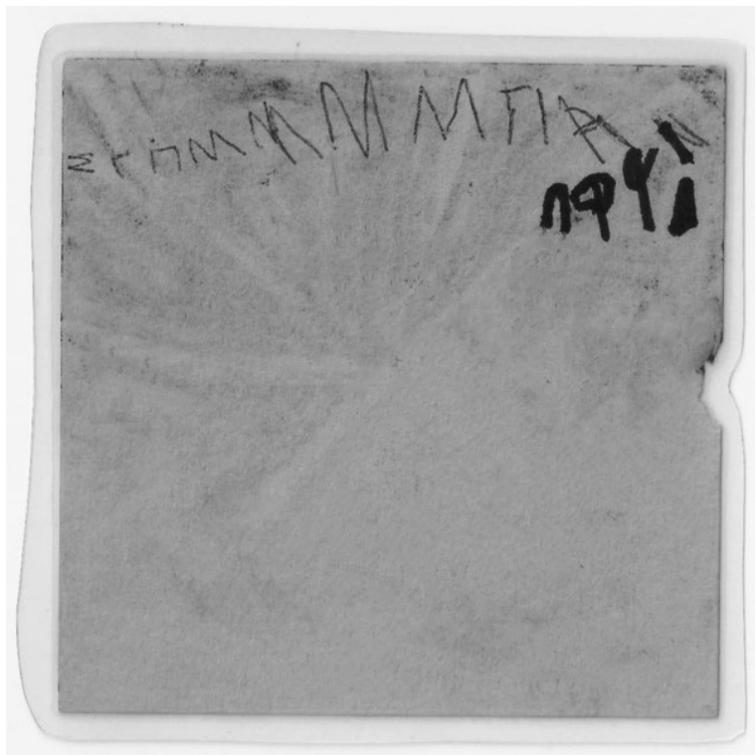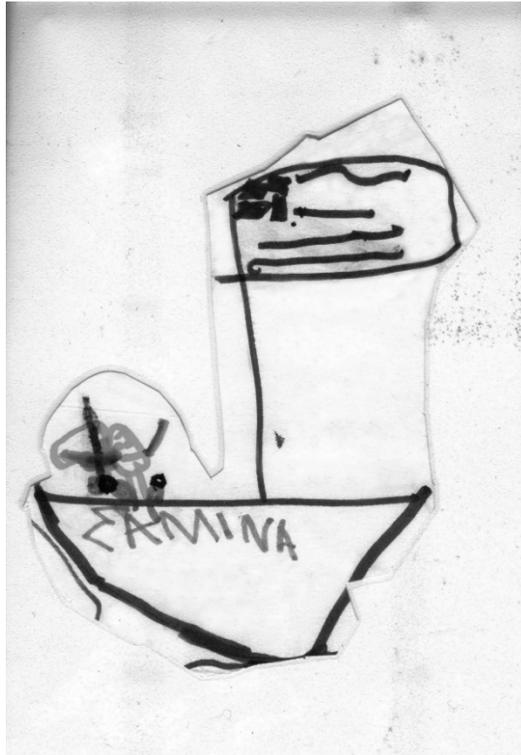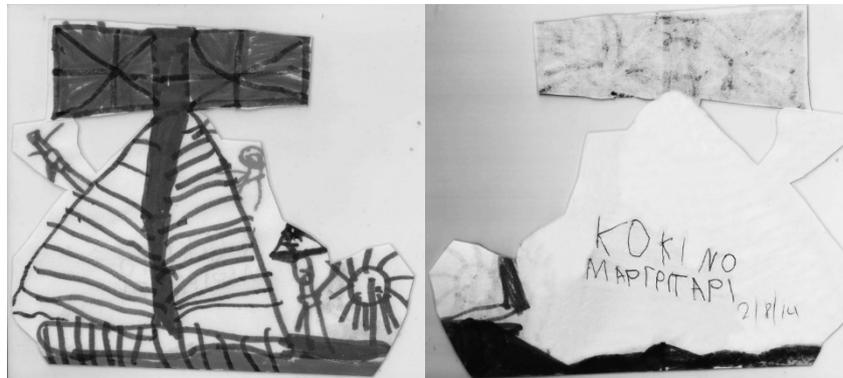
Introduction

The significant role of play in early childhood education (ECE) is acknowledged globally. While play has been viewed as the *business of childhood* or a *way of learning*, it remains a matter of discussion as to whether stakeholders can utilise it to optimise children's early development as well as academic learning. In Hong Kong (HK), where the educational system is highly academic and examination-oriented, the Education Bureau values and promotes a play-based curriculum in kindergartens (i.e., ECE settings for children aged 3 to 6 years). The Kindergarten Curriculum Guide (Curriculum Development Council, 2017) particularly highlights the value of *learning through play* for children's holistic development (e.g., Karuppiah, 2020; Rodriguez-Meehan, 2020; Siu & Keung, 2022). However, research has indicated that factors such as kindergarten teachers' insufficient knowledge and sometimes misinformed views about play-based learning hinder the successful implementation of a play-based curriculum (Fung, 2007; Fung & Cheng, 2011; Fung & Lam, 2008). Therefore, it is important to understand how pre- and in-service ECE professionals perceive a play-based curriculum, as teachers' beliefs directly influence their decision-making and curricular practice. However, prior research has predominantly focused on the views of parents and in-service teachers regarding a play-based curriculum for children's academic learning, leaving pre-service kindergarten teachers' perceptions of teaching children academic knowledge through play largely unexplored. This study aims to address this knowledge gap.

International Perspectives on Children's Play and Academic Learning

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that every child has the

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right to play (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 1989). In recent decades, scholars around the globe have generated ample evidence indicating that play, as a learning vehicle for learning, is shaped by distinct pedagogical, sociocultural, and contextual factors (Rogers, 2010).

In the United Kingdom (UK), Scott-McKie and Campbell's (2019) study examined a capabilities approach in Scotland. The study revealed that when children's play is voluntary and flexible, with a focus on the means rather than the ends, it can facilitate children's academic learning. More importantly, the authors demonstraated that play supports the early development of autonomy, affiliation, and practical reasoning. Similarly, the studies of McNair et al. (2019) and Molinari et al. (2017) underscored the developmental benefits and power of children's self-directed play within self-chosen play spaces.

At the government level, the Scottish government has incorporated play into its early education policymaking. Policymakers have launched relevant policies (e.g., the National Play Strategy for Scotland) aiming to promote the importance of play in strengthening children's holistic growth, rather than focusing on children's academic achievements alone. The Scottish government has also reinforced the significance of children's play by embedding the commitment to play stipulated in the UNCRC into a Scottish law of 2021 (Scottish Government, 2019). This can be seen as a national response to the global discourse of play-based pedagogies in ECE.

In addition to the UK, Australia highly values play-based learning for children's holistic development. Since 2010, a series of educational reforms has advocated the inclusion of play-based pedagogies in ECE settings. The implementation of the National Quality Standard (NQS) has also led to an overall pedagogical shift from a didactic and structured approach to a more child-centred approach (Jay & Knaus, 2018). As a result, ECE practitioners and educators across Australia have begun placing more value on play as a fundamental right of children, with the implication that ECE programmes should be based on developmental appropriateness and children's interests and delivered through play-based pedagogies (Hesterman & Targowska, 2020; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017).

Aside from Western societies, play-based learning has gained substantial popularity in Asian ECE contexts. In Malaysia, the National Preschool Standard Curriculum emphasises play-based learning as one of the key endeavours for fostering children's critical-thinking, creativity, problem-solving, and leadership skills (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2017). The Malaysian government believes that children should have the opportunity to learn in a safe, joyful, and meaningful environment through their most natural behaviours and intuitions. Therefore, ECE settings in Malaysia are encouraged to provide children with three sessions of free-play time each week (20 minutes per session). However, Aquino et al. (2017) found that despite the government's promotion of play-based learning, Malaysian ECE teachers still face challenges associated with insufficient teaching materials and parents' results-oriented expectations.

In China, educational reforms since 2010 have also advocated play-based learning on a nationwide scale, but the effectiveness of promoting a play-based curriculum in ECE settings has met many practical challenges. For example, Wang and Lam's (2017) research found that while Chinese ECE teachers demonstrated positive beliefs towards play-based learning for facilitating children's development, their teaching practice did not mirror their stated beliefs. Instead, teachers tended to adopt authoritarian roles, learning content, and activities, as well as strictly following the prescribed curriculum.

Regarding this belief–practice gap in Asian contexts, Fung and Cheng (2011) argued that in addition to traditional teacher beliefs, the results-oriented culture and school and parental factors have contributed to the various difficulties in implementing play-based learning. Although the value of play for children's development has been widely accepted, it appears that many practitioners are reluctant or unable to translate their beliefs into classroom practices. Therefore, it is necessary for ECE stakeholders to facilitate children's play in a strategic and coherent manner (McKendrick, 2019a; 2019b).

As discussed above, play-based learning is perceived and practised differently in different cultures and countries. However, there remains a lack of research conducted in HK, a unique Asian society, regarding how play-based learning is perceived by local ECE stakeholders. Therefore, this study aims to

explore pre-service teachers' beliefs about play-based learning in the HK ECE context.

ECE Teachers' Beliefs About Playing and Learning

Bubikova-Moan et al.'s (2019) systematic review indicated that ECE in-service teachers hold varying perspectives regarding the conceptual compatibility between play and learning for children's development. On the one hand, some ECE teachers express how play and learning are inherently linked, with learning being a product of play. On the other hand, some ECE teachers see the combination of play and learning as forming an *integrated lesson* (Moon & Reifel, 2008). In Fesseha and Pyle's (2016) study, kindergarten teachers demonstrated positive perspectives regarding children's play-based learning, yet more than half of the participants expressed that there is a complete separation between the enactment of play and children's learning in the ECE setting.

According to Baker (2014), there is a gap and disconnection between the positive beliefs of student teachers and their authentic practices in kindergarten settings. Moreover, Cheng (2012) investigated the contradictory perspectives between pre-service teachers' play beliefs acquired in teacher training programmes and the practical situations that they experienced in their practice. This research indicated that while pre-service teachers held positive beliefs about play as the most desirable learning mode for children's holistic development, the constraints of reality, such as the results-oriented education system and Chinese parents' traditional perspectives on play, could be obstacles to enacting these beliefs in practice.

Furthermore, Cheng (2012) pointed out that while student teachers held positive beliefs regarding children's play, their pedagogical knowledge of play-based learning gained from teacher training programmes was superficial and disconnected from practice, resulting in teachers' low self-efficacy in overcoming the practical challenges. Moreover, Keung and Fung (2020) suggested that the teaching environment is a crucial factor affecting the interactions among teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), pedagogical perceptions, and authentic practices, which interact to shape teachers' curricular practices and create promising learning experiences.

In sum, prior research has predominantly examined parents' and in-service teachers' perspectives on play and pedagogy in the field of ECE (e.g., Pyle et al., 2018; Vogt et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2018. By comparison, pre-service teachers' beliefs about implementing play-based learning have remained largely unaddressed, particularly in Asian contexts.

A Play-Based Curriculum in the HK ECE Context

In the HK higher education sector, the notion of globalisation has been a key element over the last decade as it has attempted to maintain its world-class status (Fok, 2007). As Li and Chen (2023) stated, the globalisation of the early childhood curriculum (ECC) is not a recent occurrence, as there have been various instances in which progressive curriculum models from the West have become popularised in the East. Nevertheless, the more recent phase of globalisation of the ECC has significantly influenced Asian societies in their respective ECC reforms, leading them to embrace Western discourses, values, and ideologies. Such influences are evident in the higher education sector, and many HK educational institutions offering ECE programmes have incorporated play-based pedagogies in pre-service teacher training programmes. For example, the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) (2023) has incorporated a three-unit course related to children's play-based learning in its curriculum framework for the undergraduate ECE programme. Meanwhile, the Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK) has designed relevant programmes to provide pre-service teachers with a comprehensive understanding of early childhood development and education that emphasises children's play-based learning (Department of Early Childhood Education, 2023). These programme designs indicate that HK pre-service ECE teachers are expected to acquire relevant knowledge and skills regarding play-based pedagogies. However, there is a paucity of research exploring the challenges faced by pre-service teachers when bringing their beliefs about play-based learning to ECE settings.

In the HK ECE sector, the concept of learning through play has been adopted and enunciated as a

key principle since 1986 (Hong Kong Government, 1986). In 2017, the HK Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide (Curriculum Development Council, 2017) reiterated the beneficial and significant role of play for children's holistic development. The Education Bureau encourages kindergartens to adopt play-based pedagogies and requires all relevant parties to provide children with opportunities and desirable environments to learn through play. These educational reforms have brought about a paradigm shift for ECE practitioners, contributing to the many challenges they face (Yin et al., 2021). Therefore, it is important to empirically investigate whether and how this shift is reflected in HK pre-service ECE teachers' beliefs and practices.

Theoretical Framework

To explore student teachers' perspectives on learning through play in the context of HK kindergartens, we adopted Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological system theory (EST) as the theoretical framework for this study. According to EST, the reciprocal interactions between individuals and their environments shape individuals' development. This theory proposes that an individual's development is influenced by a layered and interconnected system that includes the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem. EST emphasises the interplay among personal factors, behaviours, and the surrounding environment.

In applying EST to the present study, the microsystem explains how student teachers' play perspectives are developed and influenced through their immediate classroom environment, which includes their interactions with peers, mentors, and the instructional methods they learnt in training programmes. The mesosystem highlights the intricate connections between student teachers' educational settings and their perspectives on children's play-based learning. The exosystem examines the external factors that create certain constraints for teachers, such as parental and community expectations regarding children's play and learning, educational policies, and the structural resources available in kindergartens. Finally, the macrosystem considers how the predominant ideologies, cultural values, and beliefs about children's play and academic learning influence the acceptance of a play-based curriculum. Therefore, by adopting EST, this study aims to comprehensively elucidate the intricate network of factors that influence student teachers' perspectives and practices regarding the implementation of children's play-based learning in HK kindergartens.

The Present Study

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, it aims to explore HK student teachers' perceptions of a play-based curriculum for children's academic learning. Second, it seeks to explore the constraints and challenges that ECE students encounter when implementing a play-based curriculum to nurture children's academic learning in HK kindergartens. Specifically, this study is led by two research questions (RQs):

RQ1) What are HK pre-service kindergarten teachers' perspectives on adopting a play-based curriculum to facilitate children's academic learning?

RQ2) What are HK pre-service teachers' perceived constraints and challenges in implementing a play-based curriculum in HK kindergartens?

Method

Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design to enable comprehensive data triangulation (Ivankova et al., 2005; Klassen et al., 2012). The research procedure consisted of two phases. In the first phase, to address RQ1, we adopted a quantitative survey – the Play Belief Survey (PBS) – to specifically collect student teachers' perspectives on implementing a play-based curriculum to facilitate children's academic learning. An online quantitative survey was adopted, as it was easily accessible, allowing the researchers to distribute it to a large number of potential participants in order to ensure an adequate level of generalisability of the findings (Fowler Jr, 2013). In the second phase, to

address RQ2, we selected student teachers from the survey sample for participation in a focus group interview, with the aim of acquiring qualitative data to glean deeper insights into their play beliefs and understand their perceived constraints and challenges when implementing a play-based curriculum in HK kindergartens. The focus group interview was conducted as a supplement to support the survey data, allowing the researchers to understand within a conversational setting how the teachers' ideas, positions, and challenges regarding children's play-based learning were implemented (Rabiee, 2004).

Participants

Purposive sampling was adopted in this study, which took place during the outbreak of COVID-19, specifically November–December 2022. According to Palinkas et al. (2015) and Patton (2014), purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research as a technique to identify and select potential individuals or groups of interested participants who are knowledgeable about certain topics and/or have relevant experiences related to the phenomenon of interest. It emphasises the availability and willingness of participants and their ability to contribute and communicate their relevant experiences and opinions (Bernard, 2018; Spradley, 2016).

Therefore, to recruit the 200 participants for the quantitative survey phase, we sent the survey in Google Forms to the instructors of relevant teacher education institutions (see the Play Belief Survey section below for details). We specifically targeted students majoring in ECE, inviting them to participate and provide their perspectives on implementing a play-based curriculum for children's academic learning. Participants who met the eligibility criteria were individuals who were pre-service teachers, were currently enrolled in an ECE programme at a recognised higher educational institute in HK, had studied play-based pedagogies or relevant subjects, and had successfully completed a teaching practicum. In the qualitative phase, six participants were selected from the survey sample based on the play belief scores they obtained in the survey (see the Focus Group Interview section below for details). As it was the peak season of the academic semester, only one focus group with six participants was conducted. The entire interview lasted for 100 minutes. Five participants completed the entire interview, and one participant left after one hour of the interview due to a teaching commitment.

Data Collection

Play Belief Survey (PBS)

The PBS used in this study was adapted from the work of Clevenger (2016), Yin et al. (2011), and Head Start (2006). The first section of the survey collected demographic information from the participants (e.g., gender, age, academic qualifications, years of teaching, and the age group of the children taught). The second section aimed to explore teachers' perspectives on utilising play-based approaches in their teaching. It contained 11 items in total: seven items drawn from Clevenger's (2016) work and four items drawn from Yin et al. 's work (2011). The third section of the survey consisted of eight items drawn from Head Start (2006), which examined teachers' perspectives on using play-based approaches to facilitate children's academic learning. All 19 items from both Section 1 and Section 2 were rated using a Likert scale ranging from "Not important" (1) to "Very important" (4) or "Strongly disagree" (1) to "Strongly agree" (4).

Concerning the validity and reliability, multiple steps were taken to ensure the soundness of the instruments. The internal consistency of the adopted instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. For the current study, Cronbach's alpha reached an acceptable level of 0.77, indicating good internal consistency for the survey. This suggested that the items within the scale were reliably measuring the intended construct.

Focus Group Interview

A focus group was conducted to collect more in-depth qualitative data about the student teachers' play beliefs and to explore their perceived constraints and challenges when implementing a play-based curriculum in HK kindergartens. Six participants who obtained the highest differences in score between the play belief items and the behavioural intention items in the survey were selected

to take part in the interview. An interview protocol was developed based on a descriptive analysis of the participants' survey results and findings from the existing literature (e.g., Keung & Cheung, 2019). Before conducting the interview, the protocol draft was reviewed by the experts in ECE. During the interview, the researcher prompted questions related to the participants' survey results. Based on the interview protocol, the participants were asked about their understanding of play, their observations of children's play experiences in kindergarten classroom settings, the perceived benefits and disadvantages of play, and the challenges, constraints, and anticipated obstacles when implementing play-based learning in the kindergarten setting in HK. The interview was conducted in Cantonese via Zoom and lasted for 100 minutes. It was audio recorded, and a transcript was generated.

Data Analysis

For the quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics were calculated, including means, modes, medians, and standard deviations of the survey items. These descriptive data served as a foundation, providing the researchers with an overview of the student teachers' perceived play beliefs and their views on children's academic learning. The coding software NVivo was used to determine the initial codes for the survey items. The initial codes were re-examined and compared with one another, creating new higher-order codes in response to RQ1 (what are HK pre-service kindergarten teachers' perspectives on adopting a play-based curriculum to facilitate children's academic learning?). Any disagreements that occurred during the coding process were resolved by holding meetings between the first author and the second author, who is an expert in the field of ECE studies.

Based on the coding analysis of the survey items, the HK pre-service kindergarten teachers' perspectives on play-based pedagogy for children's academic learning were grouped into three themes: 1) pre-service teachers' play beliefs (PB), 2) pre-service teachers' practical knowledge (PK), and 3) pre-service teachers' behavioural intentions (BI). The categorisation of the survey items was informed by the existing literature aiming to investigate ECE teachers' beliefs regarding children's play-based learning and play pedagogy (e.g., Bennett et al., 1997; Clevenger, 2016; Jung et al., 2016).

Survey items that highlighted student teachers' beliefs and attitudes regarding the importance of play for children's learning were grouped in the PB category. For example, items such as PB1 and PB9 were categorised here because they directly addressed the participants' beliefs about the role of play for children's academic development. Items in the PK category underscored the student teachers' understanding of the effective implementation and incorporation of play into their teaching practices. Items such as PK1 and PK2 were included because they reflected the teachers' practical implementation of a play-based pedagogy in the classroom settings. Finally, items in the BI category captured the student teachers' willingness and intention to promote and implement a play-based pedagogy in their authentic educational settings. For instance, items BI1, BI3, and BI4 directly demonstrated the participants' proactive stances towards the notion of incorporating play into their instructional practices.

For the qualitative analysis, a verbal transcript was created corresponding to the audio recording of the focus group interview. Similar to the quantitative analysis process, the qualitative data drawn from the interview was openly coded by the first author through NVivo to determine the initial codes. The initial codes of the interview data were re-examined and compared with one another, creating new higher-order codes in response to RQ2 (i.e., what are HK pre-service teachers' perceived challenges and constraints in implementing a play-based curriculum in HK kindergartens?).

Both the first and second authors discussed the coding analysis to ensure that the codes effectively reflected the interview data. Based on the coding analysis of the interview, the HK pre-service kindergarten teachers' perceived challenges and constraints in implementing a play-based curriculum in HK kindergartens were primarily structural obstacles, such as the academically packed kindergarten curriculum, time constraints, inadequate classroom resources, children's aggressive behaviours, and the predominant parental beliefs. These categorisations were drawn based on the frameworks of prior research endeavours that explored the incorporation of play-based pedagogies for children's academic development as well as systemic instructional challenges in kindergarten classrooms (e.g., Adcock & Patton, 2001; Lam,

2018).

The coding of interview responses was aligned with the previously identified themes from the quantitative analysis, which further enriched the understanding of the survey findings. For instance, the structural obstacles that were identified in the qualitative data – the academically packed kindergarten curriculum and time constraints – were connected to the quantitative findings regarding the pre-service teachers' PB and PK. This complementary approach enhanced the validity of the results and allowed for a more comprehensive perspective on the challenges faced by pre-service teachers (e.g., Clevenger, 2016; Lam, 2018).

Findings

In response to RQ1 concerning the pre-service ECE teachers' play beliefs, as Table 1 demonstrates, a high proportion of the participants held positive beliefs about utilising play-based approaches to develop children's academic learning. They believed that play skills are significant, as they have a positive influence on children's holistic development (problem-solving skills, academic skills, etc.). For the items "how important is play in the kindergarten classroom?" and "I do not think children learn important skills by play," the mean scores were 3.77 and 1.92 out of 4, which showed that a sizeable group of respondents agreed that it is important that play should be adopted in the kindergarten setting and that children's play helps children acquire significant developmental skills that contribute to their academic learning. Moreover, the respondents expressed that it is crucial for parents to spend time playing with their children. For the items "I do not think it is important for parents to play with their children" and "play does not help children learn academic skills," the mean scores were just 1.48 and 1.83, respectively.

Table 1
Theme 1 – Items on Collecting Pre-Service Teachers' Play Beliefs (PB)

Items	Mean	Mode	Median	Standard Deviation
PB1). How important is play in the kindergarten classroom?	3.77	4	4	0.52
PB2). It is ____ for kindergarten children to play rather than to complete activities such as workbooks, worksheets, and similar activities during the school day.	3.11	3	3	0.38
PB3). It is ___ for kindergarten children to complete activities such as workbooks, worksheets, and similar activities rather than to play during the day.	2.91	3	3	0.53
PB4). I do not think children learn important skills by playing.	1.92	2	2	0.43
PB5). Reading to children is more worthwhile than playing with them.	2.83	3	3	0.45
PB6). Play does not influence children's ability to solve problems.	1.9	2	2	0.38
PB7). It is ___ for children to have good academic skills rather than to play well with others.	3.14	3	3	0.87
PB8). I do not think it is important for parents to play with their children.	1.48	1	1	0.53
PB9). Play does not help children learn academic skills.	1.83	2	2	0.45

Moreover, the qualitative data drawn from the focus group interview supported the qualitative results of the survey, revealing that the participants held strong beliefs about utilising play as a pedagogic tool for facilitating children's holistic development and valued it as an effective means to introduce new academic concepts to children. When the six participants responded to a question on how to integrate play in kindergarten, three commented that they designed play materials and games in every corner of the classroom according to the learning theme of the month. The purpose was to encourage children's free play with the resources. The participants also indicated that through their practicum, they realised that when children are allowed to play freely, they are engaged and are likely to gain knowledge about the new learning content. The following excerpts demonstrated this point:

> In my practicum, teachers in the school will change the classroom setting according to their learning themes. They will make relevant play materials and sometimes include ready-made toys in the classroom for children to play with, so children can do activities that are related to the learning themes during playtime. This is different from having a lesson with the teacher. (Pre-service teacher 1; Tina)

I also agree with what Tina just said, as I think it is important to provide children with a pleasant and playful environment to boost their interest about new concepts that they need to learn. (Pre-service teacher 2; Santy)

Exactly! As I am a part-time play-group teacher, I also realise that if we give children relevant play materials to play with before the lesson, whether in a free-play manner or a guided-play manner, they are more able to learn relevant keywords and ideas during the lesson even if that is the first time they learn the theme. That is quite surprising to me. (Pre-service teacher 3; Crystal)

Table 2 presents how the pre-service ECE teachers demonstrated a relatively high level of practical knowledge about children's play. They scored 3.83, 3.51, and 3.18 out of 4, respectively, when asked to rate the level of importance of providing diverse play materials to support children's play, planning sufficient time for play, and ensuring extended outdoor play for kindergarten children to support their developmental needs. However, the results also revealed that even though the respondents held positive play beliefs, a notable number of them agreed that they would not prioritise play in their classrooms in the future. The item asking whether "playtime is a priority in my classroom" received a mean score of just 2.75 out of 4, a noticeable difference when compared to the previous items.

Table 2

Theme 2 – Items on Collecting Pre-Service Teachers' Practical Knowledge (PK)

Items	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation
PK1). It is ___ for kindergarten teachers to provide a variety of materials to support children's play.	3.83	4	4	0.45
PK2). It is ____ for kindergarten teachers to plan extended periods of time for children to engage in play.	3.51	4	4	0.55
PK3). It is ____ that kindergarten children have extended periods of outdoor play.	3.18	3	3	0.44
PK4). I would rather read to children than play together with them.	1.99	2	2	0.35
PK5). Playtime is a priority in my classroom.	2.75	3	3	0.60

In the focus group, when the participants were asked if they had encountered any challenges when incorporating play in the kindergarten curriculum, they expressed that it was challenging to strike a balance between allowing children's play and fulfilling parents' expectations. Even though all the participants understood the benefits of play for children's holistic development, they still needed to cater for parents' high expectations regarding their children's academic learning. This being the case, the participants expressed that it was sometimes necessary to include some didactic content in their teaching in order to equip children with the knowledge and skills for future learning. Moreover, they indicated that parents with high expectations concerning their children's academic learning were often impatient regarding their children's gradual improvement, as they preferred to witness their children's immediate improvement through tangible tasks. Such predominant parental beliefs greatly hindered the teachers' confidence in turning their play beliefs into authentic classroom practices:

I wholeheartedly agree that play is good for children's development, no matter whether for their daily growth or academic learning, and I can tell that play is important to children too. But we are living and studying in HK, such a results-driven city, where it is normal for parents to have such high expectations of their children, so I think it is understandable that some schools are still integrating didactic and traditional teaching methods and content in their curriculum. (Pre-service teacher 4; May)

I think we can all relate when you talk about how hard it is to balance children's play and parents' expectations. To me, I even consider it the biggest challenge for teachers to implement play, as many parents often set high hopes for their children's academic success and always think that children should win from the starting line. Regarding this, I admit that play is good for children' holistic development, but this is on the premise that the parents are patient enough to wait for their children's gradual improvement rather than believing that children should manifest significant improvement once they are involved in play. (Pre-service teacher 5; Jennifer)

Indeed, parents who have high expectations for children's academic learning are often impatient to understand how children can be improved through the play process, while they still believe that using tangible tasks like worksheets and homework is the ultimate means to see children's improvement. Such beliefs hinder teachers from putting their play beliefs into practice in the classroom, despite our recognition of the role of play for children. (Pre-service teacher 3; Crystal)

Theme 3 identifies the pre-service kindergarten teachers' behavioural intentions. In comparison to the responses shown in Tables 1 and 2, Table 3 reveals that the pre-service teachers were less confident in putting play-based pedagogy into practice. This was evident in their responses to items BI1, BI2, BI3, and BI4, for which the participants received mean scores of just 2.25, 2.69, 2.28, and 2.95 out of 4, respectively.

Table 3

Theme 3 – Items on Collecting Pre-Service Teachers' Behavioural İntentions (BI)

Items	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation
BI1). I actively and openly support the implementation of play in this school.	2.25	2	2	0.65
BI2). I agree with the idea of implementing play in this school.	2.69	3	3	0.63
BI3). I will propose the implementation of play in my behaviour and communication with other teachers.	2.28	2	2	0.59
BI4). I will tell my colleagues that play can be feasibly implemented in this school.	2.95	3	3	0.41

The data drawn from the focus group interview lent support to the above-mentioned findings regarding the pre-service teachers' behavioural intentions. For instance, when asked to describe how confident they were in their ability to facilitate children's learning through play, the participants stated that parents do not prefer teachers to use play and toys in the classroom. Moreover, most participants reckoned that meeting parents' expectations increased their confidence in teaching. They went on to comment that as novice ECE teachers, they usually did not feel confident enough to challenge parents' expectations and desires. Moreover, they expressed their apprehension about children manifesting only minimal but not obvious improvements through play. This hindered their willingness to implement play in the classroom, as it made it difficult for them to convincingly demonstrate to parents and senior teachers the effectiveness of play on children's learning. This was evident in the following teachers' comments:

> To be honest, we are all fresh to the kindergarten; it is quite luxurious for us to carry out our beliefs in the classroom, irrespective of how strong our beliefs are. I would say my main goal is to meet parents' expectations, in order to gain parents' trust. (Pre-service teacher 5; Jennifer)

> As a novice teacher, I often feel like I'm walking a tightrope. I want to communicate to parents and senior teachers that play can be effectively used, but I worry that they won't see its value and outcomes. So, I find myself proposing more structured activities instead. (Pre-service teacher 2; Santy)

> I want to support the implementation of play, but no matter how positive my play belief is, I can honestly say that I will prioritise first aligning myself with what parents expect. I think unless I can evidently show them how play can lead to children's learning outcomes, I don't have the confidence to take the initiative to promote play as a tool for children's academic learning. As it is hard to guarantee. (Pre-service teacher 6; Connie)

ECE Pre-Service Teachers' Perceived Challenges and Constraints

In response to RQ2, which aimed to explore the pre-service teachers' perceived constraints and challenges in implementing a play-based curriculum in HK kindergartens, five themes were identified in the analysis of the qualitative data. These five themes were regarded as structural constraints, namely the kindergarten curriculum, time constraints, limited classroom resources, children's behaviours, and parental beliefs.

Structural Constraints

Kindergarten Curriculum. The participants indicated that the major challenge of utilising a play-based pedagogy for children's development was the kindergarten curriculum. The majority of HK kindergartens follow a half-day schedule with three hours of school time and provide classes for upper-kindergarten, lower-kindergarten, and nursery levels, with only a few kindergartens offering full-day classes. Moreover, within the regular half day of school, kindergarten teachers are expected to nurture children's holistic development in five domains: ethics, intellect, physique, social skills, and aesthetics (Education Bureau, 2023). The intense school curriculum and packed daily schedules in kindergartens meant that it was stressful for all the participants to allocate a designated time slot for children to engage in play activities on regular school days. Instead, the school simply extended the daily gross motor activity

time to include children's free play. Additionally, the participants mentioned that insufficient classroom resources acted as another major obstacle:

> During my practicum, I observed that for most of the school day, children don't really have a designated period of playtime or free-play time. Rather, the teacher will add a short period of time, like around 15 minutes, for children to play freely after the gross motor activity. (Pre-service teacher 1; Tina)

> At my internship kindergarten, the teachers said there was large-scale funding allocated to purchasing those virtual materials for developing children's STEM education. But the school did not put much emphasis on regular play materials. Teachers themselves have to create play materials with both their self-collected recyclable materials and handcraft materials for children based on different learning units. (Pre-service teacher 4; May)

> Even though the mentor from teacher training always states that the latest ECE curriculum guide from the government emphasises the concept of having children learn through play, what I saw in the real kindergarten setting during my practicum was quite different. Their daily classroom routine is always tight, which means that the teacher even needs to ask students to take turns sitting in a group to finish classwork while the rest are having their free-play time. This classwork is usually Chinese and English handwriting drilling or a math worksheet. (Pre-service teacher 6; Connie)

Time Constraints. Three participants mentioned that there were only three hours for the regular school day, including the time for dealing with housekeeping and administrative affairs, snack time, and toilet time. Moreover, teachers are required to provide children with learning experiences in six learning areas (physical fitness and health, language, early childhood mathematics, nature and living, self and society, and arts and creativity), for which teachers should ensure that the learning encompasses three essential components (values and attitudes, skills, and knowledge) in order to facilitate the comprehensive and balanced growth of children (Curriculum Development Council, 2017). Additionally, kindergarten teachers are required to record, evaluate, and report on children's learning and developmental outcomes, and they barely have extra time to engage children in play activities. As Santy and Tina indicated, it was challenging to accomplish the above responsibilities by only observing children's play, as this meant that there would be a lack of evidence proving whether the children had met the general milestones. Given the tremendous workload and many teaching tasks to be included in the daily routine, the participants used the term "luxury" when describing the difficulties of arranging a regular designated timeslot for children to play freely:

> I think we should stick to the reality when talking about the packed schedule of school and the kindergarten curriculum. The Educational Bureau requires teachers to cover all six learning domains in children's study and to evaluate how they learn. There are only about three hours on each school day, including the time that we have to spend on dealing with miscellaneous affairs. It is indeed a luxury for us to arrange an extended period of time for children to engage in playful activities or even free play. (Pre-service teacher 2; Santy)

> Don't forget that we also need to make a student portfolio for each child, in which we have to include not just our comments about their learning performances but also a record of their schoolwork, like worksheets, pictures of their artworks, and many more. If we don't urge them to finish all these tasks, how can we have enough resources to put into their portfolios? (Pre-service teacher 1; Tina)

Lack of Classroom Resources. The insufficient classroom resources were found to be another constraint. This mainly included the limited play materials due to a lack of funding, as well as the noise control regulations for not disturbing the adjacent classes.

Due to the lack of clear partitions, the participants observed challenges faced by teachers in facilitating children's free play in HK kindergartens. Jennifer stated that teachers needed to constantly remind students to manage their voices and behaviours in order to avoid disturbing the adjacent classes. This highlighted the difficulties in maintaining an environment conducive to children's free play in an authentic kindergarten in HK. The participants also emphasised that it was difficult for teachers to purchase play materials for each classroom. Instead, the kindergarten expected teachers to design play materials based on each learning theme. May stated that teachers were responsible for ensuring that all the play materials in the classroom were up to date and corresponded to the current learning unit of the curriculum. Furthermore, Crystal pointed out that play materials could be worn out due to daily usage or children's misbehaviour. Therefore, teachers needed to spend extra time recreating the play materials for children.

> From my latest internship experience, I can see how the teacher is struggling when trying to allow for children's free play. Since there's no clear partition between classrooms, the school only uses tall boards as classroom dividers, and teachers always need to remind children to control their voices and behaviours during their playtime in order to ensure that the adjacent class won't be disturbed. (Pre-service teacher 5; Jennifer)

> My mentor from the practicum school shared with me that they have to keep the play materials updated whenever there is a change in the learning theme. To this, they said they are not just required to buy already-made materials with the limited funding, but also to use recyclable and craft materials to create play materials for the play corners in the classroom. (Pre-service teacher 4; May)

> I think that even if teachers are willing to take the responsibility of updating and creating the play materials, we still cannot avoid the reality that the materials will wear out from daily use or be ruined by some naughty children. (Pre-service teacher 3; Crystal)

Children's Behaviour. Children's behaviours acted as another constraint impeding the implementation of play-based learning. Challenges usually arose when some children demonstrated dominating personalities in the group play. These children tended to assume the role of leaders and take control of the toys and materials. Meanwhile, other children might feel shy or even scared to ask for their turn and for opportunities to use the toys. The participants mentioned that teachers needed to respond to such situations by supervising the usage of toys and arranging a time slot for each child to use the toys to ensure fair opportunities for each child. Moreover, Crystal indicated that some teachers grouped children based on their temperaments and personalities to ensure that every child had the chance to play:

> I can recall that a class teacher that I've worked with would try to split children into groups to play, since the class teacher said that each of them has different tempers. It wouldn't work to allow all the extrovert and aggressive children to play together; in that case, battles would happen. (Pre-service teacher 3; Crystal)

In addition, Connie and Jennifer mentioned that the free-play time might turn out to be more chaotic if children with aggressive behaviours interacted with children with special educational needs (SEN), as the former might not understand and use inappropriate approaches to interact with children with SEN:

> I still remember that at my internship school, there were three SEN students in my class – one of them suffered from autism and the other two suffered from ADHD. Their aggressive behaviours often dominate the class activities, and other children in the class usually don't like to play with them, as they can't control their temper and dominant behaviours when they try to get along with others. (Pre-service teacher 6; Connie)

> I think it is even harder for us to handle when it comes to situations where both aggressive children and SEN children stay in the same classroom. Typically, normal children might not know how to deal with SEN children, which we can't blame them for. As a result, they might sometimes say something inappropriate that may irritate SEN children. (Pre-service teacher 5; Jennifer)

Parental Beliefs. Parental beliefs were another major challenge perceived by the teachers. All agreed that HK parents' overall negative attitudes towards play-based learning were a major challenge that they might need to deal with. On the one hand, the participants expressed how HK parents were somehow reluctant to embrace the term *play*. Instead, most parents viewed play as just entertainment that contradicted their expectations for children to be academically successful. Tina and Santy indicated that they would choose to use the expressions *learning activity* and *free exploration* to report to parents on the school performance of their children, as parents preferred hearing the word *learn* rather than *play*. On the other hand, the participants expressed their understanding regarding the predominant parental beliefs and the expectations concerning children' learning at school.

> For me, I think most HK parents are blindly holding high expectations of their children's academic performance. Most parents prioritise academic learning over children's play and even neglect the true abilities and interests of their children. As a teacher, it would be better and safer for us to use wordings that meet parents' expectations when communicating with them, such as using the word "activity time" to replace "playtime." (Pre-service teacher 1; Tina)

> I think despite parents' acknowledgment of the role of play for children's development, they rather expect children to be fully dedicated to learning during school time, with playtime offered after school. But not the other way around and not simply playing both in school and outside the school. Therefore, I think it is understandable why parents expect their children to learn instead of play at school. Therefore, in order to make parents feel assured, I think I will use phrases like "learning activity" and "free exploration" rather than words like "games" or "free play" when reporting to parents. (Pre-service teacher 2; Santy)

> It's true, to be honest, and even if I were a parent, I would acknowledge the role of play for children's all-round

development, , but I still think that a certain level of traditional teaching is essential to ensure the input of some foundational academic concepts. (Pre-service teacher 3; Crystal)

The participants also revealed that although most young parents had accepted the value of play in children's early learning and development, they still tended to prioritise children's learning over their free-play time. For example, May mentioned that during her practicum, parents arranged a series of after-school activities for children to attend every day and even on weekends, which targeted academic purposes. This tendency of parents posed constraints on teachers seeking to nurture children through the means of play, as these parental beliefs led to the organisation of numerous inter- and after-school activities with an academic focus. Consequently, the teachers encountered challenges in promoting and incorporating sufficient play opportunities within the educational framework:

> I would say that although parents nowadays are more open to the idea of children's play, they still tend to prioritise academic-focused extracurricular activities for children outside school time. For example, I know that some children from my practicum school need to attend classes like phonics and pinyin classes, coding, and even mathematical computational thinking classes after school or on the weekend. (Pre-service teacher 4; May)

> Not only are there some learning centres that offer academic-focused programmes for parents' choice; I know that some schools would also provide academic-wise after-school activities (ASA) for children to join after the regular school day or even hold these activities during their summer holiday. (Pre-service teacher; Connie)

Discussion

It is important for all ECE stakeholders to recognise and understand pre-service teachers' perspectives on professional work. Such an understanding serves as the basis for preparing them to be well-informed, competent, and confident educators in the future. The present study set out to obtain knowledge about HK pre-service ECE teachers' perspectives on implementing a play-based curriculum in kindergartens, including the perceived difficulties and challenges. The quantitative analysis of this study revealed that HK pre-service ECE teachers generally held positive beliefs regarding a play-based curriculum, believing in and acknowledging the benefits of play in enhancing children's academic learning as well as their holistic development. This finding aligns with prior research reporting that ECE educators hold generally positive views about play-based learning (e.g., Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Cheng, 2012; Fung & Cheng, 2011). For instance, the systematic review of Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) aimed to synthesise global research on ECE practitioners' perspectives on play-based learning, drawing from a meta-synthesis of 62 studies across 24 countries. The results underscored how despite teacher educators' recognition of children's play-based learning and their eagerness to implement a play pedagogy in practice, their efforts to integrate play-based learning into practice are hindered by policy and curricular concerns, parental beliefs, structural challenges, children's behaviours, and the lack of knowledge and skills necessary for applying a play pedagogy in authentic educational settings. The findings regarding teachers' paradoxical play beliefs align with the results of the present study, as both studies indicate that while teachers generally acknowledge play-based learning as beneficial for children's development, they are hesitant and less confident in applying their pedagogical knowledge of play in practice when faced with the aforementioned challenges. Surprisingly, Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) also pointed out that peer pressure is another notable challenge that emerges within ECE communities. They stated that teachers are generally reluctant to participate in collegial discussions about the benefits of play, especially in environments with rigid ECE curricula, highlighting the concerns of some teachers about being viewed as lazy for prioritising play-based pedagogy over direct and teacher-led activities that have more straightforward outcomes.

The present study discovered that while the pre-service teachers scored highly in their practical knowledge regarding children's play and demonstrated a strong tendency to believe that children's play could facilitate children's academic learning and holistic development, they scored relatively low in terms of their behavioural intentions toward practically translating their play beliefs into practice. This implies that there are hesitant mindsets among teachers when the notion of a play-based curriculum meets children's academic learning in the local context. This was also evident in the focus group interview, in which the participants used the word "luxury" to express how the idea of arranging an extended period of

time for free play is not realistic in HK kindergarten settings. This is mainly caused by various local contextual features, such as the results-oriented education system, the packed daily schedule, and the high parental expectations.

Furthermore, the participants stated their beliefs that children's play activities do not provide adequate evidence for teachers to explicitly record children's developmental performance; instead, they tended to believe that tangible evidence, such as children's artworks and worksheets, should be included in children's portfolios for parents to see their children's learning progress and outcomes. This finding aligns with Fesseha and Pyle's (2016) and Kim's (2004) research, in which the researchers found that teachers consider time as one of the major challenges for implementing play, while parents tend to believe that direct teaching methods are more effective for producing concrete proofs of children's academic development. Moreover, the findings of Fesseha and Pyle's study (2016), which aimed to investigate how teachers' perspectives influence their implementation of children's play-based learning in Ontario, showed that time constraints were the most common challenge among the teacher participants. The other 19 identified challenges included considerations of noise levels, the need to fulfil children's academic knowledge, and limited resources and support from kindergartens. These identified challenges align with the qualitative data collected in the present study. However, regarding the challenge of limited resources, the participants in Fesseha and Pyle's (2016) study highlighted the lack of teaching assistants and resource teachers who could provide assistance to teachers in large classes. They considered this lack a common challenge, while the pre-service teachers in our study did not mention this during the interview.

The findings of this study indicated that the HK ECE educators appeared to struggle in actualising the globally accepted play-based learning ideology in their local context. Although this finding may not seem to be completely new, it shows that even among the most recent generation of pre-service ECE teachers, the global–local and belief–practice gaps persist. In the HK Kindergarten Curriculum Guide (Curriculum Development Council, 2017), which is entitled "Joyful Learning Through Play: Balanced Development All the Way," it is clear that the local educational authority highly values play, emphasising the importance of creating a joyful learning environment that nurtures children's holistic development. However, this notion runs in the opposite direction to HK parents' expectations that the ECE stage should lay the foundations for children's future academic success; thus, play is considered less important.

In fact, the challenges faced by HK pre-service kindergarten teachers are similar to those faced by their counterparts in Mainland China. According to Li and Chen (2023), over the past decade, Chinese ECE policy documents have been heavily influenced by Western, particularly American progressive educational ideologies, and many curricula originating in the West have been introduced to China. However, educational practitioners still find it challenging to fully implement a Western-based early childhood curriculum due to various contextual and cultural constraints (Li et al., 2012; Tzuo, 2007).

Limitations, Conclusion, and Implications

This study aimed to investigate HK pre-service kindergarten teachers' perspectives on utilising a play-based curriculum to facilitate children's academic development. The findings indicated that although the pre-service teachers held positive beliefs about and confidence in utilising play to enhance children's academic development, they faced many challenges when translating their beliefs into practice in their classrooms. Factors such as the kindergarten curriculum, children's behaviours, and parental beliefs were perceived as the main constraints that affected how the pre-service teachers implemented a play-based curriculum.

This research has a few limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small, which may have affected the generalisability of the findings to a larger population and, in turn, limited the representativeness of the target group and the external validity of the study. Future studies should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample size to enhance the generalisability of the findings. This could involve recruiting participants from multiple institutions or participants who have taken ECE training outside HK but intend to work in HK kindergartens. Second, teachers' teaching experiences may have

varied markedly due to the outbreak of COVID-19, and this could have affected how they responded to the interview questions in the focus group. Future studies are recommended to consider conducting longitudinal studies to examine changes in teachers over time, capturing, in particular, their transition from being pre-service teachers to being in-service teachers upon graduation. Additionally, it would be beneficial to explore whether their early beliefs align with their authentic practice. Third, this study employed descriptive analysis, which only summarises the data for a simple overview but does not explore the intricate relationships between variables, such as how parental beliefs influenced the teachers' implementation of a play-based curriculum. Finally, due to the student teachers' busy schedules during the academic semester, we conducted only one focus group interview with six teachers. Future studies may consider conducting more sessions of focus group interviews to glean more comprehensive qualitative data.

For the local educational authority, the findings of this study imply that local policymakers may have underestimated the gap between the globalised notion of play-based learning and the local contextual features. As a result, the belief–practice and policy–practice gaps put many ECE teachers, including pre-service teachers, in a challenging situation. Therefore, more practical teacher-supporting policies and mechanisms (funding, resources, staffing, etc.) should be put in place to allow teachers to incorporate play-based learning in ECE settings. It is also imperative to raise parents' awareness and knowledge of child development and establish strong family–kindergarten communication channels. Furthermore, for higher education providers, there is a need to develop more practice-relevant curriculum subjects to expose pre-service teachers to the local educational reality, prompting them to think critically about how to connect what they learn from textbooks to their future educational practice.

Declarations

Authors' Declarations

Publisher's Declarations

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'We can make a difference': School leaders' claims about School-Age Educare in areas with socioeconomic challenges

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to explore how School-Age Educare Centers (SAEC) adapt to the circumstances and needs of pupils living in areas with socioeconomic challenges, and how SAEC can contribute to promote pupils' continued learning and knowledge development for further education and for life. The Swedish school-age educare offers education and care for children aged 6-12 years old, before and after school. The following research question guides the study: What claims are made about the SAEC contribution to pupils in terms of subjectification and qualification? Data consist of 13 interviews with school leaders working in schools in vulnerable areas, neighborhoods at risk, and particularly exposed zones identified by the Swedish Police. Qualitative content analysis was applied. The study is theoretically grounded in Biesta's concepts subjectification and qualification, which are used as aspects of education. This study contributes with nuanced descriptions of how the SAEC mission to compensate and complement is claimed to be put into practice. One conclusion is that school-age educare centers can make a difference in children's life conditions and prerequisites for succeeding in school. Another conclusion is that school-age educare centers emerge as potential arenas for crime prevention.

Introduction

This study explores how school-age educare (SAEC) in Sweden can make a difference for children living in areas with socioeconomic challenges. The Swedish school-age educare offers education and care for children aged 6-12 years old before and after school. The mission of the SAEC is to complement school and to compensate for children's living conditions. Data consists of thirteen in-depth interviews with school leaders[*] and their narratives about school-age educare practice in areas with socioeconomic challenges, highlighting both hinders and possibilities. A central point of departure for this study is that the location of an SAEC program matters, because where children live and where the school-age educare centers are situated are shown to impact childrens' life conditions and prerequisites for succeeding in school (Lindbäck, 2021; Swedish Government Official Reports [SOU], 2020a; Valizadeh, 2023). The school is usually highlighted as a protective factor as it is one of society's most important crime prevention actors (Lindbäck, 2021; Sandahl, 2021). At the same time, a well-known problem is that students' home conditions have become increasingly important for how well they succeed in school (Skolverket, 2018). It is shown to be a clear correlation between areas with socioeconomic challenges, a majority of low-income households, and households with a foreign background and mother tounge (Boverket, 2023). It is in these areas that most students leave compulsory school without passing grades (Lindbäck, 2021; Swedish Government Official Reports, 2020b). Additionally, the results from PISA 2022 reveal that the differences between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds have increased (Skolverket, 2023), and the students from areas with socioeconomic challenges scored less on PISA 2022, compared to what they did in 2018. Meanwhile, students from more favorable socio-economic backgrounds performed at the same level. These results imply that the previously identified gap has increased, and it is safe to say that inequity among

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Swedish schools has risen dramatically in the last decade (SOU, 2020a). Prior research shows that schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods in metropolitan areas are affected worst, and in some of these schools, students lack about fifty percent of the grades required to qualify for upper secondary education (Lindbäck, 2021).

This study is focused on how SAEC can make a difference for children's life conditions in areas with socioeconomic challenges. Prior research has shown that children at an early age are already sensitive to condescending attitudes and belittling treatment, which can reduce their self-esteem and performance (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018). Doubts about one's own abilities can make children already feel like losers in the early school years. Therefore, it is essential to support children at an early age, helping them to position themselves as learning subjects in different ways so that they develop a positive attitude towards education and identify strongly with the school (Ackesjö & Persson, 2021). This is an important mission for the SAEC. School failure can in some instances contribute to reinforcing pupils' experiences of exclusion and not being part of the rest of society (Bunar & Ambrose, 2016). If the children do not get the opportunity to be included in positive environments, such as sports and cultural activities, they may, in worst case, seek inclusion and community in criminal gangs (Wahlgren, 2014).

Many countries offer after-school care, but it is organized and controlled differently, such as by the municipality, by the church or by a community center, and consequently the organization frames the core of the conducted activities (Audain, 2016). However, what is common to all programs is that for a rapidly growing number of children, SAEC has become a socialization environment of great importance throughout Europe, Australia, and the United States (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2006; Plantenga & Remery, 2017). From an international perspective, the Swedish school-age educare is unique, first and foremost because of its close collaboration with the compulsory school and for the fact that the SAEC combines teaching, meaningful leisure time, and recreation. Since 2016, the national curriculum for compulsory school includes a chapter directed especially to the SAEC program (Skolverket, 2022). The primary aim of the educational program is to facilitate complementary learning and teaching activities in relation to the objectives in compulsory school, to compensate for gaps, and to provide meaningful leisure-time for children before and after school hours (Skolverket, 2022).

Since 2011, Sweden has a specialized teacher education program at the university level in SAEC teaching; the qualified teacher in SAEC holds a university degree. In addition, other categories of personnel, such as child carers and recreation leaders, can be hired based on upper secondary credentials. In the case that there are no qualified teachers available, principals can hire unqualified staff a year at a time. In 2021, only 42% of the SAEC personnel were qualified and certified teachers. Today, the Swedish school-age educare is an extended education program which is regulated by the curriculum of the elementary school system (Skolverket, 2022) and adheres to the national Education Act (SFS, 2010). The number of enrolled children is increasing steadily, and eighty-four percent of the six to nine-year-olds attend the SAEC before and after school and on school vacation days (SOU, 2020b). Thus, SAEC is an essential part of the Swedish education system. Therefore, it is problematic that the program is voluntary and only permitted for children (six to twelve years of age) whose parents either study or work and can pay the fee for having their children enrolled in SAEC. This means that some children are excluded from participating in SAEC. In areas with socioeconomic challenges, the mean enrollment rate of 6-9 year-olds is as low as 60 percent and sometimes as low as 30 percent (in comparison with 93 percent enrollment in affluent areas) (Delegationen mot segregation, 2021). The situation in Sweden stands in contrast to the United States where programs have evolved from safe havens, especially in unsafe neighborhoods, into after-school programs with ambitions to promote positive social, cultural, artistic, and character development in youth (Farrell et al., 2019; Halpern, 2000).

The Swedish school-age educare mission, to complement the teaching in school and compensate for children´s living conditions, is clearly addressed in school guidelines (Skolverket, 2022; SOU, 2020b), and as mentioned, inequity among Swedish schools has risen dramatically in the last decade (SOU, 2020a). Although this study focuses on pedagogical compensation in the SAEC, the object of the study is placed in

a pluricultural area. Consequently, a few things must be said about the children's prerequisites and the teachers' responsibilities in these areas. One relevant example for this study concerns the role of language(s) in integrating migrant children. Previous research has found that both the children's heritage language(s) and the language(s) of educational institutions are essential for fostering a sense of identity as pluricultural individuals (Little, 2020). Pluricultural individuals possess the knowledge, linguistic, and behavioural skills required to function as social actors within two or more cultures (Galante & dela Cruz, 2024). However, an identified problem is that several studies show that the deficit perspective dominates; in school, children are to be compensated based on their linguistic, cultural, and social background according to the Swedish norm (Åkerblom & Harju, 2021; Bunar & Ambrose, 2016; Lund & Lund, 2016). Recent studies highlight the importance of teachers providing a caring relational climate where migrant children's identities and cultural belongings are valued (Horgan et al., 2022; Lazzari et al., 2020). One fundamental tasks of the SAEC program is to support students in becoming democratic and empathetic members of society who recognize the inherent values in cultural diversity (Skolverket, 2022). However, SAEC centers also remain key sites for teaching national belonging and identity. Research highlights that both promoting understanding of other cultures and mediating the dominant culture are integral to the curricula and practices in many countries (Mavroudi & Holt, 2015), including Sweden. Previous studies have problematized the tension for teachers, who are both promoters of pluriculturalism and mediators of the dominant culture (Åkerblom & Harju, 2021; Lunneblad, 2017). How the teachers in the SAEC balance the mission to complement and to compensate can illustrate this tension. The Swedish curricula stipulate that "Teaching shall be adapted to the circumstances and needs of each pupil. It shall promote pupils' continued learning and knowledge development based on their background, previous experiences, language or languages, and knowledge" (Skolverket, 2022, p. 6). Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore how SAEC adapts to the circumstances and needs of pupils living in areas with socioeconomic challenges and how SAEC can contribute to promote pupils' continued learning and knowledge development for further education and for life. The following research question guides the study: What claims are made about the SAEC contribution to pupils in terms of subjectification and qualification?

Previous Research

Historically, the Swedish SAEC has been based on a *social pedagogical tradition*, largely centered around a care-focused mission combined with attention to children's fostering and development. This tradition is based on the Nordic EduCare model, which emphasizes humanistic aspects, such as play and rest, well-being, volunteering, and social development (Gustafsson Nyckel, 2020; Johansson, 1984; Pálsdottír, 2014). However, the mission of the SAEC has changed during the last decades. Since the beginning of the 2010's, more emphasis has been placed on teaching and learning in the SAEC, which is related to the global discourse of knowledge efficiency and the economic aspects of education (Andersson, 2013; Holmberg, 2018). This movement is based on an *educational pedagogical tradition*.

It is safe to say that these changes can be understood in the light of global movements towards a learnification of education (Biesta, 2009; Memiševic, 2024). Behind the policy changes and reforms, there are arguments about increasing all pupils' achievement results in school. When the Swedish national results in PISA and other international knowledge assessments fell during the beginning of the 2000's, the focus of educational policy arguments shifted towards a knowledge rationality and knowledge effectiveness at all levels, namely, preschool, SAEC, and school[*]. The intertwining of early childhood education and care, which was the earlier focus of the SAEC, was transformed into discourses where goal-orientation moved to the foreground instead of social pedagogic values concerning the group of children, its needs and interests (Lager, 2018).

From a political standpoint, there are several reasons to invest in education for young children. These reasons are related to the financial and economic investment paradigm that emphasizes the profitability of strengthening education for young children. It is widely held that young children's experiences of

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[*] The Swedish SAEC is included in the school curricula, and in this way becomes a part of the school system, even if parents, based on the family's needs, can choose whether or not their children participate in this educational program.

participating in early learning environments of high-quality influence their chances in life (Heckman, 2000). Of relevance for this study is previous research showing that children's second language acquisition and their participation in teaching activities are facilitated by the use of multimodal acitivites and non-verbal communication (Koyuncu et al., 2023, Lötman & Puskás, 2024; Petersen, 2020). Thus, it is suggested that teachers should reflect on how to organize teaching activities from an equity perspective (Löthman & Puskás, 2024). Teaching methods in SAEC often include practical work that offers multimodal learning. The combination of multiple modes contributes to pupils' meaning-making and provides opportunities to learn by imitating what others are doing (Wernholm, 2023).

Research findings suggest that participation in extra-curricular activities, such as the SAEC, is associated with improved academic performance (Guilmette et al., 2019). The SAEC focus on pupils' social relations, their social learning, social skills, companionship, community, and environmental competence is considered to be the core mission of the SAEC (Hippanen Ahlgren, 2021; Johansson, 1984). These soft skills are central for future generations to develop (see e.g. Slot, 2016) and have been identified as key factors for the individual's continued learning (Levin, 2013). The SAEC instruction of soft skills is not be considered extra, as something in addition to regular teaching, but as the basis for all development and learning since soft skills are prerequisite to the development of cognitive skills (Håkansson & Sundberg, 2016; Heckman & Kautz, 2013; Levin, 2013). Thus, the SAEC core mission is crucial, as the teaching conducted in the SAEC contributes to the students' learning both in school and in life (Ackesjö et al., 2022; Wernholm et.al., 2024). Furthermore, the current focus on learnification can in fact be based in the SAEC historical social pedagogical tradition.

Due to the global and national policy movements, the teachers in SAEC may feel that they are positioned in a field of tension between tradition and new educational policy intentions. In the SAEC, children are to be offered meaningful free time before or after school, including care, rest, and creative activities. At the same time, the SAEC is to be understood as an educational arena with focus on the prescribed skills that children are supposed to develop. SAEC teachers try to navigate between these two different value systems (Ackesjö & Haglund, 2021) as they adapt to the educational policy intentions presented in the revised curriculum, new school law descriptions, and a new teacher education program (Ackesjö et al., 2020; Andersson, 2013; Gustafsson Nyckel, 2020; Haglund, 2015; Holmberg, 2018). While children attend the SAEC, they are to be engaged in activities that support their school achievement and complement the primary school instruction (Ludvigsson & Falkner, 2019). As a result, children's time in the SAEC seems to have become increasingly institutionalized (Andersson, 2013; Saar et al., 2012). The same trends are found in Norway and Denmark (Øksnes et al., 2014) as well as in countries outside the Nordic countries and Europe. The challenge is how the SAEC teachers handle the tensions between teaching and learning in a meaningful and voluntary context based on the children's interests and willingness (Memiševic, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

In this study, we use Biesta's (2009) concepts *subjectification* and *qualification* as aspects of education. First, we direct our focus on the school leaders' claims about the subject, which is the child/pupil to be educated. Secondly, we focus on claims related to what the child is supposed to be qualified for by attending the SAEC. These concepts are further explained below.

According to Biesta (2009), education impacts on processes of *subjectification* – discourses of becoming a subject. This implies that there will be claims about the nature of the subject – the child – in the school leaders' narratives. Here, we are concerned with the claims about the nature of the child (the being child) and the desirable child (the becoming child) in the SAEC. Subjectification is about our freedom as human beings, our freedom to act or to refrain from action (Biesta, 2017, 2018, 2022). In other words, the point is how children choose to exist as a subject of their own life, not as the object of what other people want from them (Biesta, 2022). In the process of analyzing the narratives, we raise the question: *what claims are made about the child attending SAEC in areas with socioeconomic challenges?*

The *qualification* discourse of education lies in the meaning of providing children with the

knowledge, skills, and understanding that will allow them to cope with future education and make it possible for them to act in the world (Biesta, 2017, 2018, 2022). Claims about educational qualification relate to something that is not yet present, something that children must be prepared to handle at a later time. Thus, education should focus on encouraging children to become knowledgeable and skillful (Biesta, 2017, 2018, 2022). In the process of analyzing the narratives, we raise the question: *what claims are made about how the SAEC should qualify and prepare children for further education and for life?*

In line with Biesta (2017), we argue that although subjectification and qualification can be distinguished, they cannot easily be separated in practice. Of relevance for this study, with its focus on children residing and attending SAEC in areas with socioeconomic challenges, is Biesta's notion that education should "give students what they *didn't* ask for, first and foremost because *they didn't even know they could ask for it"* (Biesta, 2022, p. 70).

Method

This study is part of the research project *The (un)equal school-age educare center*[*], with the overarching aim to contribute knowledge about school-age educare compensatory programs in areas with socioeconomic challenges.

Participants and Ethical Considerations

In this qualitative interview study, the participants have been chosen strategically by way of purposive sampling (Bryman, 2012). During the spring of 2023, a questionnaire was sent out to all school leaders working at schools in vulnerable areas, neighborhoods at risk, and particularly exposed zones identified by the Swedish Police (Polismyndigheten, 2021). In total, the questionnaire was sent to school leaders at 159 different schools in 82 different areas/districts in 29 cities. The overall response rate was 63%. In the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate whether they wanted to participate in an interview where we could ask follow-up questions. Interviews with 13 school leaders from 13 schools in 10 different cities were conducted, and these interviews form the basis of this article.

The study was implemented in accordance with the ethical guidelines stated by the Swedish Research Council regarding information to the participants about the study, how the interviews would be used, informed consent, anonymity, and the right to withdraw participation from the study without giving a reason (Vetenskapsrådet, 2024).

Data and Data Collection

The semi-structured interviews took place during 2023 and included a set of questions with the possibility of follow-up questions depending on the answer received from the school leaders (Bryman, 2012).The interview guide consisted of four main areas with in-depth questions related to: (1) the area where the school-age educare center is situated; (2) the school-age educare practice; (3) the pupils attending the school-age educare, and (4) the teachers and staff working at the school-age educare center.

All interviews were carried out on a one-on-one basis and recorded via the digital Zoom application. The participants actively gave their informed consent to participate in the study by clicking a dialog box and thereby also accepting to be recorded. The thirteen in-depth interviews lasted between 30-60 min and were transcribed verbatim soon after to avoid losing any data or reducing the complexity of the material.

Analytical Procedures

Qualitative content analysis was applied, inspired by the guidelines from Kuchartz and Rädiker (2023). The first stage of the analysis included reading the transcripts, guided by the questions: What claims are made about the child attending SAEC in areas with socioeconomic challenges? What claims are made about how the SAEC should qualify and prepare children for further education and for life? The identified

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[*] https://lnu.se/forskning/forskningsprojekt/projekt-det-o-likvardiga-fritidshemmet/

claims were marked with two different colors (one for each of the questions) to become familiar with the data initially and gain an overview. In parallel, two handwritten documents (one for each of the questions) were created in which keywords and quotes were noted in a systematic way, segmenting the text passages to be coded as suggested by Kuchartz and Rädiker (2023). In line with this method, each of the handwritten documents was transformed into a table in a Word document, to get a better overview and make it possible to search for keywords or quotes. At this stage of the analysis, the keywords and quotes facilitated the identification of a pattern of aspects in the school leaders' claims, and thereafter the formation of categories. Thus, three categories emerged regarding the claims made about the child residing in areas with socioeconomic challenges: the child in need, the child at risk and the child with pluricultural experiences. Another two categories were created concerning the claims made about how the SAEC is to qualify children for further education and life: qualification for further education and qualification for life. In the final stage, there was a selection of excerpts from the empirical data that were representative and descriptive of the identified claims.

Limitations of the Study

This is a small-scale study which means that it is not possible to make claims about generalization; however, we have used selected quotes to illustrate the empirical findings, in order to increase the 'credibility' of the research in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, it is important to provide clear and rich descriptions so that others can decide the extent to which findings from one study are generalizable to another situation. Despite the limited amount of data, the results should be of relevance for other similar contexts. As such, the study contributes to the understanding of how the school-age educare practice can make a difference for children in areas with socioeconomic challenges.

Results

In the following sections, the school leaders' claims about the SAEC contribution to children residing in areas with socioeconomic challenges will be presented in terms of subjectification and qualification.

Subjectification

The conversations revealed nuanced pictures of children and childhood. In the analysis regarding claims about the child, three categories were identified: the child in need, the child at risk and the child with pluricultural experiences. These findings are presented below.

The Child in Need

Nuanced pictures of *the child in need* can be identified in the analysis. There are children who do not get their basic needs fulfilled, such as having enough food and sleep, since a lack of money and overcrowding at home seem to be common. In the narratives are examples of how SAEC can make a difference for these children by providing breakfast, extra snacks, fruit, and additional meals. The explanation is that "if children are not well, then they cannot learn". The following excerpt illustrates how the SAEC tries to adapt to the circumstances and needs of each child:

> We can provide an extra snack for those [children] who arrive late. We can buy extra meals and keep them in the freezer if there are dishes that our children favor so that we can just take the dishes out and heat them. It is a very, very special treatment for many children so that they do not go hungry. Or feel bad, we know that they simply need extra [care]. It is a very important part for us and very many [children] have that need.

The above excerpt also shows that there are children who need extra care, in order for them to feel well. For these children, SAEC can be regarded as a safe place. A claim that is shared by most of the school leaders is well summarized in this excerpt:

> After all, we have many pupils who have a tough time at home. That is how it is. It could be anything from living in a cramped space, being a large family with a small apartment, to having parents who don't work well as parents and becoming very isolated [the child]. So, the SAEC center is very important in our area.
> They [the children] are kept inside by their parents, because they [the parents] are worried that something will happen to them.

As illustrated above, there are children who are kept inside by their parents. Consequently, these children have limited access to activities. According to the school leaders, parents can lack money to pay for activities or no activities are available nearby, and some parents do not want their children to play outside due to risks in the neighborhoods. Enrollment in SAEC can give these children the opportunity to try out various activities:

> [T]he children who live in poverty or something close to that. … [just] to be able to play soccer in a team or to be able to play basketball or to be able to learn to play an instrument or whatever it is, these things are important when the parents can't afford it.

These claims made about the child in need seem to focus on basic needs and extra care. The school leaders' claims about the child reveal that children in socioeconomically challenged areas seem to need a secure place, caring professionals, and to be able to have new experiences. The claims are made in relation to both the children's poor home conditions and risks in the surrounding neighborhood. In line with Biesta's (2009) notion that education should impact on processes of subjectification, a possible interpretation of the examples above is that SAEC can offer the child a place to exist as a subject with other options than staying at home.

The Child at Risk

This category differs from the child in need insofar that it highlights some of the risks that children in areas with socioeconomic challenges are exposed to. Most of the school leaders claim that these children are at greater risk of growing up in extreme vulnerability, dropping out of school, and being socialized into criminal gangs, which supports previous research (Bunar & Ambrose, 2016; Wahlgren, 2014). It is not uncommon that these children also experience violence, drugs, and abuse in their homes.

> Many of our children are not doing so well at home. It can be that they are dirty and messy. But it can also be that they are abused or things like that. It is very important for them to be among safe adults. School is their safe place, as well as SAEC.

The above excerpt illustrates how enrollment in SAEC is a way of keeping the children safe, to protect them from abuse or other harmful circumstances. Providing a safe environment is one of many reasons why school leaders give dispensation to children so that they can be enrolled in SAEC without parents having to pay the fee.

One of the school leaders describes the potential of SAEC to keep the children safe also by acting as a gatekeeper to safeguard them from the risks in the surrounding neighborhood. Most school leaders express worries about children hanging out in the city center, as all parents do not know where their children are or what they are doing at nighttime. School leaders' claims are unanimous about the reasons why these children are easy to recruit by gangs and why they should be enrolled in SAEC:

> It's that easy for the gang criminals; they know exactly how to recruit them. And it's obvious if you live at home with eleven siblings, and you can't afford that jacket//…//It's not difficult to understand. Of course they want some extra money, maybe for their family or for themselves or for sweets. That is why we need to have them here [in SAEC] so they don't get recruited.

> I absolutely think that we contribute to the prevention of crime.

The claims made about the child in risk seem to focus on protection. The school leaders' claims about the child reveal that children in socioeconomically challenged areas seem to need a safe place with observant and gatekeeping professionals (cf. Swartz, 2009). The claims are partly made in relation to the children's home conditions, but mainly in relation to the children's exposure to risks concerning criminality. In line with Biesta's (2009) notion that education should impact on processes of subjectification, a possible interpretation of these conditions is that SAEC can offer the child a safe place and protection from risks in society.

The Child with Pluricultural Experiences

Significant for this category are descriptions of *the child with pluricultural experiences.* Two of the school leaders describe how parents are involved in creating a festival, which is a tradition in one of the schools. The festival serves as a meeting point to enrich the pluricultural experiences of both children and parents, showcasing the various cultures and languages represented in the school. However, the tension between promoting pluriculturalism and mediating the dominant culture (Åkerblom & Harju, 2021; Lunneblad, 2017) is evident in many of the school leaders claims. This is expressed as:

> Having an understanding of different cultures and being able to mix them in a good way, and how to incorporate Swedish culture while also benefiting from the cultures they come from. Then we need to relate to certain things here in Sweden, and how to work with that and not be afraid to have those discussions.

Ramadan and swimming are two areas that many school leaders highlight as a challenging balancing act**,** because many children seem restricted in their choices (c.f. Galante & dela Cruz, 2024). The school leaders stress the importance of the SAEC being able to provide the children with options in their learning or daily activities, expressed as: "we will give them the choices". According to the school leaders, activities free of charge are crucial for the majority of children living in areas with socioeconomic challenges. Therefore, many of the school leaders cooperate with other actors in the immediate area, such as sports clubs, the culture school that provides lessons in art, dance and music, and other associations, so that the children can try out new activities which might otherwise not be possible. An advantage of these kinds of activities is that they include multimodal learning (Wernholm, 2023), thereby relying less on verbal communication (Löthman & Puskas, 2024). This indicates that more children can participate and succeed. In the school leaders' narratives, examples are emerging of how participation in sports activities and inclusion in positive environments have made a difference:

> That you get to be someone, that you can become *the hockey player Yosif*. You are no longer the one who messes around. You are a hockey player. And if you've become a hockey player, you can suddenly do things in a classroom that you've never been able to//...//If they just gain this self-identity and this way of thinking about themselves, they'll fix things later. So, once they've grown a bit bigger and they know the language, they'll manage.

This excerpt illustrates the importance of making it possible for children to participate and succeed in areas other than school, since experiencing some success outside the classroom also seems to have an impact on these children's success in school.

The claims made about children with pluricultural experiences seem to focus on promoting identities as pluricultural individuals. The school leaders' claims are partly related to the challengening balancing act between promoting pluriculturalism and mediating the dominant culture, but mainly to promoting children's ability to make decisions. The SAEC strives to provide options in children's learning and daily activities, aiming for them to succeed and experience inclusion in positive environments. In line with Biesta's (2009) notion, education should impact on processes of subjectification. Therefore, it seems important to base education on children's own pluricultural lifes. One possible interpretation of the examples above is that SAEC can enable each individual pupil to discover what makes them unique, which might empower them to participate in society by giving their best in responsible freedom–to make wise decisions.

Qualification

The school leaders' claims about how the SAEC helps qualify and prepare the children for the future are presented here as two categories: *qualification for further education* and *qualification for life*.

Qualification for Further Education

The analysis identified four aspects of how SAEC can contribute to qualifying the children for further education: by supporting the development of their self-esteem, by nourishing the development of soft skills, by supporting the development of children's language skills, and by designing learning activities that broaden their knowledge of the surrounding environment. These four aspects are highlighted by the

school leaders as crucial for the children to be able to leave primary school with passing grades, with developing their self-esteem considered to be a very essential aspect:

> We must work a lot on their self-esteem, to make them feel that they have value, that they can succeed. And we also know that if they get passing grades, they will also have a greater chance of getting on in life.

The above excerpt illustrates the importance of supporting the development of children's self-esteem by helping them succeed. Many of the school leaders claim that the children thereby might gain status and respect in a school subject, and succeeding in school could enhance their chances of getting on well in life. These findings are well in line with research showing that at an early age, children are already sensitive to condescending attitudes and belittling treatment, which can reduce their self-esteem and performance (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018).

Another aspect that is evident is that many of the children need to develop soft skills, since they have spent very little time or no time at all in preschool. This means that many children have limited, or might even lack, experiences of being included in institutional contexts or participating in early learning environments, which is illuminated in this excerpt:

> They don't know how to take turns, to show consideration, to pay attention and listen, to join and walk in line, to move from point A to B. SAEC can help with that.

Some of these soft skills are shown to be necessary for succeeding in school (Ackesjö et al., 2022; Håkansson & Sundberg, 2016; Levin, 2013; Wernholm et al., 2024). Therefore, one important mission for the SAEC could be to offer children opportunities to train these skills in order to succeed with further education.

An additional aspect, which is a claim shared by all the school leaders, is the necessity to support the development of children's language skills for succeeding in school. The importance of the mother tongue (heritage language) is emphasized by several school leaders, for example, to ensure that they can communicate with relatives and maintain their cultural heritage. One of the school leaders gives an example of how SAEC can contribute:

> We have many students who study their mother tongue. The municipality has teachers employed for this, and previously they came to us. Now some do, but others do not, so we have arranged it so that we accompany our students to the different schools where they are supposed to be. This practically means that we take educators from our own organization, but we do this to compensate for the parents who are not able to come here and pick them up and accompany them. We do this so that they can participate, because we think it is important

At the same time, claims are made regarding the importance of children learning Swedish. They need to be exposed to rich Swedish language environment and have opportunities to practice using it; their language needs are greater than those of children who have Swedish as their mother tongue. This is expressed as:

> We have a language focus in the whole school, because we notice that our pupils are very bad at Swedish. Even when you are a third-generation immigrant, you have parents who don't speak or have this rich Swedish, which means that you cannot pass it on to your children. And you live in an area where you don't use the Swedish language, which makes it very difficult to get by in school where you get texts that require subject-specific vocabulary.

The above quote could be interpreted from a deficit perspective, suggesting that children need to be compensated based on their linguistic background according to the Swedish norm (Åkerblom & Harju, 2021; Bunar & Ambrose, 2016; Lund & Lund, 2016). However, it is can also be interpreted with an awarness of what previous research has shown: that skills in the majority language and education in that language are crucial enablers of educational and, consequently, societal integration (Horgan et al., 2022; Suárez-Orozco, 2017). Many of the school leaders claim that participation in SAEC can develop children's language skills. SAEC might be the only place, apart from school, where children get a chance to practice their Swedish, which is important for passing grades in school:

> What we identify as the major issue that our children [who are not enrolled in school-age educare] miss out on is the language [development]. And that has an impact on all subjects [in school]. So, if they were here and would be exposed to the Swedish language a longer time of the day, it would make a big difference.

It is here [school-age educare center] many of them practice their Swedish language. They do not do that otherwise.

The above examples also illustrate the importance of the teachers being fluent in Swedish, so that the children are exposed to rich Swedish. However, the advantages of having teachers who speak a variety of languages are also stressed by many of the school leaders, exemplified by this quote:

It is a comfort for children to be able to explain themselves or have things explained to them in their mother tongue when it is possible.

This aligns with research showing that access to instruction in one's best language is significant for multilingual pupils' literacy development, as well as their personal and cultural identity, emotional and social maturity, and cognitive development (Galante & dela Cruz, 2024). A reasonable interpretation is that these SAEC teachers can provide a caring relational climate where migrant children's identities and cultural belongings are valued.

The final aspect identified in the analysis concerns the claim that many of the children have limited or lack experiences of early learning environments and have spent most of their life in the residential area. Consequently, their knowledge of the school environment and the society is limited, which becomes problematic when they are introduced to new knowledge in school. This is illustrated in the following example:

Our pupils' world consists of the residential area, the school, and the mall. We see that many times the problem is that they don't have...any knowledge they can relate to and build upon [when they are introduced to new knowledge in school].

This explains why meaning-making might be difficult for many children. School leaders claim that SAEC can qualify children for further education by providing them with new experiences, such as trying out new activities and going on excursions, and through these measures, broadening their knowledge becomes possible.

The claims made about how SAEC contributes to qualify the children for further education seem to center around providing opportunities for the children to develop self-esteem, to train soft skills, to develop language skills, and to broaden their knowledge of their surrounding environment. The claims are made both in relation to the children's home conditions and in relation to the children's limited experiences of the world outside their residential areas. In accordance with Biesta's (2009) notion that education should provide children with the knowledge, skills, and understanding that will allow them to continue with future education, a possible interpretation of the examples above is that SAEC can help to qualify children to become knowledgeable and skillful in line with their peer group.

Qualification for Life

Two aspects can be identified in the analysis of how SAEC can contribute to children's qualification for life: to broaden children's horizons and to instill a belief in the future. As already mentioned, many of these children's world might be limited, and in this excerpt, the first aspect is illustrated how SAEC can make a difference for children's qualification for life by broadening their horizons:

We have pupils in preschool class...when we go to the central square in the middle of [city] which is the connecting point for all the buses, they ask: "What country are we in?"

This example reveals that being in the city center is a new life experience for the children. Although it might only be 15 minutes away, this experience seems to be so different that they think they are in another country. Thus, a shared claim is that SAEC can contribute to broadening the children's horizons, by taking them on excursions to discover and learn about the society beyond their residential area:

We collaborate with 4H farms; we make sure to take the children outside [the residential area] and show [them] that this also exists. Then they go home to their parents: "Do you know what we have seen? We have been to a 4H farm". And then the parents come here and ask how to get the bus there, and then we help them with that. And then suddenly we have families that start going on outings, not only to the mall, but they are also going to the 4H farm.

This example illuminates how SAEC not only can contribute to broaden the children's horizons, but also can apparently broaden the families' horizons by showing them new possibilities and helping them to get around in the community to experience something new. One of the school leader's narratives stands out in the empirical material insofar that this school leader has created a network and applied for government grants to get financial support to make it possible "to broaden the children's horizons". The real estate company, which has rental properties in the residential area, not only finances buses for taking the children to excursions, but also provides some financial support so that the children can get help with their homework. Moreover, all pupils who raise their grades get summer jobs at the real estate company. This SAEC center also shares facilities with the municipality, which offers free activities for people in the residential area, since these families often lack money to pay for activities or seldom have the possibility to take their children to activities outside the residential area.

Another aspect concerns SAEC being able to contribute to instilling a belief in the future. It is claimed that many of the children are growing up under very difficult life conditions, and they face many complexities in having to adapt to and navigate between different cultures. The narratives highlight that the children alternate their ways of acting, behaving, and speaking different languages. Moreover, the challenges with raising children in areas with serious crime is also addressed. All these issues are well summarized in this statement: *These children have an uphill battle*. Thus, all the school leaders stress the necessity of giving these children a belief in the future:

> We still want to give the children a belief in the future. We want to show them that 'You can!'. Our school's vision is the joy of knowledge, a belief in the future. We can, we want, we dare and that is what we try to work with. We can give them a belief in the future. Together with the parents and that they [the children] should dare to explore and do things and be proud of who they are.

The example above illustrates how SAEC can contribute to helping children think about their future and be prepared for life. The SAEC contributes to the children's qualification for life by instilling in them a belief in the future.

The claims made about how SAEC contributes to qualifying the children for life seem to focus on instilling a belief in the future, by broadening the children's horizons and having them experience new opportunities. The claims are mainly made in relation to circumstances connected to the children's daily life in areas with socioeconomic challenges. According to Biesta (2000), education should provide children with the knowledge, skills, and understanding that will make it possible for them to act in the world; thus, a reasonable interpretation of the examples above is that SAEC can contribute to qualifying children for life by preparing them to handle and act in the world, knowing that they themselves will manage.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore how SAEC adapts to the circumstances and needs of pupils living in areas with socioeconomic challenges. It also examines how SAEC can contribute to promoting pupils' continued learning and knowledge development. This is achieved by analyzing school leaders' claims about children attending SAEC in these areas and their views on how SAEC should qualify and prepare children for further education and life.

This final section will first focus on how SAEC can make a difference for pupils in terms of subjectification by compensating for the conditions of their daily lives, according to the school leaders. Second, the discussion will address how the SAEC mission to complement the pupils' development can make a difference and contribute to their qualification. Third, the child with pluricultural experiences will be highlighted. Finally, the contribution of this study and school-age educare centers as potential arenas for crime prevention will be discussed.

First, the results show that school leaders are aware that many children *in these areas are growing up under very difficult life conditions*. The claims made by the school leaders indicate that children might be both in risk and in need. It is evident that the SAEC can compensate for what can be regarded as very basic needs, such as by providing breakfast, extra snacks and meals since there often is a lack of money at home.

It is also indicated that there are children who need extra care from engaged adults and that SAEC can be regarded as a safe place. These results seem to be well in line with the SAEC historical *social pedagogical tradition*, which is centered around a care-focused mission combined with attention to children's fostering and development and with an emphasis on humanistic aspects such as well-being and social development (Gustafsson Nyckel, 2020; Johansson, 1984; Paulsdottír, 2012). It is evident, from the school leaders perspectives, that SAEC can make a difference by compensating for the life conditions of the subject – the child. This is achieved by striving to fulfill basic needs such as providing food and a sense of safety. Although more emphasis has been placed on teaching and learning in SAEC (Andersson, 2013; Holmberg, 2018), its mission is still to provide care (Skolverket, 2022). One of the school leaders rightly claims: "If children are not well, then they cannot learn". In other words, children need to be fed and feel safe before they can start learning in school.

Second, the results in this study indicate that in a variety of ways, SAEC can complement the school and contribute to pupils' development in terms of qualification for further education and qualification for life. One needs to keep in mind that *these children have an uphill battle.* According to the school leaders' claims it is shown that, SAEC can make a difference by supporting the development of children's self-esteem, by making them feel that they have value and that they can succeed. From previous research, it is well known that it is essential to support young children and to strive towards helping them position themselves as learning subjects in different ways so that they develop a positive attitude towards education and identify strongly with the school (Ackesjö & Persson, 2021). Prior research also shows that young children's experiences of participating in early learning environments of high-quality influence their opportunities in life (Heckman, 2000). These results are partly confirmed in this study, in revealing what might be lacking in young children who have no prior experience of participating in early learning environments or institutional contexts. The school leaders claim that many of the children need to develop soft skills, such as knowing how to take turns, showing consideration, paying attention and listening, and joining and walking in line. Usually, children learn these skills in preschool, and these skills are shown to matter for succeeding in school and in life (Levin, 2013). Here, SAEC can make a difference for children's qualification by training these soft skills.

Third, *the child with pluricultural experiences* is evident in the school leaders' claims. It is not very surprising that the school leaders state that most children in their schools lack the language skills required for success in school and life. This is due to a clear correlation between areas with socioeconomic challenges, a majority of low-income households, and households with a foreign background and mother tongue (Boverket, 2023). The issue is not that children 'lack language'; they lack proficiency in Swedish, the instructional language in school. By stating that children lack language, the school leaders risk upholding a deficit view of children (cf. Åkerblom & Harju, 2021; Bunar & Ambrose, 2016; Lund & Lund, 2016). However, this study presents a more nuanced picture. While it is suggested that children, from a deficit perspective, need to be compensated based on their linguistic background according to the Swedish norm (cf. Åkerblom & Harju, 2021; Bunar & Ambrose, 2016; Lund & Lund, 2016), several school leaders *also* emphasize the importance of children practicing and developing their mother tongue (heritage language). This ensures they can communicate with relatives, maintain their cultural heritage, and learn school subjects, which aligns with previous research (Little, 2020). It is concluded that SAEC can make important contributions by focusing on developing *both* the Swedish language and children's mother tongue. In this way, the shool leaders' claims seem to balance Biesta's (2022) notions of subjectification, giving children the opportunity to exist as subjects of their own pluricultural life, while also addressing the school's educational mission, which risks making the child an object of what others want from them.

Finally, one issue that has not been very prominent in previous studies, which is a contribution of this study, is that many of these children have limited knowledge of their surrounding environment as well, since they have spent most of their life in their residential area. Due to their limited experiences, they are short of concepts and consequently lack knowledge they can relate to and build upon when they meet new knowledge in school. SACE can complement the school by providing the children with new and rich experiences, such as going on excursions and offering other outdoor activities. Thus, SAEC can truly make

a difference for children's qualification for life by broadening their horizons, so that they get to discover the world beyond their residential areas. Many of the school leaders stress the necessity of giving these children a belief in the future, exposing them to the idea that it is possible to have a future beyond their residential area if they want. This view is well in line with Biesta (2000), arguing that education should provide children with the knowledge, skills, and understanding that will make it possible for them to act in the world. In this way, the children choose to exist as a subject of their own life, not as the object of what other people want from them (Biesta, 2022), which could be the case if they are otherwise recruited to criminal activities.

According to previous studies, the school is often highlighted as a protective factor, as it is one of society's most important crime prevention actors (Lindbäck, 2021; Sandahl, 2021). This role is strengthened by the results in this study, which point to the SAEC as being a crime prevention actor of importance. Most school leaders claim that children who live in areas with socioeconomic challenges are at a greater risk of growing up in extreme vulnerability, dropping out of school, and being recruited by criminal gangs. These are reasons why there might be a greater need to have these children enrolled in SAEC, in order to protect them from abuse and from exposure to risks concerning criminality. The results highlight why some children, due to their life conditions, are easy to recruit to criminal gangs. It is not difficult to understand that they also would like some extra money for themselves or for their family, new clothes, a new cell phone, etc. But saying 'no' to doing a small favor, which is often the starting point for being recruited, means that the children must decline an offer that is so attractive for the moment. It is most likely that the children know that this might be their only chance of getting what they want, because they will not get it from their parents. If the children also have already failed to succeed in school, which according to previous research is common in areas with socioeconomic challenges (Lindbäck, 2012; Valizadeh, 2023), they might find the criminal gang attractive, as it offers a community where one can feel a sense of belonging, with the possibility of becoming someone and becoming rich by earning "easy" money. Therefore, more children in these areas should, according to the school leaders, be enrolled in SAEC with observant and gatekeeping professionals. This aligns well with previous research, which states that the SAEC focus on pupils' social relations, companionship, and community is an important mission (Hippanen Ahlgren, 2021; Johansson, 1984). Just like many of the school leaders, we argue that enrollment in SAEC could contribute to preventing children's early involvement in crime.

To sum up, in prior research, either a school in crisis or an increasing and more serious criminality among youth in disadvantaged areas has been highlighted. These negative images have seldom been linked to each other, but in recent research there is a growing interest in the school-crime relationship (eg. Sandahl, 2021), with attention on how the social context shapes individual behavior (Lindbäck, 2021; Sandahl, 2021). This study is in the same vein, by highlighting what growing up in a residential area with socioeconomic challenges might mean for children's life conditions. This study contributes with nuanced descriptions of how the SAEC mission to compensate and complement is claimed to be put into practice. One conclusion is that school-age educare centers can make a difference for children's life conditions and prerequisites for succeeding in school, which is also stated by one of the school leaders: *We can make a difference!* Another conclusion is that school-age educare centers emerge as potential arenas for crime prevention, which we suggest should be further explored in future studies.

Declarations

Authors' Declarations

Publisher's Declarations

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Rethinking play and child-centredness within early childhood curriculum in Croatia

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Abstract: Within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) the child-centred approach, with all its various and diverse contextual interpretations, is well-established as a cynosure of contemporary theoretical discourses as well as endeavours in everyday practice, at least on a declarative level. Play is positioned as a high priority within the child-centred approach; more specifically, play is conceptualized as the central activity of the child through which they learn. Whilst these two concepts seem to be coherent and based upon similar theoretical underpinnings, there is much room for critical discussion concerning the conceptualizations and rationale behind both of them. This paper discusses how the academic community, in this paper, exemplified by specific policy-makers and early childhood educators in Croatia, see play and child-centredness in the curriculum-framed ECEC context. An e-focus group was conducted with twelve (12) early childhood educators in Croatia, showcasing the educators' uncertainties regarding thinking about and 'doing' play and child-centredness while realising their planned curriculum. The paper concludes with deliberations on the position of adults within child-centred ECEC practice, based on both literature and research results with a potential impact in terms of rethinking ECEC practices as well as documentation practices in Croatia.

Introduction

It could be said that the three key notions this paper focuses on are, in a way, buzzwords within the early childhood education and care (ECEC) community 'vernacular', be it within the academic discourse, lived practice or in popular how-to articles. The notions of play and curriculum, and how they need to be child-centred, are well known by academics and ECEC professionals, but how they are interpreted is a completely different matter (Campbell-Barr, 2017; Catalano et al., 2023; Frankel, 2023; Hanson & Nieuwenhuys, 2020; Pinter, 2023; Rasmusson et al., 2010; Shah, 2019; Višnjić Jevtić & Visković, 2021). The different interpretations of these notions could be discussed in terms of (for example) ownership of play, openness/flexibility or rigidity of a curriculum as well as the position/role/place or even presence of adults within an enactment of child-centredness. These and other different stances are discussed in separate sections of the theoretical part of this paper, paying special attention throughout to the relationship between the principle of child-centredness focusing on the importance of play, or, more specifically, learning and play, and the principle focusing on children's participation and decision-making (Bogatić et al., 2018). The empirical section of the paper provides insight into early childhood educators' thoughts about *the three notions* and their role as related to them, proving that although *the three notions* are well-known amongst early childhood educators, they require further research as well as comprehensive theoretical discussions.

Child-centredness as an Epitome of ECEC Theory and Practice

It could be stated that in current discussions within early childhood education and care child-centredness is viewed as the foundation of the contemporary approach to education (Catalano et al., 2023;

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Langford, 2010; Višnjić Jevtić & Visković, 2021). Although the concept of child-centredness – along with its differing theoretical and contextual interpretations – is a longstanding one (see, for example, Campbell-Barr, 2017; Rasmusson et al., 2010; Shah, 2019), it seems that educational practices are currently rediscovering it. An awareness of the existence of differing theoretical and contextual interpretations of the concept of child-centredness served as one of the starting points of this paper as the construct's ambiguous nature proves it to be a valuable research interest. These different interpretations can be grounded in the different disciplines accommodating for the construct of child-centredness and translating it into their own theoretical schemata (e.g. Hanson & Nieuwenhuys, 2020; Carter et al., 2024), they can be grounded in the different sociocultural contexts in which the construct of child-centredness is being lived (Rasmusson et al., 2010), or, among other things, they can be grounded in the different individual characteristics and values of the educators enacting the child-centred concept (Višnjić Jevtić & Visković, 2021). From an academic level, Frankel (2023) views child-centredness as a prerequisite for exploring the value ascribed to children's voices, taking into consideration their situatedness as well as multiplicity; collaborating in rethinking the (asymmetrical) adult-child power relations; and exploring the methodologies delineating children's impact (up)on the social world. Bringing it to the lived practices, Sak et al. (2016) define child-centredness as a multifaceted process which includes a variety of activities and relations respecting children's individual developmental differences and needs.

Therefore, both in theory and practice, the underlying idea it seeks to 'bring to life' are the best interests of children. The principle of the child's best interests arises from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC] (1989), in the sense of fulfilling the child's developmental needs and respecting their identity. Adults are presumably in the position of power, which theoretically grants them the necessary individual and structural conditions to meet the children's needs. Consistent with the current literature on ECEC, there is a potential shift away from solely relying on adult perspectives regarding children's needs – a sort of a denunciation of a pure adult perspective in research, policy and practice (e.g., Clark, 2005; Hanson & Nieuwenhuys, 2020). While adults may be trying to capture the perspective of children, there remains an ongoing academic debate about whether they are genuinely listening to children's perspectives on their needs, or merely interpreting their own adult understanding(s) of what children's perspectives about their needs are (see, e.g., Sommer et al., 2010). Following the discourse set out here and relating it to the notion of child-centredness, a discussion on whether child-centredness is closer to the notion of child perspectives or children's perspectives (as explained by Sommer et al., 2010; Babić, 2014) is continuously necessary (Višnjić Jevtić & Bogatić, 2024). For example, in relation to the concept of time, Gillis (2003) and Halldén (2005) see child-centredness as an adult-created construct, thus making child-centredness as thought about and lived through the prism of what the adults think is important, best, needed, etc. for children, an issue more recently discussed by Frankel (2023).

Important in "bridg[ing] the gap between listening to children and learning" is the early childhood educator, according to Clark (2005, p. 500), who emphasizes the connection between early childhood educators who listen to children and children who are capable learners. Ryan (2005) sees the role of adults not as interpreters but as facilitators of children's learning, while a child is seen as an active participant in their own learning (and interpreting) of ideas and experiences, which should encompass the child being listened to. Learning as a process is comprehended as an indistinguishable part of children's participation, and vice versa (Bogatić, 2023), and as Rogoff et al. (2015) idiomatically put it, *learning by observing and pitching in*.

Chung and Walsh (2000) assert that, through time, the meaning of child-centredness changed in terms of the position of the child. A child is perceived (a) in the centre of the world, (b) in the centre of their own learning, (c) as the leader of their own learning. The perception of the child in the centre of the world could be exemplified by the overprotection of children, e.g. adults tending to focus on organizing a safe and enabling environment for the child instead of the child's actual current needs or interests. Winkworth and McArthur (2006) discuss this in terms of child-centredness being a protective discourse in child rearing. Munro (2011) also discusses policy perspectives on child-centredness as a demand for protection, recognizing the need for respecting a child's individuality within this framework of protection. This might

be perceived as respecting children's individual freedom to develop at their natural pace as elaborated within the romantic discourse on child-centredness (Campbell-Barr, 2014), while at the same time putting a protectionist stance in the forefront. This contradiction is also visible in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) in terms of emphasizing both child protection and child participation (Campbell-Barr, 2021). The perception of the child in the centre of their own learning might reflect the educators' view on child-centredness. The main part of their professional competence is to provide an enabling learning environment for the children, in other words, to put the child in the centre of the learning process (Visković & Višnjić Jevtić, 2018). The perception of the child as the leader of their own learning might be interpreted as 'true' child-centredness. Recognizing the child as a competent learner, able to participate in organizing their learning reflects the ideas behind child-centredness, which Helavaara Robertson et al. (2015) describe as a child-initiated pedagogy. The different perspectives on child-centredness (Chung & Walsh, 2000) might be connected to differences/inequality in power positions between children and adults. Children could be seen as the ones with less experiences and therefore less competences, as the ones who need protection and support, which all leads to them having less power. If adults see themselves as responsible for the children and their development, then the children's power to decide about their learning might be perceived as a lack of responsibility on the part of adults or as not acting in the best interests of the child.

Bogatić et al. (2018, p. 11-12) draw on international ECEC literature to define eight principles of child-centredness: (I) focusing on children learning through play; (II) respecting children's needs, interests, strengths, and capacities; (III) recognising children's learning strategies; (IV) recognising children's uniqueness; (V) respecting children as capable learners; (VI) respecting children's participation and decision making, (VII) respecting children's diversity and individuality; (VIII) respecting children's family and culture. It is hypothesized that following these principles in educational settings should lead to child-centred practice. While some principles are well-established and embodied in early childhood education (e.g. learning through play) others might prove to be more challenging in terms of actually existing in everyday practices (e.g. children's decision making). As discussed earlier, the challenges might stem from adult-perceived changes in positions and responsibilities of both adults and children.

Play-setting the Stage

In ECEC literature focusing on both theory and practice, as well as in child's rights literature, conceptualizations of play and the child's right to play could be thought of in at least two ways (Bogatić, 2021): on the one hand, researchers are discussing play as authentic children's play (e.g. Rengel, 2014), i.e. play as a children's project (Babić, 2015), determined by their choice and autonomy (Colliver & Doel-Mackaway, 2021), "intrinsic", "autotelic" play, in the sense of playing for play's sake (Lester & Russell, 2008, p. 10). On the other hand, researchers are discussing conceptualizations of play as "instrumental", "utilitarian" (Lester & Russell, 2008, p. 10), in trems of viewing play as an educational tool, means of instruction within the context of play (Rengel, 2014), i.e. play as a project of adults (Babić, 2015). These two differing conceptualizations contrast but also make visible the connection between at least two principles of child-centredness, as identified by Bogatić et al. (2018): focusing on children learning through play (In this paper, it is considered that learning comes from the nature of play itself and that the two notions are intertwined and indivisible (e.g. Pramling Samulesson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008) and respecting children's participation and decision-making. The core of these two contrasting but connected principles is in the position of children and adults in relation to play.

> The process of recognising that power relations exist in children's play may be uncomfortable for early childhood educators, especially if they are steeped in universal certainties about the efficacy of play for children's learning and development. Recognising how those power relationships are played out presents another discomfort, because it requires educators to see play as a political and negotiated terrain and to focus on issues of agency, power and control between adults and children, and between children. (Wood, 2014, p. 16).

Wood (2014) attempted to trouble the dominant discourses in literature about "free choice and free play" (p. 16) in terms of developing a sociocultural and poststructural theories-inspired conceptualization of agency. She emphasizes the need for the adults to be aware of "children's repertoires of choice" (p. 16)

as well as the ways in which freedom is individual – in terms of advantaging some and disadvantaging others, instigating a need for a critical discussion about freedom as related to play and choice. This involves an acknowledgement of "the complexity of children's experiences" which could be contrasted with "reductive versions of play in many national policy frameworks and educational effectiveness discourses" (p. 16). Wood (2014) advocates profound attention be paid to the "microanalyses of play, alternative meanings and interpretations" thus opening "the possibility for deeper engagement with the socio-political dimensions of children's play cultures and practices" (p. 16). This investigation of play is certainly important at a macro level, but also at a micro level, in terms of each early childhood educator re-examining the play that 'goes on' in their own learning context, the meanings this has for the children and their everyday life, for each individual child and their everyday life as well as for the(ir) practice.

While free play is sometimes considered as "the opposite of receiving guidance from adults" (Hjelmér, 2020, p. 146) – for example by equating choice time and free play time within a classroom (e.g. Berkhout et al., 2013), the adult influence is always there, be it in the setting of the environment (Bogatić, 2023), the provision of materials, structure of the day allocating certain parts of the day for "free play" or everyday interactions between the children and early childhood educators, in which educators, knowingly or not, try to guide and constrict children's choices (Rengel, 2014). The number of children within a classroom is also relevant here, where a social crowd could restrict children's opportunities for free play (Howes et al., 2011), as well as provide for niches free from adult intervention (Edwards, 2002). Kyttä (2004), writing from the perspective of the theory of affordances, in terms of "an individual's perception of the environment surrounding him/her" - the physical environment as the one that can "afford different actions and behaviours", sees children as "actualiz[ing] affordances in their environment through exploration and play", which is regulated through "cultural and social rules and practices" (Storli & Hansen Sandseter, 2019, p. 66). Kyttä (2004) provides three regulatory structures in "child-friendly environments": (1) "the field of free action", emphasizing children's agency, (2) "the field of promoted action", regulating what can go on in an environment, where and in what way; and (3) "the field of constrained action", in terms of restricting and excluding factors (Storli & Hansen Sandseter, 2019, p. 66). Pramling et al. (2019) refrain from attempts to define play, but start from analysing different participants' perspectives on an activity, their fluctuation(s) and negotiation(s).

All these different discussions on the sole definition of play, play as contextualized within ECEC guided by a curriculum and the interplay between adult perceptions of a child, children, play, ECEC and their own position have a part in the (lived) reality of the playing and learning that is emphasized within child-centred practice. From a researcher's perspective, based on these discussions, two important questions arise: (1) How much of play within the child-centred approach could be interpreted as authentic children's play and how much as an adult dominated playful 'activity'? (2) Does an early childhood educator's provision of time and space for play in terms of taking responsibility for play mean they are taking professional responsibility for the co-construction of a child-centred curriculum or does it mean they are taking 'leadership over' play? The line between the two could be quite thin.

Play in (Child-centred) Early Childhood Curricula

Contemporary early childhood education is typically guided by curricula. McLachlan et al. (2010) explore the idea of whether curricula can be considered as policy documents, models, or frameworks for organizing the learning environment. Ross (2000) defines curricula as any socially constructed or prescribed activities which are in some way selected from the culture of a particular society, and result in the transformation of the individual. The definition of curriculum is shaped by how its aims and areas of application are understood, but it is primarily framed by its theoretical foundation. In this regard, McLachlan et al. (2010) and Sekulić-Majurec (2007) argue that variations in curriculum definitions reflect differing foundational perspectives, which are influenced by philosophical, psychological, and political considerations, as well as value orientations regarding the educational purposes, the nature of the child, the child's learning and development, and the nature of knowledge itself. If the context of curriculum implementation is considered, i.e. the complexity, dynamics, unpredictability and authenticity of

educational practice, then neither the definition nor the interpretation of a curriculum can be consistent and unique. Early childhood curricula could be understood in terms of describing the overall reality of ECEC (Bergen et al, 2001; MacNaughton, 2003). Babić (1996) asserts that in the broader sense of the notion, curricula are pedagogical documents encompassing early childhood educators' implicit pedagogies as well as the actual curricula, i.e. reality, practices and social context in which the different curricula are taking place.

National curricula could be defined as documents, written by experts but founded in the current state policy. Depending on the political image of the child and childhood, they may differ. Opposite to the policy approach, curricula could also be seen as learning and environment guidelines. Scott (2008) defines curricula using four dimensions – aims, content, methods, and evaluation. The above-mentioned types of curricula could be developed using these dimensions. The question that prevails is whether a specific curriculum is performance- (the most common) or competence-oriented (Bernstein, 1996). Since competence-oriented curricula acknowledge the child/learner as the co-constructor of the curriculum, they could be thought of as child-centred. Schiro (2008) defines a learner-centred ideology of curricula as the one in which each individual learner achieves an active learning experience. Therefore, aims, content, method and evaluation of the curricula cannot be rigid, nor strictly planned. It is important to discuss if policy documents can be open and adjustable to meet the individual needs of each child. Assuming that curricula are based on child-centred principles, they can serve as guidelines to practitioners suggesting possible ways of arranging the learner-centred social, emotional, and physical environment.

Curricula serves as a support to practitioners' actions towards child-centred learning, in terms of promoting play as a foundation of children's learning. The playing/learning principle could be influenced by the practitioners' understanding of play itself. Wood and Attfield (2005) state that curricula should empower both children and early childhood educators - children to express their intention and follow their own learning path and early childhood educators to understand meanings of children's play and to use these for the planning of next steps. Van Hoorn et al. (2015) claim that:

> (T)he idea of play at the center of the early childhood curriculum is grounded in work from four early childhood traditions: (a) early childhood practitioners, (b) theorists and researchers who study play, (c) researchers and theorists in the field of development and learning, and (d) educational historians. (Van Hoorn et al., 2015, p. 5)

Play-based curricula are widely recognized in early childhood education and are, at least in principle, integrated into national and institutional curricula. However, it remains unclear whether practice aligns with these official documents or whether it follows its own distinct educational trajectory. Orientation towards play could be discussed within the notions of spontaneous play, directed play and/or adult guided play (Van Hoorn et al., 2015). While spontaneous play is child initiated and intrinsically motivated, directed and guided play are adult initiated. If play is a free, child-led activity (e.g. Hjelmér, 2020), whether the latter two forms of play can be described as play at all is a matter of discussion. Early childhood educators have the responsibility for supporting children's development (Višnjić Jevtić, 2021), therefore, their engagement in all activities, including play, is expected. But, is this expectation truly child-centred? Or does their involvement disrupt children's play?

A society that prioritizes the ideal of success may introduce academic goals at earlier stages of education. Consequently, time for play in early childhood settings is decreasing (Miller & Almon, 2009). Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson (2008) state that play and learning are still separated in the context of early childhood settings. Early childhood educators can be caught between the society's expectations (children's academic success) and professional demands (play-based child development and learning). Curricula could provide a framework to balance the two, but would these curricula then be considered child-centred?

Given the laid out flexibility in the use of the term 'curriculum' and the fact that it is conceptualized at various levels, it is possible to propose that the development of a child('s) rights-centred curriculum could help reconcile the tensions between the emphasis on early academic skills and children's perceived needs and rights (Caplan et al., 2016; Jerome & Starkey, 2022), many of which are outlined in the principles

of child-centredness (Bogatić et al., 2018). If this kind of formulation of curriculum were to clarify its conceptualisation of play, child-centredness, learning and other key notions that are often understood to be self-explanatory and therefore left vague (meaning their practices depend on individual values and implicit theories of those bringing the curriculum to life - early childhood educators (Bogatić, 2023; Višnjić Jevtić & Visković, 2021)), in order to delineate its stance on children's agency, freedom, the role of the educators, etc., the question that would still remain open is whether this would pose an intrinsic tension to the sole conceptualisation of an early childhood education and care curriculum as such, predominantly viewed as a notion characterised by emergence, openness and flexibility (Borovac & Somolanji Tokić, 2024).

In order to better understand the context of the research presented in this article, it is important to provide insight into the context of ECEC in Croatia. Early childhood education and care has long been under the jurisdiction of the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education mirroring the country's policies emphasising the intertwining aspects of education and care in the early years. Children can attend early childhood institutions starting from 6 months until the start of elementary school. Children start elementary school in the autumn if they turn 6 by the end of March that year. Although institutions catering for children from 6 months to 3 years old have a special name that could be provisionally translated to *nurseries*, in practice they are mostly integrated in early childhood institutions catering for all children prior to starting elementary school, comprising just separate educational groups. While there is a lot of momentum and emphasis being put on the advantages of heterogenous groups of children, homogenous, age-segregated groups still dominate in ECEC practice in Croatia. Early childhood educators working with children need to have at least a bachelor's degree in early childhood education and care studies, and more and more of them have a master's degree. Two qualified educators work with children throughout the day (Bogatić & Campbell-Barr, 2017; Višnjić Jevtić et al., 2021). There is a National curriculum in place since 2015 and a new one is currently in the making. All early childhood institutions must adhere to the National curriculum, even though their founders are local municipalities, who also provide the funding, which can therefore differ from institution to institution. Along with adhering to the National curriculum, each institution makes their own curriculum for each pedagogical year. While the National curriculum emphasises the basic theoretical ideas (values, principles, starting points) guiding ECEC in Croatia, the institutional curriculum plans for some content, allowing for the realisation of ECEC curriculum in practice in Croatia to be (somewhat) emergent and flexible.

The Croatian National Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (Ministarstvo znanosti, obrazovanja i sporta Republike Hrvatske [MZOS], 2015) (hereinafter NKRPOO) stresses the importance of providing "learning while playing" for children (p. 16), however there is a lack of guidance on how to do that. The word play is mentioned four times within the NKRPOO (MZOS, 2015):

- within the explanation of knowledge as a value: "Within early childhood, it is especially important to provide the child with the joy of discovery and learning that relies most on play and other activities that are interesting to the child." (p. 8)
- in describing the competence for communication in foreign languages: "Children learn a foreign language in a stimulating language context, through play and other purposeful activities." (p. 13)
- in a table relating conceptualizations of children and the educational process: "Children learn through play, exploration and other activities that are purposeful for them, i.e. through direct experience with a variety of learning resources." (p. 16)
- part of the short pre-school curriculum (Mandatory short programme (250 hours per year) attended by children about to start elementary school, who have not been enrolled in an early childhood setting thus far.): "Acceptance of play and other activities that contribute to purposeful learning and overall development of children and the development of physical exercise habits and maintaining one's own health." (p. 27)

The NKRPOO (MZOS, 2015) emphasizes the strong connection between playing and learning, without using the term "learning through play", but rather "learning while playing" (p. 16). The role of the

early childhood educator in regards to play, other than "support" is not comprehensively specified. Play as such is not defined. The openness of the NKRPOO (MZOS, 2015) could provide early childhood educators with the freedom to construct an early childhood setting's curriculum related to the needs, interests and development of their children as well as the sociocultural context. By not providing details on how to support play it could implicitly support play as a children's project (Babić, 2015), thus supporting child-centredness, as related to children's perspectives (Sommer et al., 2010). However, this openness could also lead to early childhood educators being lost and their practice being dominated mainly by their own implicit pedagogy, which has its own challenges and possible pitfalls. To gain insight into everyday practice – the life of the curriculum as viewed by early childhood educators themselves, as well as their understanding of the curriculum, child-centredness and play and their own place in it, a research was conducted.

Method

Based on the NKRPOO (MZOS, 2015), play and child-centredness could be thought of as the foundation for early childhood education and care in Croatia. While it is possible to conduct a document analysis and draw conclusions based solely on educational policy, reaching conclusions about practice is more challenging. Therefore, the aim of the presented research was to gain insight into:

- early childhood educators' understanding of child-centredness and play within the national and their own institutional curricula
- early childhood educators' perception on their role as related to play and child-centredness.

Gaining insight into early childhood educators' views was done through a focus group discussion. Focus groups provide a secure environment for sharing ideas on professional topics while acknowledging the views of all participants. Cyr (2019) indicates the advantages of focus groups as a research method, especially in social sciences as they are social, emic and produce data on several different levels (individual, group and interactive).

Participants

Fifteen early childhood educators were invited to participate in the focus group. Participants were chosen according to their work experience (5 years minimum), professional development (participation in different forms of continuous professional development), educational levels (B.A. and M.A.), professional status (mentor/adviser), region and willingness to participate. The invitations were sent out using networks of several early childhood educators' associations in Croatia.

Twelve participants decided to participate in the focus group discussion. The participants who agreed to participate have 5 to 37 years of work experience as early childhood educators, and all of them regularly participate in continuous professional development activities (at least 50 hours per year). Seven participants have a bachelor's degree in ECEC and three of them are currently studying for their masters degree. Five participants have a master's degree. Six participants had been promoted to a higher professional status – three of them are early childhood educators-mentors and three of them are advising early childhood educators. Participants work and live in different regions of Croatia (the city of Zagreb, and regions Slavonija, Dalmacija and Međimurje).

Data Collection Methods

The focus group discussion was organized on a platform for virtual (online) meetings. While focus groups are usually organized face to face, virtual ones are not a discovery of the COVID pandemic or post-COVID pandemic era. The so-called eFocus groups have been conducted even in the last century (Rezabek, 2000). Virtual focus groups enable the participation of a wider community compared to what a locally-based approach would allow (Morrison et al., 2020). Possible obstacles might be technical issues or a lack of ICT competences. Some researchers (i.e. Chase & Alvarez, 2000) see a lack of a group dynamic in virtual

environments as a disadvantage of online focus groups, but Hoffman et al. (2012) have not found a difference between online focus groups and those conducted face-to-face.

A link for the online meeting was sent by e-mail to participants who agreed to participate in the focus group discussion. The researchers prepared initial questions related to play, child-centredness, curriculum and the early childhood educators' role as related to those three notions. At the beginning of the focus group, researchers/moderators introduced guidelines for the discussion, especially those related to participants' anonymity in the final report and a possibility for them to withdraw from participating at any time during the focus group discussion. The participants gave their consent to record the session. The discussion lasted for 105 minutes.

The discussion was transcribed verbatim. The transcript was then analysed independently by two researchers. The content analysis was done as per Bader and Rossi (2002; see also Stewart et al., 2007): reading through the transcript at a macro level to get a broad picture of the data; eliminating irrelevant data straying from the topic; identifying and coding broad themes (patterns following the researchers' questions); adding supplementary codes if necessary; re-reviewing of the transcript; grouping of codes into themes; checking for clarity; dividing themes into smaller themes if necessary; summarizing themes reflecting the most important points. The three core themes were: view of play; view of child-centredness and view of the (national) curriculum with an underlying fourth theme intertwined within the first three themes, which could be called *professional engagement* as the early childhood educators' role as related to play, child-centredness and curriculum respectively.

Findings

The findings of this research are presented according to the three themes identified in the analysis (view of play; view of child-centredness and view of the (national) curriculum), highlighting the key points of each theme with specific examples written in italics accompanied with anonymized identifiers for the early childhood educators who provided the selected examples. The fourth theme, *professional engagement* as the early childhood educators' role as related to play, child-centredness and curriculum respectively, is described within each of the first three themes as it was seen throughout the analysis that early childhood educators' perspectives on the three aforementioned key concepts were deeply intertwined with their perception of their own professional engagement with the respective notion.

View of Play

The first part of the focus group discussion focused on play. Participants of the focus group discussion approached play as a child's right, at times explicitly referencing the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989)

P1: Play is a child's fundamental right. This must be our starting point and something we should never forget.

When discussing play as a child's right, the focus group discussion quickly shifted to talking about play as a child's need.

P6: Play is a need arising from the child.

Some participants expressed a romanticised view of play, emphasizing its importance while using metaphors to define it

P3: For me, play is a kind of magic, a magic that unfolds at every moment. (…) It is a story we can read better the more knowledge we have. The more we develop professionally, the better we are at following and understanding children's play.

This example demonstrates how the discussion among early childhood educators about their views on play shifted towards an attempt to discuss their own positions in relation to play. Early childhood educators who participated in this research see their role in recognizing ways to ensure an encouraging play environment

P8: Providing children with different incentives, we, in a way, hold ladders for them while they're developing through

play.

Different perspectives on early childhood educators' roles led to a discussion that brought *scaffolding* as the early childhood educators' primary task to the forefront. A participant (P9) explained that this would entail:

> children actually guiding their own play without our interference. We will help them via provision, observation, documentation… But we will let them organize their own play the way they want to.

An alternative perspective arose during the conversation, according to which early childhood educators should lead and guide children towards a higher developmental level. One of the participants (P3) added that they are not talking about 'traditional guidance', but

> guiding and moderating play, directing children's interests towards some new concepts or things that might, for whatever reason, be unfamiliar to them.

In child-centred practice, the role of the early childhood educator is not (and should not only be) reduced to the role of a provider, observer and documenter. The early childhood educators think that their professional engagement (P3) entails

> observing, planning as well as guiding children's play.

Almost all participants accentuate that early childhood educator's involvement and interest extend children's play experience. One of the participants gave an example of a child who she perceived as having difficulty establishing social relations with other children in her group to the extent that *she seemed non-existent to the other children* (P10). The early childhood educator then took the role of a co-player. She explained her intention was to attempt to ensure the child had at least some play experience and also to encourage others to join them in play. This participant estimated that it is appropriate to take on an active role in play in order to enable the child to participate in play with others. Another example of how early childhood educators perceive the complexity of their roles and the need for their professional engagement is visible from the following excerpt:

> P7: Usually, at the beginning, when children start kindergarten, I make sure to remind the parents that, in the whole process, neither they nor we as educators are the most important; it's actually the children themselves. They are the ones who are very, very small and coming into the unknown, especially when it comes to adjusting to a new space. All of our energy needs to be focused on them to make their transition easier, and of course, we will make it easier for them mostly through play. The goal is for them to gain trust, relax, and feel safe. When we talk about being child-centered, it's important that they feel secure, and they feel safest at home with their parents or someone they know. I believe that, as educators, we need to focus on making this whole process easier for them – the play and socializing in kindergarten – so they can accept the other children, us, and the whole routine of going to kindergarten, staying there, and playing.

View of Child-centredness

Focus group participants see *child-centredness* as flexibility of the educational process and child autonomy

> P8: So, they are, in a way, free to circulate through all the activity centres. They choose activities according to their own interests… Child-centredness is visible through the entire context of their activity and through giving them autonomy in their activity.

This and similar statements from other participants instigate a need for further research on early childhood educators' view of autonomy as such and supporting children's autonomy in early childhood settings. This need for further research on early childhood educators' perspectives on autonomy is supported by the views of some research participants, who regard child-centeredness as a future-oriented practice, focused on recognizing and fulfilling all the child's potentials

> P6: Child-centredness means making maximum use of the child's contribution, self-actualisation in all their different aspects, with all their possibilities and needs, then we can say that we are focused on the child.

This is also visible in the following example, accentuating the relationship between the concept of child-centredness and the readiness discourse:

> P10: The most important learning is about understanding oneself, believing in oneself, recognizing both strengths

and weaknesses, and being aware that one won't succeed in everything. However, in areas where improvement is possible, one can work on it through knowledge. For example, as a society, we tend to focus heavily on this cognitive aspect. In my opinion, when we send a child to school, I always think about how I send them, because that's all I can offer—sending them with confidence in themselves and the ability to ask for help without shame. They need to know that knowledge is built over time, that it's a collaborative process, and that it's okay not to know everything but to explore and seek answers. Ultimately, they should leave with social skills, which I believe is very important. So, this focus on the child, for me, is about creating a space in kindergarten where they feel comfortable and at home.

Some participants emphasize the importance of cooperation with parents as a prerequisite of achieving child-centredness. They see child-centredness in all segments of their work, e.g. their view of the child, offering incentives and their own role. One of the participants (P4) views child-centredness as

a day-to-day self-reminding about the importance of play and as ensuring that the principles of the curriculum are achieved through play.

View of the (National) Curriculum

Early childhood educators' autonomy and freedom are seen as the greatest value of the national and institutional curricula by the research participants

P4: Just now have I become aware what a treasure this curriculum of ours is and how much freedom it provides us with. Freedom!

They conclude that their autonomy provides them with the flexibility to create the educational process, which they find necessary when following child-centred principles. One of the participants (P6) states that the

curriculum is so flexible that it enables early childhood educators to engage with and see the child, and not just units to go through.

However, they point out that the existing pedagogical documentation in early childhood settings does not support planning based on children's current interests because it expects long-term planning. Participant P8 elaborates:

P8: If our starting point is following children's interests, following the child and respecting the child and giving him some sort of autonomy, then long-term planning of activities is impossible. ...if I plan something out for the next day, some incentives to support them in their further learning, sometimes they take it to a totally different direction and of course then thematic planning, and especially those three-monthly plans we still keep writing in the "yellow book" fall through.

The participants agreed that they often have the feeling they are *burdened*, in terms of *doing something they feel they must do* (P5) and that they have to follow the plans that exist in an "imaginary calendar of activities". They find this is not in agreement with the NKRPOO (MZOS, 2015) nor with the principles of child-centredness. The (thematic/calendar) planning is an area where the early childhood educators find the biggest discrepancy between the educational policy documents and early childhood practice.

P4: I remember a colleague of mine who had been doing the same things with the children for four years in a row, I don't know, for example, for St. Nick's Day they always made exactly the same red paper boots together… I mean, if the children aren't currently interested in bakery products, during the Bread Festivities, I mean, what's the point? Just because the Bread Festivities usually take place in October? Actually, what we need most of all is to start from the children themselves and see what they are currently interested in.

P6: It is currently autumn. And there is not a single yellow leaf in Dubrovnik, but everyone will say they are well into the themes about autumn because the calendar says it's autumn.

Considering the fact that one of the principles of curriculum is the flexibility of the educational process, how is it possible that in contemporary early childhood settings flexibility is being respected only declaratively? One of the participants (P11) concludes that, in spite of the documentation that sets a firm structure, which is not always flexible, it is possible to respect children's interests and needs because, as she puts it:

I write up a bunch of incentives, I prepare it all for myself, and then whatever goes, goes.

The participants expressed their interpretation of the contemporary curriculum as a starting point and a foothold of child-centredness. As one of the participants (P9) puts it:

For me, the curriculum is an early childhood educator's basic setting, or, as it says in smartphones - factory setting. I think every novice, every educator needs to know the curriculum and its values, principles and starting points. I can't find better words for it other than - an early childhood educator's factory setting.

Discussion

The focus group participants' perception of play indicates that they see play as a child's fundamental activity and a way of learning, a finding similar to the results obtained by, for example, Altun (2018), Davis (2024), Jensen et al. (2020), Lazić et al. (2020), Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson (2006), Tsai (2017) and Vogt et al. (2018). However, early childhood educators also see play as something that contributes to the overall respect of children's rights, a view that has recently been supported in research of children's rights *in* play (Lagerlöf et al., 2022). Interestingly, two participants described play as a means of *contributing to understanding a child's world*, i.e. understanding the way children learn. They emphasized the importance of observing play in order to ensure the child's development and learning. Despite stemming from a declarative intention to gain insight into seeing things from children's perspective, early childhood educators' focus swiftly shifts towards utilization of this knowledge for their own educational agendas. Similarly, Jensen et al. (2020) found that when discussing the relation between play and learning, to the early childhood educators "play became a 'stage' for children to demonstrate proficiency with adult- and curriculum-prescribed content, rather than an engaging context for exploring and practicing according to children's interests" (p. 309). Aras (2016) obtained comparable results in her study, where educators view play as useful in achieving their own educational purposes or fulfilling their tasks (keeping children busy while doing something else, e.g. documentation). This might indicate a distortion of the focus put on children's rights by the demands perceived by adults as important, whether they are intrinsic (a demand an educator places upon her/himself based on personal attitudes) or extrinsic (a demand placed upon an educator by the institution, policy or other external agents). This also places play as the fundamental activity and child-centredness as an underlying approach of ECEC in a precarious position within the early childhood curriculum. There are other examples of research findings that implicially or explicitly suggest the same issue, with some choosing not to problematize the instrumentalization of play in depth (e.g. Lundqvist et al., 2021; Vogt et al., 2018) and others discussing this issue through a critical lens (e.g. Lazić et al., 2020; Pyle & DeLuca, 2016). On the other hand, there are also discussions about surpassing these types of dichotomies within the ECEC academic narratives (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Veraksa et al., 2021)

The emphasis the participants of the focus group placed on their departure from "traditional guidance" (or their interpretation of "traditional guidance", to be more precise), as illustrated in the excerpt in the Findings section, could be interpreted as their attempt to get the message across that they have departed from a (traditional) focus on contents towards a contemporary concept of child-centredness. Although these two views seem quite different at first, attention must be paid to the vocabulary used when describing and elaborating the idea that was intended to come across, which can at times be normative and adult-centred, emphasizing the power inequity between children and adults (e.g. adults are the ones who 'let' children organize their play) (for a discussion on this see Babić, 2014). This need felt by early childhood educators to ensure that we, as researchers, understood what they meant by the term "guidance" could also be interpreted as their uncertainty about their role, as noted by Pyle and Danniels (2017). The nuances in the early childhood educators' role in play have long been a topic of research. For example, Lemay et al. (2016) find that, in practice, early childhood educators respect children's play, but have difficulty sustaining it, which is also supported by Colliver (2019). Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson (2006) conclude that educators should be supportive, but not disturbing, while Pyle and Danniels (2017) find that educators could be afraid of hijacking children's play, and therefore emphasize that their guidance is not necessarily a synonym for passive learning and direct instruction. On the other hand, Colliver (2019) found that "educators believe children's learning from their play was associated with educators' passive rather than active practices. Rather than intentional, it seemed to be merely coincidental that child-chosen play resulted in learning of curriculum content" (p. 182). Similarly, Pui-Wah and Stimpson's (2004) research concluded that when focusing on specific learning objectives, early childhood educators often chose direct teaching practices, inspite of being aware that within the child-centred curriculum, play-based learning is

considered more appropriate. Although it is expected that novice early childhood educators would want and need guidelines and 'rules' in order to feel successful in their professional activity (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986), the research participants find this is also present with more experienced early childhood educators.

The emphasis the research participants placed on their professional engagement as related to all three key notions of this research is supported by Bašić (2011), who claims that observing the child is crucial in leading towards devising a well-thought out space for free play. If time is necessary for the development of free play in which the child is immersed with its whole being (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008), ensuring the extension of the play experience is also a part of the early childhood educator's *professional engagement.* However, what comes to the fore are the early childhood educator's competences, sensibility and context, as well as the ability to engage in play whilst trying not to disrupt the play itself as a children's project. This entails not disrupting the play's beginning, progress and closure as well as an evaluation of the child's desire for the adult to participate in play or not.

Focus group participants recognized the national curriculum as a curriculum that enables children's learning through play. Its flexibility provides space for individual development while respecting individual learning strategies, as well as respecting the importance of partnership with families. Although all participants emphasized the importance of play in children's development, they did not further elaborate on the (lacking) interpretation of play in the national curriculum. This uncertainty could lead to early childhood educators' not being able to recognize their role in ensuring play experiences and thus lead to their stepping away from the contemporary approach to children's learning and child-centredness principles that frame it. The identified uncertainty expressed by early childhood educators about their own role as related to play and 'bringing to life' child-centredness framed within an open and flexible curriculum is supported by other relevant research, like Pyle and Danniels (2017), Pyle and DeLuca (2016) and Tsai (2017). These results open questions about their implications for living the child-centred approach within early childhood curriculum, especially the child-centred principles related to play and participation and decision-making, which leads to a rethinking of the advantages and disadvantages of an open and flexible curriculum. In spite of the emphasis put on play as children's fundamental right in all settings, adults need to be reminded about that - not just in educational policy documents, but also in practice. Sahlberg and Doyle's (2019) research highlighted that more play in educational settings leads to less stress, fatigue, testing, shame and sitting still and, consequently, less apathy and demotivation in children.

Concluding Thoughts

As balance and wandering between focusing on children's academic success and focusing on their current needs and interests as well as ways of gaining insight into their needs and interests is sometimes present in ECEC literature, and even more so in ECEC policies (and beyond), so do the early childhood educators participating in this research balance between attempts to listen and follow children's incentives and a burden they feel about making learning 'visible' in every single early childhood experience. This might put both play and child-centredness (with their differing interpretations) in a peripheral position in practice, which could be visible in institutional curricula. Although they find the national curriculum to be flexible and provide them with the desired freedom and autonomy in their work, they feel smothered by the documentation they have to keep 'doing', despite it not being in a logical theoretical accordance with the national or institutional curriculum or their own personal beliefs and expectations about their practice. If the purpose of documentation is children's learning then it could be interpreted as a contribution to child-centred practice. However, documentation with a purpose of satisfying official forms could be interpreted as an obstacle to child-centred practice. The focus group participants demonstrate an understanding of documentation as a journey through child development. Despite the curriculum that allows them to understand documentation as a process and not a current (final) moment in development, they believe that educational policy expectations do not correspond to the actual needs of everyday practice. The participants displayed a general idea about what child-centred practice should look like, however they indicated a level of uncertainty as to their own position in it, which potentially has a big impact on their everyday practice. The participants in this research are experienced early childhood educators who also

have collaborative experience with their colleagues. Therefore, it could be assumed that they have the opportunity to develop and innovate their own practice given their professional experience. Although no novice teachers were included in this research, it could be presumed that such a discrepancy between educational policy and practice could result in an uncertainty in one's own judgments and activities, especially when it comes to their role in play or in relation to chid-centredness. This instigates a need for further research on child-centred competences and professional development related to child-centredness, especially when it comes to novice early childhood educators.

As child-centredness continues to be a significant notion in the ECEC academic community, it is important to shed light into the critical research on child-centredness (e.g. Floom & Janzen, 2020; Langford, 2010; Shah, 2019) focusing on (among many other things):

a) the theoretical underpinnings of child-centredness emerging from developed, Western and Western-adjacent sociocultural and theoretical traditions, not necessarily aligning with the sociocultural and theoretical traditions of developing countries and/or 'other' sociocultural contexts;

b) the issue with centredness as such in terms of it being a gateway to rigidity blocking the way of different and/or new ideas and practices;

c) the issue with its aligning with neoliberal constructs surrounding the emphasis put on individuality and the individual decontextualized child disregarding other social structural characteristics 'inscribed' within the child as well as its relational way of *being* in this socially vibrant world;

d) the issue of *uncertainty* regarding the role of educators, or more competent others, in a child-centred educational process, which has proven to be a major concern for early childhood educators participating in the research presented in this paper as they reflected on their own practice.

All of these, along with other critiques of child-centeredness, raise questions about play and child-centeredness discussed throughout this paper. This, along with the results of the research presented, paves the way for new research on the topic of child-centeredness, play, and curriculum, as a means of bringing ECEC theories and policies to life in practice.

Declarations

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A study of teachers' perceptions of early childhood language and literacy education: Importance-performance analysis

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Abstract: This study analyzes kindergarten teachers' perceptions of the importance and performance in early childhood language and literacy education in hopes of identifying practical ways to support early childhood language and literacy development. The research questions were as follows. First, how do kindergarten teachers' perceptions of the importance differ from their perceptions of performance in early childhood language and literacy education? Second, what does an IPA analysis reveal about kindergarten teachers' importance- and performance-related perceptions of specific areas of early childhood language and literacy? Analyzing a sample of 200 kindergarten and daycare teachers responsible for classes of 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds, we examined differences in importance- and performance-related perceptions regarding early childhood language and literacy education. Our analysis focused on four areas (listening, speaking, reading, writing) in 22 sub-items. The results revealed similarities and differences between kindergarten teachers' importance- and performance-related perceptions of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The IPA analysis showed that Quadrant 1 had a high proportion of listening, speaking, and reading, mainly featuring elements related to attitude and comprehension, while Quadrant 3 had a high proportion of writing, mainly featuring elements related to the technical aspects of language, such as phonemes, fluency, and accuracy. Exploring the extent to which teachers' perceptions of the importance of each area of early childhood language and literacy education are connected to practice, the results of this study highlight the need for specific support and education in areas where discrepancies exist between perceptions and implementation.

Introduction

In October 2023, the Korean government announced the "First Comprehensive Plan for the Guarantee of Basic Academic Skills (2023–2027)" to establish a national education responsibility system. This plan was implemented against the backdrop of declining basic academic skills and learning losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Ministry of Education, 2022). A study investigating the developmental status of children whose early childhoods coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic (Financial News, 2022) found that one in three struggled to achieve age-appropriate development and required professional assistance; the study also showed that developmental shortfalls were particularly pronounced in social and language development.

Early childhood is a critical period for the amplification of both oral language development through speaking and listening and literacy through reading and writing (Morrow, 2012). Young children naturally develop oral and written language abilities through immersion in meaningful literacy environments in their daily lives and various linguistic interactions with the people around them. The language's basic functions are listening, speaking, reading and writing, further classified as oral language for listening and speaking, written language for reading and writing. Oral language, the most common language activity for children, includes experiences as a speaker or listener, understanding shared informtion, and organizing and delivering content using a variety of vocabulary (Park et al., 2012). These experiences play an important role in improving children's communication skills and promoting cognitive, social and

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emotional development (Amorsen & Wilson, 2020). Oral language is acquired naturally from a young age, so explicit teaching and learning are often inactively pursued. However scholars have emphasized that intentional teaching is necessary to provide diverse experiences and enable children's active participation in oral language (Amorsen & Wilson, 2020). Conversely, written language is considered a learned and developed domain with planned and systematic support, unlike oral language (Söderbergh, 1986). However, from infancy, children are exposed to written language daily by observing their parents or teachers reading, acquiring information through various media such as picture books, and showing an interest in environmental print such as name tags and signs. Furthermore, they see characters as tools for recording their emotions or thoughts without regard for time or space, allowing them to practice basic writing skills. As a result, educational support for developing written language in contexts related to children's play and daily life is increasingly important (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009).

Currently, teachers play a crucial role in providing quality language and literacy environments and supporting linguistic interactions in early childhood education institutions. The fact that teachers' perceptions of early childhood language and literacy education can vary widely significantly impacts children's language and literacy experiences and development (Scull & Raban, 2012; Wenglingsky, 2000). Indeed, numerous studies have shown that teachers' literacy-related perceptions influence literacy education environments in classrooms, literacy curricula, and ultimately, the literacy development of children (Eom, 2009; Kim & Kim, 2006; Oh, 2010). Studies highlighting the disparity between teachers' perceptions and actual practices of early childhood language and literacy education (Choi, 2005; McCutchen et al., 2002) have suggested that a gap sometimes exists between teachers' perceptions and the content implemented in educational settings. In reality, the differences between what teachers perceive as important in early childhood language and literacy education and what is demanded in educational settings confuse or create difficulties for many teachers (Kim et al., 2019; Park et al., 2013; Yoon, 2007). Cash et al. (2015) reported that teachers' levels of understanding of language and literacy education have a greater impact on the development of children's language and literacy than teachers' perceptions. Put simply, the varying results of prior research regarding the relationship between teachers' perceptions and the implementation of early childhood language and literacy education highlight the need for a closer examination.

Responding to this need, this study examined kindergarten teachers' importance- and performance-related perceptions in hopes of identifying practically effective strategies for supporting early childhood language and literacy education. To this end, it analyzed the differences kindergarten teachers' importance -and performance- related perceptions regarding early childhood language and literacy education in four areas (listening, speaking, reading, writing) with 22 sub-items and identified areas that need improvement for future education. Teachers' importance-related perceptions were designed to find out what they consider important in terms of early childhood language education, and performance-related perceptions of were designed to find out how much support they provide in terms of implementing the early childhood language curriculum. The research questions were as follows:

Research Question 1. How do kindergarten teachers' perceptions of the importance differ from their perceptions of performance in early childhood language and literacy education?

Research Question 2. What does an IPA analysis reveal about kindergarten teachers' importance- and performance-related perceptions of specific areas of early childhood language and literacy education (listening, speaking, reading, writing)?

Method

Research Participants

A total of 200 kindergarten and daycare teachers responsible for classes of 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds participated in this study. Table 1 shows the general backgrounds of the study participants.

Table 1
General Backgrounds of Participants

Category		N(%)
Age	Under 25	42(21.0)
	25 and over, under 30	65(32.5)
	30 and over, under 35	47(23.5)
	35 and over	46(23.0)
Education	Vocational college graduate	30(14.9)
	Bachelor's degree	94(46.8)
	Master's degree or higher	76(37.8)
Experience	Less than 3 years	43(21.5)
	3 to less than 5 years	40(20.0)
	5 to less than 10 years	72(36.0)
	10 years or more	45(22.5)
Age group of the class responsible for	3 years old	43(21.4)
	4 years old	50(24.9)
	5 years old	82(40.8)
	Other	25(12.4)
Total number of teachers		200(100.0)

Questionnaire and Procedure

To assess kindergarten teachers' importance- and performance-perceptions of early childhood language and literacy education, we first reviewed the current national language education curriculum, the 2019 revised Nuri curriculum (Ministry of Education & Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2019), and prior studies related to early childhood language and literacy education (Kim & Kim, 2016; Park et al., 2013; Park et al., 2012; Seo & Byun, 2021) before developing a preliminary questionnaire through researcher consultation. We verified content validity through written reviews by five professors specializing in early childhood language and literacy education at universities and three kindergarten teachers with at least five years of extensive field experience. The final questionnaire consisted of 22 items: 6 for listening, 6 for speaking, 5 for reading, and 5 for writing, with importance and performance for each item rated on a Likert 5-point scale. The questionnaire was designed to find out teachers' perception and implementation of the contents in each of the four language areas and was presented in the following manner. For example, 'How important do you think the formation of 'attitudes towards listening' is in early childhood language teaching?', and 'How much practical support do you provide for the development of 'attitudes towards listening'?. Table 2 shows the areas of the questionnaire and their reliability levels.

Table 2
Questionnaire Items and Reliability by Area

Area	Number of Items	Item Number and Content	Cronbach's α	
			Importance	Performance
Listening	6 items	(1) Attitude towards listening, (2) Receptive vocabulary level and ability, (3) Sentence comprehension, (4) Story comprehension, (5) Awareness of phonology(6) Recognition of specific phonemes	.851	.817
Speaking	6 items	(7) Attitude towards speaking, (8) Speaking skills, (9) Sentence structure, (10) Expressive vocabulary level and ability, (11) Accuracy of pronunciation, (12) Pronouncing specific phoneme combinations	.812	.846

| Reading | 5 items | (13) Attitude towards reading, (14) Frequency of reading behaviors, (15) Correspondence between letters and sounds, (16) Number of characters and words readable, (17) Reading fluency and accuracy | .821 | .843 |
| Writing | 5 items | (18) Attitude towards writing, (19) Frequency of writing behaviors, (20) Number of characters and words writable, (21) Writing accuracy, (22) Story composition | .807 | .865 |

We created the questionnaire as a mobile Google survey, and the response time was approximately 15 minutes. We collected data from May 24 to June 2, 2023, targeting 220 teachers responsible for classes of 3- to 5-year-olds. The study was conducted through snowball sampling, where teachers who participated in the survey were asked to forward the survey link to teachers they work with. After explaining the purpose and content of the study, we sent those who agreed to participate a link to the Google questionnaire. After excluding respondents who missed responses or responded insincerely, we selected a final sample of 200 participants.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the collected data using SPSS 26.0. To answer the research questions, we calculated the importance- and performance-related means and standard deviations for each of the four areas and 22 items and conducted paired samples t-tests. A paired t-test was conducted to verify the difference between teachers' perceptions of importance and implementation of early childhood language education, and Importnace-Performance Analysis(IPA) by area and items was conduced to identify further improvements related to early childhood language educational support. In the IPA, the horizontal axis represented the performance scores, and the vertical axis represented the importance scores, with the axes' standards set to the overall average of each dimension, positioning the importance and performance of each item on a two-dimensional chart (Martilla & James, 1977). Accordingly the IPA matrix was conducted by measuring the importance- and performance perception of kindergarten teachers', with the performance based perception on the x-axis and the importance based perception on the y-axis. The importance and implementation are organized into four quadrants based on the average value of each score. The first quadrant with both high importance and implementation was analyzed as the maintenance enhancement area, the second quadrant with high importance and low implementation as the focus improvement area, the third quadrant with low importance and low implementation as the gradual improvement area, and the fourth quadrant with low importance and high implementation as the maintenance management area.

Figure 1
Importance-Performance Analysis Matrix

High	Quadrant 2 Concentrate Here	Quadrant 1 Keep up the Good Work
Importance		
	Quadrant 3 Lower Priority	Quadrant 4 Possible Overkill
Low		
	Low Performance High	

Results

Difference in Kindergarten Teachers' Importance -and Performance- Related Perceptions of Early Childhood Language and Literacy Education

Table 3 shows the differences in kindergarten teachers' importance- and performance-related perceptions of the various dimensions of early childhood language and literacy education. Listening received the highest importance average score, 4.09(SD.518) and performance average score, 4.09(SD.575), followed by speaking(importance: M-3.98, SD-.524/ performance: M-4.08, SD-.606) reading(importance: M-3.83, SD-.624/ performance: M-3.85, SD-.748), and writing(importance: M-3.66, SD-.668/ performance:

M-3.56, SD-.822). The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between importance and performance for items related to sentence comprehension(importance: M-4.36, SD-.625/ performance: M-4.19, SD-.764) and awareness of phonemes(importance: M-3.49, SD-.814/ performance: M-3.63, SD-.937) in the area of listening. For speaking, the analysis revealed statistically significant differences in attitudes towards speaking(importance: M-4.53, SD-.575/ performance: M-4.77, SD-.459)   and speaking skills(importance: M-4.10, SD-.754/ performance: M-4.37, SD-.732). Meanwhile it showed no statistically significant differences for any of the reading items, indicating relatively small differences in importance- and performance-related perceptions. Finally, for writing, statistically significant differences in numbers of writable characters and words(importance: M-3.42, SD-.882/ performance: M-3.28, SD-1.033) and story composition(importance: M-3.73, SD-.966/ performance: M-3.56, SD-1.101).

Table 3

Analysis Results of the Differences in Importance- and Performance-Related Perceptions of Early Childhood Language Education

Area	Sub area	Importance		Performance		t
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	
Listening	Attitude towards listening	4.59	.578	4.67	.578	-1.512
	Receptive vocabulary level and ability	4.29	.639	4.23	.726	1.120
	Sentence comprehension	4.36	.625	4.19	.764	2.786**
	Story comprehension	4.45	.582	4.50	.634	-1.035
	Awareness of phonology	3.49	.814	3.63	.937	-2.117**
	Recognition of specific phonemes	3.35	.819	3.32	1.036	.417
	Overall listening	4.09	.518	4.09	.575	- .030
Speaking	Attitude towards speaking	4.53	.575	4.77	.459	-5.310***
	Speaking skills	4.10	.754	4.37	.732	-4.814***
	Sentence structure	3.78	.773	3.82	.901	- .657
	Expressive vocabulary level and ability	4.06	.731	4.11	.782	- .826
	Accuracy of pronunciation	3.94	.706	3.99	.921	- .713
	Pronouncing specific phonemes combinations	3.48	.814	3.41	.993	1.086
	Overall speaking	3.98	.524	4.08	.606	-2.287*
Reading	Attitude towards reading	4.24	.737	4.28	.828	- .752
	Frequency of reading behaviors	4.01	.737	4.14	.872	-1.972
	Correspondence between letters and sounds	3.89	.801	3.90	.943	- .075
	Number of characters and words readable	3.61	.861	3.53	1.017	1.162
	Reading fluency and accuracy	3.41	.936	3.42	1.090	- .136
	Overall reading	3.83	.624	3.85	.748	- .431
Writing	Attitude towards writing	4.15	.798	4.04	.940	1.567
	Frequency of writing behaviors	3.89	.797	3.80	.887	1.330
	Number of characters and words writable	3.42	.882	3.28	1.033	2.142*
	Writing accuracy	3.15	.984	3.11	1.115	.466
	Story composition	3.73	.966	3.56	1.101	2.207*
	Overall writing	3.66	.668	3.56	.822	2.026*

*p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001

Results of the Importance - Performance Analysis for Early Childhood Language and Literacy Education

Figure 2 shows the IPA results for each area of early childhood language and literacy education, with listening and speaking located in Quadrant 1 (keep up the good work), meaning perceived importance and performance were high, and reading and writing located in Quadrant 3 (lower priority), meaning perceived importance and performance were low. Figure 3 presents the IPA results for each specific item. Areas or items that participants perceived as important but not implemented or less important but implemented were not included appear.

Figure 2

IPA of Early Childhood Language Education by Area
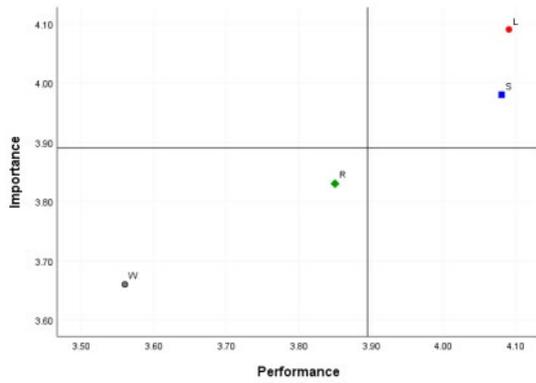
Figure 3

IPA of Early Childhood Language Education by Item

Table 4 shows the IPA results for each specific listening, speaking, reading, and writing area with 12 of the 22 total items (54.5%) i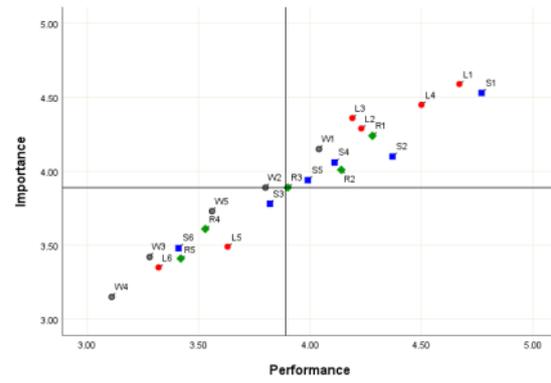n Quadrant 1 and 10 (45.4%) in Quadrant 3. Quadrant 1, which importance and performance perceptions on the language education are both above average, has a high proportion of listening, speaking, and reading items, mainly featuring those related to attitude and comprehension. Meanwhile, Quadrant 3, which importance and performance perceptions on language education are both below average, has a high proportion of writing items, mainly featuring those related to the technical aspects of language, such as phonology, phonemes, fluency, and accuracy.

Table 4

Importance-performance Analysis of Early Childhood Language Education Items

Category	Area	Item	Total (%)
Quadrant 1 (keep up the good work)	Listening	L1. Attitude towards listening	12 items (54.5%)
		L2. Receptive vocabulary level and ability	
		L3. Sentence comprehension	
		L4. Story comprehension	
	Speaking	S1. Attitude towards speaking	
		S2. Speaking skills	
		S4. Expressive vocabulary level and ability	
		S5. Accuracy of pronunciation	
	Reading	R1. Attitude towards reading	
		R2. Frequency of reading behaviors	
		R3. Correspondence between letters and sounds	
	Writing	W1. Attitude towards writing	
Quadrant 3 (lower priority)	Listening	L5. Awareness of phonology	10 items (45.4%)
		L6. Recognition of specific phonemes	
	Speaking	S3. Sentence structure	
		S6. Pronouncing specific phonemes combinations	
	Reading	R4. Number of characters and words readable	
		R5. Reading fluency and accuracy	
	Writing	W2. Frequency of writing behaviors	
		W3. Number of characters and words writable	
		W4. Writing accuracy	
		W5. Story composition	

(*None in Quadrant 2 or Quadrant 4)

Conclusion and Discussion

Using an IPA of teachers' perceptions of early childhood language and literacy education, this study aimed to identify practical strategies for supporting early childhood language and literacy education. As they relate to the research questions, our findings were as follows:

First, in our examination of differences in kindergarten teachers importance- and performance-related perceptions of early childhood language and literacy education, participants gave the importance of and performance within the listening area equally high scores. This suggests that teachers view the listening area as important and believe they are effectively implementing the related curricula. Meanwhile, they gave performance within the speaking and reading areas higher scores than importance. This can be interpreted as a positive signal that teachers are actively implementing speaking and reading curricula. Conversely, they gave the importance of the writing area higher scores than performance, indicating that while they consider writing important, it may not receive sufficient time and effort in practice.

Examining the components of each area, while we found no significant difference between the importance and performance scores for attitude and receptive vocabulary in the listening area, the participants gave sentence comprehension statistically significantly higher importance than performance scores. This highlights the need for actual implementation of lessons to enhance sentence comprehension, which is foundational for understanding communication contexts and overall content as well as for developing story comprehension skills (Potocki et al., 2012). Conversely, for awareness of phonology, performance received statistically significantly higher scores than importance. This may stem from the widespread use of masks during the COVID-19 pandemic, which made language development in situations where vocal delivery was hindered and facial expressions or lip movements were concealed more difficult (Charney et al., 2021; Green et al., 2021). Furthermore, phonology awareness is a core aspect of listening and speaking abilities (Porta et al., 2021), and teachers generally recognize it as crucial in literacy education.

In the speaking area, all components received higher performance than importance scores, and the differences were statistically significant for attitudes toward speaking and speaking skills. Attitudes toward speaking and speaking skills are essential for forming relationships and creating effective communication environments in early childhood (Nordberg & Jacobsson, 2021). The fact that masks conceal facial expressions and mouth shapes, causing changes in sound and negatively impacting communication (Crimon et al., 2022), explains why teachers had to increase their efforts in this area. Meanwhile, since young children's pronunciation may be immature or inaccurate (Jalongo, 2013), specific methods and resources to improve speaking skills and attitudes may be necessary.

In the reading area, the analysis revealed no significant differences between perceived importance and performance, except for numbers of readable characters and words, where importance received higher scores. This aligns with Lynch and Owston's (2015) finding that teachers place significant importance on words in literacy education. This emphasizes the need for whole language approach to early childhood education that encourage the natural acquisition of words and self-learning in daily contexts. Choi et al. (2022) stresses the importance of enhancing foundational literacy by focusing on receptive vocabulary and basic reading skills, underscoring the need to inspect and enrich language environments in classrooms and institutions for emergent literacy from a perspective that emphasizes natural word acquisition.

Lastly, the writing area received the lowest overall importance and performance scores, with importance and performance receiving roughly similar scores. Among the components, numbers of writable characters and words writable received statistically significantly higher importance than performance scores. Young children's writing is more comprehensive in scope and intent than that of adults, including not only the use of symbols in the form of letters that others can recognize, but also drawings and scribbles (Kim, 2010). The current national curriculum reflects this view of early childhood writing, but it can be a dilemma for teachers in that parents have high expectations and demands for writing education in order to prepare their children for elementary school (Kim & Park, 2020; Park & Park, 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the value of early childhood writing and reflect efforts

to develop writing by understanding the process and content of writing from the perspective of young children. In that regard, writing is crucial in laying the foundation for children's literacy and reading achievements. In particular, writing experiences that connect and associate various words are vital for literacy development (Gerde et al., 2012), underlining the need for teaching methods that provide meaningful writing environments through topic-related words or word cards.

Second, examining the IPA results by area, listening and speaking were located in Quadrant 1 (Keep up the Good Work), where both the perceived importance and performance scores were above average; meanwhile, reading and writing were in Quadrant 3 (Lower Priority), where both perceived importance and performance scores were below average. Thus, the participants not only perceive the listening and speaking areas as important in early childhood literacy education but also believe they actively implement them. By contrast, the fact that the perceived importance and performance scores for reading and writing were somewhat lower highlights the need for support to enhance teachers' perceptions of the importance and implementation of these areas of early childhood language and literacy education.

Literacy refers to both the ability to produce, understand, and use texts appropriately in interpersonal communication (Graddol et al., 1994) and communication based on listening and speaking is a fundamental element of language and literacy development (Mousena, 2020). Experiences listening, speaking, and communicating within meaningful contexts lay the foundation for development, motivating and fostering autonomy in reading and writing. Therefore, in kindergarten settings, the role of teachers in providing multi-faceted support within meaningful literacy environments is crucial to effectively linking and expanding children's oral language experiences in listening and speaking to written language experiences in reading and writing.

Third, in the item-specific IPA, Quadrant 1 (Keep Up the Good Work) contained 12 items (54.5%), including listening (4 items), speaking (5 items), reading (3 items), and writing (1 item). The trend of high recognition and implementation of attitudes, receptive and expressive vocabulary understanding, and listening and speaking skills across the four areas is related to the communication content presented in the 2019 revised Nuri curriculum. Teachers prioritize the cultivation of correct attitudes towards listening, speaking, reading, and writing as well as the ability to listen, understand, and express thoughts and feelings appropriately.

Quadrant 3 (Lower Priority), where both importance and performance were below average, contained 10 items (45.4%), including two items each from listening, speaking, and reading, and four items from writing. In particular, the perceived importance and performance levels of the phonology awareness and phoneme combination items in the listening and speaking areas were lower. Experts in early childhood education in Korea familiar with whole language approach, tend to view teaching abstract language knowledge and skills such as phonology and phoneme awareness to young children negatively (Lee, 2011). However, recognizing and effectively utilizing the relationship between speech and writing is crucial, necessitating the acquisition of language skills such as phonological rules and knowledge of consonants and vowels. Since this is essential for supporting early childhood literacy and language development, it should be incorporated into early childhood literacy education content in a developmentally appropriate manner (International Literacy Association, 2019). Therefore, the provision of ongoing education opportunities through pre-service and in-service teacher training programs, which enable kindergarten teachers to recognize the importance of this content and provide balanced instruction in manner suitable for development, is crucial. Moreover, content related to language skills like phonology awareness and knowledge of consonants and vowels in the current national early childhood language education curriculum needs to be reviewed and improved to bolster teachers' importance-related perceptions and implementation in these areas.

Additionally, importance- and performance-related perceptions of reading and writing abilities and accuracy were lower than average. This may be due to the fact that the current national language education curriculum suggests relatively low experiential levels for reading and writing achievements to cultivate in early childhood, such as "showing interest" and "trying to express," which may lower the perceived

importance and implementation of literacy skills and accuracy in educational settings. Nevertheless, reading and writing are crucial for laying the foundation of early childhood literacy (Gerde et al., 2012), and teachers' importance-related perceptions and implementation in these areas must therefore improve to ensure children have ample opportunities to read and write in meaningful ways in their daily life contexts.

Despite generating meaningful results, this study had several limitations. First, because it only examined the importance- and performance-related perceptions of kindergarten teachers in the Seoul metropolitan area, generalizing the findings is challenging. Future research on this topic should focus on data design to ensure generalizability. Second, the survey asked teachers to self-assess their actual language and literacy education practices, and teachers' perceptions and teaching realities may differ (McCutchen et al., 2002). To bolster scholarly understanding of language and literacy education implementation in early childhood education settings, subsequent research should analyze teachers' actual teaching practices as well as their perceptions.

These limitations notwithstanding, this study's exploration of the extent to which teachers' perceptions of the importance of each area of early childhood language and literacy education connect to practice specifically highlights the need for support and education in areas where discrepancies exist between perceived importance and performance. In so doing, its findings should help identify ways to support and strengthen the implementation of early childhood language and literacy education.

Declarations

Publisher's Declarations

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Understanding and implementing play as a learning pedagogy: Narratives of practitioners in early childhood mobile units

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Abstract: This research examined practitioners' narratives on understanding play as a learning pedagogy in early childhood mobile units. The national curriculum framework encourages practitioners and teachers in early childhood settings to employ a variety of play pedagogies to stimulate young learners to develop core skills in early childhood learning environments. Underpinned by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the article draws from the zone of proximal development and social interaction as significant theoretical concepts to examine practitioners' understanding of play as a learning pedagogy in early childhood mobile units. A phenomenological within the qualitative research domain was utilised to gather in-depth data on the topic under investigation. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with twenty practitioners purposively selected to provide their narratives on understanding play as a learning pedagogy in early childhood mobile units. The Atlas.ti software was used to analyse the collected data using a narrative strategy. The findings revealed that the practitioners maintained a high standard of service delivery within the mobile Early Childhood Care and Education unit contexts, which was transformative, high-quality and play-based. This paper contributes to the existing knowledge of delivering high-quality play-based learning pedagogy in early childhood settings.

Introduction

Play is widely recognised as a crucial component of early childhood education. It supports cognitive, social, emotional and physical development (Whitebread & Basilio, 2013). Play-based learning encourages children to explore, experiment, and solve problems (Zosh et al., 2022). Different types of play, such as free play, guided play and structured play, each offer unique benefits and learning opportunities (Pyle et al., 2020). Structured play fosters cognitive, physical, social and emotional development, teaching children's essential skills like problem-solving, teamwork, resilience, and rule-following in a guided, engaging environment (Mawarpury, 2018). In addition, free play allows children to exercise autonomy and creativity, while guided play involves adult scaffolding to enhance learning outcomes. Play as a learning pedagogy offers numerous benefits, particularly in early childhood education. It supports holistic development by engaging children cognitively, socially, emotionally and physically (Mawarpury, 2018). Through play, learners explore their environments, experiment with ideas and build critical thinking and problem-solving skills naturally and enjoyably. Social interactions during play enhance communication, collaboration and empathy, fostering essential life skills. Moreover, play-based learning encourages creativity and imagination, laying the foundation for innovation and adaptability. The intrinsic enjoyment of play motivates learners, promoting active participation and deeper engagement with learning materials (Cheruiyot, 2024). Despite its advantages, implementing play as a learning pedagogy comes with challenges. Teachers may struggle with balancing structured learning objectives and the open-ended nature of play, especially in resource-constrained environments. Misconceptions about play being unstructured or lacking educational value can result in resistance from parents or school authorities

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(Cheruiyot, 2024). Additionally, large class sizes, limited resources and time constraints may hinder teachers' ability to integrate play into the curriculum effectively. Ensuring inclusivity and catering to diverse needs during play activities can also be challenging. Addressing these barriers requires teacher training, advocacy for the value of play and policies prioritising adequate resources and support for play-based learning.

Play can be categorised into various types, each serving a unique purpose in a child's development. Physical play, such as running, jumping and climbing, supports motor skills, coordination and physical health (O'Connor et al., 2017). Constructive play involves using building blocks or creating art, fostering problem-solving, creativity and spatial awareness. Pretend or imaginative play, including role-playing and make-believe, enhances social skills, language development and emotional expression as children explore different perspectives (O'Connor et al., 2017). Social play, such as games with peers, promotes collaboration, communication and conflict resolution. Meanwhile, independent or solitary play encourages self-reliance and creativity.

Early childhood educators and practitioners facilitate play by creating enriching environments, providing appropriate materials, and engaging in play with children (Tok, 2022). Practitioners use observational and assessment techniques to understand children's developmental progress through play (Brown et al., 2021). However, there needs to be more literature regarding the implementation and effectiveness of play pedagogy, specifically in mobile ECCE units. Most research focuses on stationary early childhood settings typically structured environments such as classrooms or childcare centres, where children engage in planned, consistent activities within a fixed location (Selepe, Nhase et al., 2024). Investigating play pedagogy within mobile early childhood education units is not well understood. Mobile units offer a flexible and accessible alternative to traditional early childhood education, particularly benefiting underserved and rural areas (Selepe, Nhase et al., 2024). These units provide play-based learning opportunities tailored to the needs of diverse communities (Bernal et al., 2023). Likewise, the study addresses the limited understanding of how play-based learning is adapted and perceived across different cultural and socio-economic contexts, particularly in underserved and rural areas.

During the history of early childhood education, social interaction was prioritised, as evidenced in the early works of theorists such as Froebel (1899), Montessori (1976), Dewey (1938) and Vygotsky (1978). In 2015, the Department of Social Development (2015) in South Africa advanced the idea that children learn best through social interaction activities. Contemporary perspectives of Froebel indicate the importance of guided play and interaction involving the learner, the teacher and the peer (Teichert & Helbig, 2024). In Montessori classrooms, teachers are facilitators who rigorously encourage social interaction and collaboration among children (Modest & Mwila, 2023). As cited in Cade (2023), Dewey (1938) advocates experiential learning through social activities and peer interactions, while Vygotsky (1978) affirms that higher-order thinking skills are stimulated through social activities and play pedagogies. These studies emphasise the indispensability of play pedagogy and social interaction in early years' education. Early childhood experts have recently highlighted the advantages of play-based learning in teaching-learning environments. In early childhood education, one of the core beliefs is that play is fundamental to the development of young children. The theoretical and ideological origins of play and its adoption as an ECCE strategy in teaching-learning programmes can be traced back to various regions. The curriculum policy in Australia's Early Years Learning Framework emphasises the play-based learning strategy to promote children's holistic development (Cohrssen, 2021). In addition, the Ghana Education Service encourages teachers to effectively engage children through interactive play-based activities (Quartey & Casely-Hayford, 2023). The South African National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (Department of Basic Education, 2011) recommends integrating play-based pedagogies in early childhood development.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in South Africa is underpinned by a strong policy framework promoting equitable access and quality education for young children. The National Development Plan 2030 emphasises the importance of ECCE in addressing socio-economic inequalities and preparing children for formal schooling (Tyilo & Matshoba, 2022). Central to this is the NCF for children

from birth to four years, which guides practitioners in delivering age-appropriate and play-based learning experiences. However, while the policy framework is robust, its implementation often faces challenges, particularly in under-resourced areas (Tyilo & Matshoba, 2022). Disparities in access and quality remain significant, especially in rural and township contexts, where ECCE centres struggle with limited infrastructure, inadequate teacher training, and insufficient learning materials (Tyilo & Matshoba, 2022).

For an international audience, the prioritisation of ECCE in South Africa is particularly interesting, as it reflects both progress and persistent systemic challenges. ECCE is partially funded by the government, with subsidies provided to registered centres; however, many centres rely heavily on parental fees, which limits access for low-income families. Staffing in ECCE centres is another critical issue, as many caregivers and teachers lack formal qualifications or professional development opportunities despite their crucial role in early childhood education (Fredman et al., 2022). Efforts to address these gaps include initiatives like the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), which trains ECCE practitioners and partnerships with NGOs to supplement resources and support. Nonetheless, achieving universal, high-quality ECCE remains complex, requiring sustained investment, improved governance and innovative approaches to overcome structural inequities. Two research questions underpinned this study (Fredman et al., 2022).

- What is the mobile early childhood care and education practitioners' understanding of play pedagogy
- How do mobile early childhood care and education practitioners implement play pedagogy in their units?

Research Purpose

Mobile ECCE units and their programmes appear to be gaining momentum as significant providers of early learning for children aged 0–4 in South Africa, especially in scarce resourced areas. As the name implies, a mobile ECCE programme uses a functional vehicle (mainly a truck), tents (Gazebos), community-based open spaces, different teaching and learning and playing materials, facilitators, food items, drinking water and mobile toilet facilities. Thus, the researchers who teach childhood education preservice teachers and whose research projects focus on early childhood education, explored the practitioners' understanding of play pedagogy and how they implement it in ECCE mobile units. This study uniquely emphasises the narratives and experiences of early childhood practitioners in mobile ECCE units, providing a firsthand account of how play pedagogy is understood and implemented. Additionally, this research contributes to the existing knowledge of play as a learning practice in the childhood education setting. It further strengthens the understanding of various childhood education settings in the education sector, such as mobile ECCE units in South Africa.

Role of Researchers

Our role in this research was to collect data on the views of ECCE practitioners in mobile units about their understanding of play pedagogy and how they implement it to provide the foundation for education in young children in resource-scared areas. The study was conducted in rural communities in the Free State, South Africa, where two organisations operated fully functional mobile ECCE units. We are academics and researchers at the University of the Free State (UFS) and the University of South Africa who have been directly involved in children's education in South Africa for many years. We believe this research is necessary and valuable for broader childhood education practitioners, childhood education preservice and in-service teachers, and relevant education stakeholders. Consequently, the results of this study should be used as reference material, which is still limited, especially on the concept of mobile ECCE units.

Literature Review

The literature about mobile ECCE units, particularly in rural and resourced scarce settings, highlights the profound impact of these initiatives on children's holistic development. Research

consistently underlines ECCE's crucial role in establishing a foundation for lifelong learning and socio-economic well-being, linking access to high-quality early childhood programmes to enhanced cognitive abilities, social skills, and academic achievement (Ghosh, 2024). In the context of rural communities, where geographical isolation and limited resources often worsen disparities in access to quality education, mobile ECCE units have emerged as a promising solution to bridge these gaps (Ghosh, 2024). Through a synthesis of empirical evidence and theoretical frameworks, the literature provides a comprehensive understanding of mobile ECCE units in the South African context and play pedagogies in developing core skills in young children (Ghosh, 2024).

Mobile Early Childhood Care and Education Units

Mobile ECCE units provide flexible and accessible early learning opportunities for children in underserved areas. These services are provided within equipped vehicles with staff who deliver educational programmes, health check-ups and nutritional support directly to underprivileged communities (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021). UNESCO addresses the barriers of geographic isolation and economic hardship to ensure children's holistic development and preparation for school (UNESCO, 2020).

The mobile ECCE units regularly involve parents and community members to foster a supportive and conducive learning environment that prioritises parental engagement in children's education (Selepe et al., 2024b). This innovative approach is crucial for reducing educational inequities and promoting early childhood development (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2022). The significance of the availability of relevant resources in ECCE cannot be overstated. Quality educational materials, trained practitioners and supportive ECCE environments are crucial for fostering early cognitive and social development in children. Adequate resources ensure that children receive quality education, which includes literacy, numeracy and emotional, cognitive, and physical development (UNICEF, 2022). Moreover, ECCE teaching resources yield long-term benefits by promoting school readiness and reducing future educational inequities (Selepe, Nhase et al., 2024)

Furthermore, the Department of Basic Education (2015) NCF emphasises the significance of employing high-quality materials in ECD to support children's holistic development. This entails offering books suitable for the children's age and hiring skilled and experienced professionals who can use these resources well and modify their teaching strategies to accommodate children's needs and interests (Ghosh, 2024). We explored the practitioners' perspectives on play pedagogy and how they implement it to improve children's overall development in mobile ECCE units.

Play Pedagogies

The strategy of play-based learning has gained momentum in ECCE because of its many benefits. Consequently, numerous definitions of play have emerged due to increased scholarly research. This resulted in much uncertainty among researchers, theorists, teachers and practitioners, particularly when attempting to conceptualise play, comprehend its function in the learning and development of young learners, and implement play as a practice within rural areas. According to Selepe (2021), play is a pedagogical practice teachers rely on to enhance social interaction skills. Parker et al. (2022) agree that play pedagogies require teachers to create rich social environments, interactive games and group activities. Palaiologou (2020) asserts that musical and digital play activities stimulate learners' skills to foster holistic child development. In other words, by integrating play into the learning process in ECCE, practitioners can create a rich, engaging and supportive environment that stimulates all aspects of a child's development. Hence, this paper examined practitioners' narratives to understand how play as a teaching-learning pedagogy in early childhood mobile units can enhance the general development of children in ECCE spaces.

Play-based Learning and Core Skills

Play is often defined as an intrinsically motivated, voluntary and enjoyable activity that promotes creativity, exploration, and learning in a non-threatening environment (Forbes, 2021). In the context of

playful pedagogy, the focus shifts to the deliberate integration of play into teaching practices to foster engagement, holistic development and active participation. Scholars like Vygotsky highlight the role of play in cognitive and socio-emotional development, emphasising its ability to scaffold learning and facilitate the zone of proximal development (Forbes, 2021). For this study, playful pedagogy is an approach that employs structured and unstructured play-based activities to create a meaningful, learner-centred educational experience. This definition emphasises the balance between child-led exploration and teacher-guided instruction, making it a dynamic tool for learning across diverse educational contexts (Forbes, 2021).

Play as a learning pedagogy is generally conceptualised as developing children's core skills. Accordingly, play can contribute to and support the development of core physical, emotional, social and cognitive skills of a child's being (Parker et al., 2022). For example, movement play develops children's fine and gross motor skills, while sensory play develops brain cells (Creekpaum, 2019). Significantly, different types of games accelerate the acquisition of social skills between children and adults (Garner, 2021), thus revealing that play-based learning encourages children to indulge in activities that help them relate to the world and the people they encounter. However, existing research pays little attention to supporting ECCE practitioners in effectively implementing play-based learning at ECCE mobile units. Since play-based teaching-learning has become popular at crèches, coordinating and arranging professional opportunities for practitioners to share and grasp modern trends in teaching ECCE children has become imperative. Hence, this paper contributes to the literature by investigating practitioners' understanding of play as a learning pedagogy in ECCE mobile units.

Incorporating Play-based Learning in ECCE

Literature was reviewed from different regions that used empirical methods; however, it was noted that little research was conducted concerning incorporating play as a learning pedagogy in mobile ECCE units. Although Selepe, Mofokenget al. (2024) explored the views and beliefs of practitioners regarding the use of play pedagogy in rural ECCE, their focus was not on ECCE mobile units. They used an interpretive qualitative case study approach by collecting data from six practitioners in Limpopo (South Africa) through semi-structured interviews, document analysis and non-participant observations. Their findings revealed that more resources were needed to improve early years' environments and effectively incorporate play pedagogies in rural ECCE settings. Therefore, this study is different because the focus is on mobile ECCE practitioners in the rural areas of the Free State.

Additionally, studies by Zama and Mashiya (2022) explored ECCE teachers' experiences integrating activities from the six early learning developmental areas of the NCF (Department of Basic Education, 2011). However, their study did not focus on play pedagogies but on NCF-related matters that guided practitioners in ECCE. Through purposive sampling, they selected six ECCE teachers from the three ECCE rural mobile units in the KwaZulu-Natal province. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, personal records (lesson plans and theme books), and official planning documents (NCF) used by the participants (Zama & Mashiya, 2022). Their findings demonstrated the importance of collaboration among teachers to interpret the NCF, select relevant themes and identify activities that could be integrated into lessons. Zama and Mashiya (2022) recommend that there should be teamwork in ECCE to develop learners' core skills and school readiness.

The Development of Core Skills in ECCE

Play pedagogy, which emphasises learning through play, is recognised for its effectiveness in promoting the development of core skills in young children. This section of the literature review considered current research on how practitioners incorporate play pedagogy to foster cognitive, language, social, emotional and physical development in ECCE; for instance, when children engage in musical play, they develop mental and movement skills. The research by Alam and Mohanty (2023) confirms that children develop motor skills through musical play, while language development is enhanced through wordplay. According to Stenius et al. (2022), children use words to express their emotions while playing. They discover new ground through playful activities that facilitate interaction with the world around them, thus emphasising that children develop social skills as they explore their feelings, learn how to express

themselves, and share play experiences (Hamzah et al., 2023). Children learn to move (mobility), balance and lift objects during play. Lastly, Cheraghi et al. (2022) corroborate that physical play helps them develop the fundamental movement skills that contribute to fine and gross motor development.

Theoretical Framework

The study is underpinned by the theoretical lens of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to understand mobile ECCE practitioners' views of play pedagogy and how they implement play pedagogy in their mobile units, considering the sociocultural context of the communities where mobile ECCE units are utilised. Sociocultural theory (SCT) explains how individual mental functioning relates to its cultural, historical, and institutional context (Shabani, 2016). It is informed by the notion that learning is a product of social interactions involving adults and peers (Vygotsky, 1978), in this case, the mobile ECCE practitioners and children. It attends to the broader social system in which learning occurs and draws on individual thinking and development interpretations based on participating in culturally organised activities (Stott, 2016). Within Vygotsky's SCT for this study, we used the following tenets: social interaction and zone of proximal development (ZPD).

Vargas-Hernández and Vargas-González (2022) highlight the importance of social interactions in play pedagogy, particularly the principle of ZPD; adding that individualistic play pedagogy limits the potential to exploit ZPD activities. Hence, Bredikyte and Hakkarainen (2023) emphasise the role of mutual interventions in adult-child play. Further, Panhwar et al. (2016) exemplify the significance of peer interaction in play by exploring the benefits of self-directed age-mixing in play, particularly within democratic school settings. Play processes are deeply rooted in sociocultural theories of learning, which highlight the significance of social interactions and cultural tools in cognitive development, particularly concerning children's ZPDs during play activities (Panhwar et al., 2016). In the context of this study, the interactions between ECCE practitioners and children regarding how learning materials are manipulated to enrich play activities that promote children's holistic development demonstrated the ZPD; that is, the space between what a learner can do without assistance and what a learner can do with adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978).

When play pedagogy is viewed through sociocultural theory, it becomes a valuable tool for learning, particularly in a collaborative context (Karpushina et al., 2020). This collaborative nature of play mirrors Vygotsky's emphasis on learning as a social process (Souza Amorim et al., 2022), which engages children in interactive collaborations crucial for their cognitive growth and language development (Topçiu & Myftiu, 2015). Moreover, play provides a rich opportunity for developing symbolic and theatrical representation capacities, imagination, and creativity (Karpushina et al., 2020). However, the role of play in learning can be hindered by factors such as (among others) the lack of opportunities for social interaction, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Souza Amorim et al., 2022).

In summary, social interactions play a critical role in the ZPD, particularly within the context of play pedagogy. Rooted in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the ZPD emphasises the space where children can achieve higher levels of understanding and skill development through guided interactions with more knowledgeable peers or adults. In play pedagogy, this manifests as collaborative activities that encourage children to engage in problem-solving, role-playing and exploration of new concepts within a supportive social framework. Through these interactions, practitioners scaffold learning by providing timely assistance and gradually withdrawing support as children gain independence. Play thus becomes a dynamic context for cognitive and social development, nurturing not only the acquisition of knowledge but also critical social skills such as cooperation, negotiation and empathy. This highlights the importance of structured yet flexible play environments where children can stretch their capabilities within their ZPD.

Methods

Overview of the Research Study

This article is drawn from extensive research conducted on mobile ECCE units in the Free State,

South Africa. However, for this specific article, we focus solely on practitioners' understanding of play and how they implement it in their mobile units to develop core skills and quality education in children. The research is funded by a non-governmental organisation, Hosken Consolidated Investments Foundation (HCIF), Cape Town, South Africa. The foundation hypothetically (HCIF, 2021) argues that children who attend mobile units where the eight indicators are functional would experience successful formal schooling. We are looking at indicator number four of the eight indicators for this article; delivery of transformative, high-quality and play-based early learning. See Figure 1.

Figure 1
Eight indicators for units of excellence (HCIF, 2021)
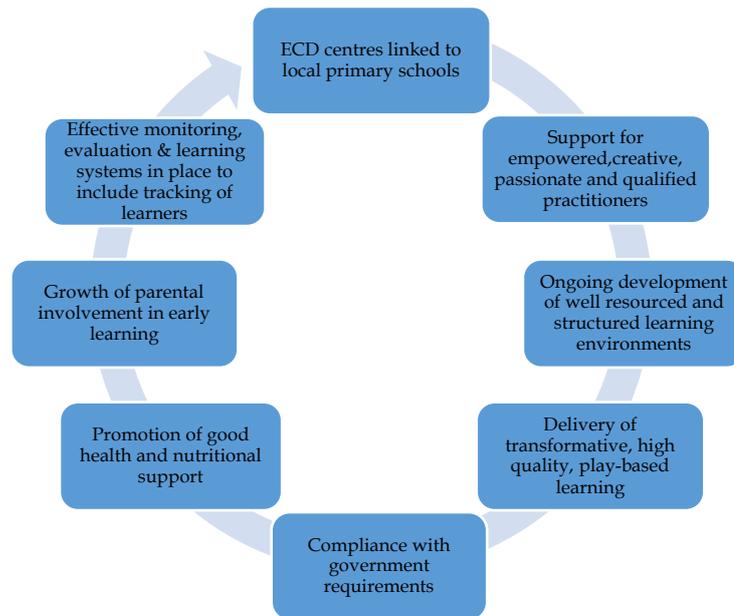
Research Design

Subsequently, the study's primary objective warranted that we adopt the qualitative research design to obtain data from 20 purposefully selected mobile ECE practitioners (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) from two organisations providing mobile ECCE services in the Free State, South Africa. Qualitative research is the methodical gathering, arranging, and analysing of textual data extracted from verbal communication or discussions (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Qualitative investigations at the foundational level allow researchers to comprehensively understand individuals' lived experiences, behaviours, emotions and organisational functioning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For this reason, a qualitative research method was used; as researchers and academics who work with preservice childhood education teachers, we were interested in understanding mobile practitioners' understanding of play pedagogy and how they implement it (Alam, 2021). We used the interpretive paradigm as it is suitable for this study (Pewa & Mzimela, 2024). Aligned with this approach, we adopted the phenomenological research design because of the interest in understanding the subjective views of the participants on the objective under study (Neupane, 2024). Data was obtained by conducting semi-structured interviews following an interview guide subjected to thorough scrutiny to identify themes per the research question and objective.

Selection of Participants

This research included 20 ECCE practitioners from two mobile units in the Free State, South Africa. Identifying participants for this study was not challenging for us as researchers. As mentioned above, the study was drawn from the larger research project, and it focused only on the existing mobile ECCE units in the Free State that the HCIF supported. Campbell et al. (2020) maintain that participants' experiences should directly relate to the aim of the study, which in this case involved eliciting mobile ECCE

practitioners' experiences regarding their experience of working in mobile ECCE units and understanding the ECCE context. This enriched and strengthened the study's findings per the research objectives and questions.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Through the interpretive phenomenological approach, we engaged directly with mobile ECCE practitioners through semi-structured interviews to uncover the intricacies of their interactions and understanding of play pedagogy and how they implemented play pedagogy as a teaching strategy during their teaching. An audio recorder was used (with permission) to record participants' responses and increase the study's credibility and authenticity (Coleman, 2022); in addition to verbatim transcriptions from audio recordings, the interview transcripts were imported into Atlas.ti for analysis.

In arriving at the units, we physically introduced ourselves as a team, as we had initially communicated with practitioners through emails. The practitioners were ready and had planned how the interview sessions would take place with each of them. In this way, they accommodated everyone and simultaneously ensured that their teaching was not disrupted on the days of our visits. We visited the units four times to ensure all 20 practitioners were successfully interviewed. This prolonged engagement enhanced the credibility of the findings since interviews data were obtained only from the selected participants (Coleman, 2022). Each interview session was 30–45 minutes long. Some examples of questions were: What are the practitioners' understanding of play pedagogy? How do practitioners plan to implement play pedagogy in the physical spaces of mobile units? What resources do practitioners use when teaching during the implementation of play pedagogy? How do practitioners develop and implement play pedagogy to develop core skills and quality education in children? Thus, Our overall objective regarding this article was to understand practitioners' understanding of play pedagogy and how they implement it to develop core skills and quality education in children.

Measures of Trustworthiness

We achieved data credibility through peer debriefing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition, it was ensured that data from this study would be transferable. Stahl and King (2020) contend that to facilitate transferability; researchers should assume a position encouraging thick descriptions, adding that a transferability criterion remains a suggestion, and its applicability depends on the researcher's discretion. Also, the principle of data dependability, which addresses issues related to the consistency and repeatability of a particular study in other contexts and reaching the same or similar outcomes, was adhered to (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). Notably, we have prioritised the achievement of trustworthiness by ensuring data confirmability. According to Sabnis and Wolgemuth (2024), confirmability relates to the extent to which the findings of qualitative research are purely informed by the participants' views, without any manipulation by the subjective ideas of the researchers. Confirmability was ensured by providing comprehensive methodological descriptions demonstrating how conclusions were reached and reported in this study.

Data Analysis

We organised the data by identifying similarities and differences to emerge with patterns before conducting the analysis. Although the most fruitful approach to answering the research questions was identifying themes and patterns during data gathering, transcribing, editing and coding, we had to be patient when looking for new codes. This led to comparing datasets regularly as we attempted to classify and label the data for explanation and clarity (Locke et al., 2022). The interview data was transcribed and coded using Atlas.ti software. The codes were created using the keywords from the research questions. Furthermore, we created and developed categories guided by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, looking at social interactions and using the ZPD while implementing play pedagogy. We also identified connections, correlations, implications for theory and topics for future research to expand this study area. In addition, the analysis of qualitative data was conducted using Atlas. ti software at two levels: the method level and the process level (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Figure 2 outlines the generic qualitative data

analysis method:

Figure 2
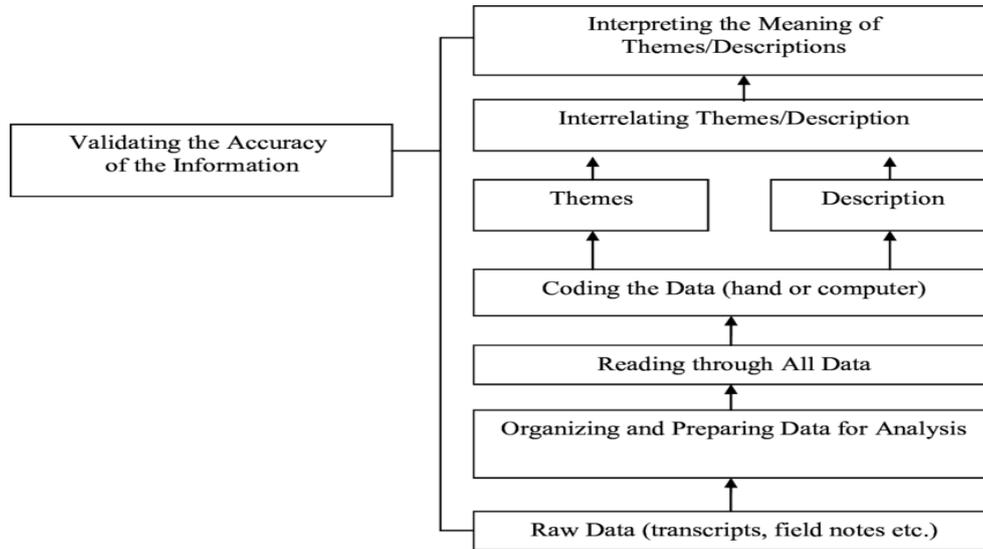*The generic qualitative data analysis method (Creswell & Creswell, 2018)*

Figure 2 represents an iterative coding process to develop categories later formulated into several themes. Data analysis involved two phases of data coding. In the first phase, we coded data manually. Thus, the coding process undertaken in this analysis was built inductively from the raw data collected from 20 ECCE practitioners. In final co-coding, interview data was imported into the Atlas.ti software for further analysis. In this phase, an independent coder was employed to co-code the transcribed data, which enhanced the accuracy of the coding process and the credibility of the findings (Brethet et al., 2023). Reliability of the findings was achieved by reducing biases and pursuing transparency in the coding, co-coding and analysis processes. After concluding the analysis processes, several themes emerged. They are presented in the section on findings and interpretation, supported by verbatim responses (in excerpts) from the practitioners' information.

Ethical Considerations

The visiting arrangements were made beforehand and only after all ethical considerations were obtained. The ethical considerations included the HCIF organisation, the practitioners of the mobile units, and the UFS's ethical committee. The ethics certificate (UFS-HSD2022/0808/22) was issued by the General/Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Free State. After this approval, gatekeepers obtained permission through letters to the mobile ECCE management to enable us to talk to and interview the practitioners. In addition, informed consent was obtained from all 20 practitioners who participated in this study. After that, different interview sessions were conducted with the participants on their mobile settings. Participants' freedom and dignity were top priorities to protect the mobile units' reputations and avoid the impression of a conflict of interest; thus, pseudonyms were assigned to practitioners (1-20) and Organisation Units (Units A and B). We had to drive to the areas where the two mobile ECCE units were operating to observe the environment and surrounding areas.

Findings and Discussions

In line with the research objective of this study, four themes emerged: Theme one, understanding play-based pedagogy, was developed in response to research question 1. Theme two, maintaining a high level of transformative delivery; theme three, used as a high-quality learning pedagogy; and theme four, development of core skills, were developed under research question 2.

- What is the mobile early childhood care and education practitioners' understanding of play pedagogy?
- How do mobile early childhood care and education practitioners implement play pedagogy in their units?

Theme 1: Understanding Play-based Pedagogy

For this article, we aimed to understand the practitioners' views about their understanding of play pedagogy. The narratives below highlight the practitioners' understanding of play pedagogy.

> Play pedagogy is the learner-centred teaching method; we talk to the children, play with them and interact with them. Then we have the concepts area where children learn concentration, colours and sizes. Mathematics is also included. Then there is the art area where children learn to draw and paint (P14).

> For the children, the most important thing is playtime. Because my children are too young, they usually must play to have fun. They are learning because we use fingers, we use homemade instruments, so they learn (P1).

> OK, they also exercise to be healthy through playing. It is playing, it is exercising, it is also stretching (P2).

> We have outdoor equipment; children have wheels, hula-hoops, balls and Skittles. Those are the materials that we use for children to play (P4).

Practitioners' understanding of play pedagogy was evident during their interviews. They explained how they view the importance of play and its use during learning and developing learners' skills. The responses of practitioners provide evidence that they understood play-based pedagogy. For example, practitioners highlighted that play pedagogy is a learner-centred teaching method. In addition, they highlighted the kind of material they used to implement play pedagogy in their classrooms.

Theme 2: Maintaining a High Level of Transformative Delivery

The interview results demonstrated that mobile ECCE practitioners maintained high levels of transformative delivery through play-based pedagogies. Maintaining a high level of transformative delivery for this study highlights the incorporation of learner-centred methodologies and play pedagogies in mobile ECCE units. Again, this was evident in the type of resources the practitioners highlighted during the interviews and discussions with them. For example, the following practitioners highlighted that they had enough materials to use when teaching and using play pedagogy in their units.

> Yes, our instructional teaching materials are enough because we do not have many children in our unit. So, the instructional materials are enough (P18).

> Yes, the instructional materials are available, and they are enough. We have toys and other learning materials to support learning (P19).

> For outside play learning, we have the swim and other resources, outside Skittles, big walls, small balls, water play and sea play(P2).

Consequently, the UNICEF (2018) and the Department of Basic Education (2011) agree that teaching and learning in the ECCE should integrate child-centred activities into play-based pedagogies and resources that will promote and develop quality learning. The findings of this paper indicate that mobile ECCE practitioners understand the importance of high transformative play learning pedagogy. Furthermore, the findings indicate that practitioners maintained a high level of transformative delivery, which involved play-based early learning activities at their various mobile units to develop core skills. It further demonstrated that practitioners understood the importance of learner-centred play pedagogies. The literature from Leung (2023) corroborates that practitioners can develop learner-centred knowledge even in children's social interaction skills. This finding is also supported by the study's theoretical framework which highlights the value of social interactions in play pedagogy (Vargas-Hernández & Vargas-González, 2022). Hence, this study contends that to maintain a high level of transformative play pedagogy in mobile ECCE units, practitioners need to integrate learner-centred activities by employing play as a learning pedagogy to develop social interaction skills among children.

Theme 3: Used As a High-quality Learning Pedagogy

High-quality learning pedagogy refers to the utilisation of different types of play pedagogies. The Department of Basic Education (2011) agrees that delivering high-quality learning pedagogy employs play activities such as fantasy, word and physical play. This study revealed that practitioners used play-based strategies as a form of high-quality pedagogy. During the interviews, they described how they used play-based approaches in their mobile units, as enunciated below:

> We believe children develop, learn and thrive through play. It is important because children are acquiring skills through play. They learn through play because we teach them different themes through play-based activities. We also have fantasy corners for children where they indulge in fantasy play (P12).

> For example, the wordless books; we have books containing pictures. Very often you can pick up a discussion between children through them talking about the pictures. I think play is a very good way of encouraging a child to talk and to open up about what is worrying them (P10).

The narratives elicited from the practitioners demonstrated that play-based activities were integrated into language areas and mathematics. In this regard, P10 explained:

> Let me make an example of another song that I know; it's a Sotho song that says we have five apples in the tree. Then it says if one apple falls down, how many are left? Then they will say it's four. Then I ask again from four - how many are left if the other one falls? It's three. So, that is how they learn easily (P10).

The study also reveals that participants incorporate high-quality learning pedagogy in ECCE programmes at their mobile units. As such, they utilised different play pedagogies in languages, life skills and mathematics. This was evident when P10 mentioned the Sotho song she used to develop language, mathematics, vocabulary and numeracy skills. The literature from Stenius et al. (2022) corroborates that these kinds of songs assist children in developing language and emotional skills. In addition, Vygotsky agrees that different play activities develop different core skills needed in ECCE (Panhwar et al., 2016). Also, knowledge of the ZPD was evident from P10 who stated that play was effective in encouraging a child to talk and to open up about what was worrying them. The research by Selepe et al. (2024) confirms that during play, practitioners should apply ZPD principles to enhance children's social interaction skills. In support, the study's theoretical framework advocated the need for adult-child mutual interventions in play pedagogy as it promotes the ZPD (Bredikyte & Hakkarainen, 2023).

Theme 4: Development of Core Skills

Parker et al. (2022) assert that developing core skills such as physical, emotional, social and cognitive are fundamental in childhood education. For this paper, the practitioners preferred the play-based learning pedagogy because it assists children in developing core skills. Practitioners explained that children's cognitive, problem-solving, concentration, language and socialisation skills are developed through play-based activities. This was substantiated in the excerpts below:

> Through play, even their minds can be developed because when they play, they can see. let us say they play Seeing a Fantastic Day (P3).

> We also have a puzzle area where a child learns problem-solving and concentration. Then we have a book area or the library, where they learn quietness as they focus on books while they learn to read. So, we also have a construction area that is noisy, and there is also a block area where they learn to build structures, so those are the seven areas (P17).

> We learn through play. By learning through play and playing games, we develop language and social skills, and children will be able to socialise with other children. We develop sharing, to be able to share with others (P7).

This study's results revealed that practitioners employed high-quality play pedagogies to develop children's core skills in ECCE, including social, emotional, cognitive, and physical skills. In this regard, P7 explained that they use games to build core skills. Figure 3 depicts children playing a game that develops their core skills. The setting is a play-based and inquiry-based learning approach, where children interact and share ideas in a structured yet engaging environment. Here, the children are playing a tic-tac-toe classic game. For this game, children used paper and pencils to draw the grid and take turns placing their's and's until a winner emerged. This game assists learners in understanding the difference between b and d symbols.

Figure 3

Children playing various games that develop the core skills

Figure 3 depicts how games promote learning in young children when used as a learning pedagogy. Activities involving games promote, among others, life skills, understanding materials, adhering to rules and general well-being. Content knowledge is also acquired through pictures aligned to age-appropriateness. Lastly, the seating arrangement in learning spaces promotes interaction and communication between learners, enhancing creative-thinking and cognitive skills development.

Conclusion and Discussion

The narrative data analysis strategy that we used indicated that the views and experiences of mobile ECCE practitioners demonstrated a high level of delivering transformative, high-quality, play-based early learning activities at various mobile units to develop children's core skills. The findings indicate that ECCE practitioners use play as a learning pedagogy to deliver high-level transformative play activities to develop children's core skills. In addition, they demonstrated that they understand Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory that advocates for integrating social interaction and the ZPD in play pedagogies. The study emphasises that ECCE practitioners need to use teacher-guided play pedagogies in ECCE to develop children's social, emotional, cognitive and physical skills. Moreover, this paper advises that practitioners must acquire the knowledge of legislative frameworks to guide them in successfully utilising play pedagogies in ECCE (Zama & Mashiya, 2022). Furthermore, the various stakeholders involved in operating the mobile units could use the study findings to provide the necessary support and assistance to the practitioners, for example, in terms of training, mentoring and resources in implementing the play pedagogy effectively in the mobile units. Lastly, further research should be conducted by using observations and document analysis to see how mobile ECCE practitioners implement play-based learning in their units. While this study offers valuable insights into the experiences of teachers in South Africa with mobile ECCE, the generalizability of the findings is limited. It is recommended that the study be replicated in other ECCE settings to explore how playful pedagogy can be implemented and to develop content that supports preservice teachers in applying play-based pedagogy in under-resourced areas.

Declarations

a double-blind peer review with external reviewers.

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Integrating playful pedagogies with the curriculum: The perspectives and practices of teachers working across infant, first and second classes, in Ireland

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Abstract: While play is a key feature of the early childhood curriculum, its role in primary education can be more peripheral. In Ireland, a new primary curriculum framework aims to strengthen connections between learning in preschool and school through embedding a playful approach, more dynamically, in the primary context. This paper will share findings from an online mixed methods survey of 293 teachers, working in junior and senior infants and in first and second class. Congruent with research in other countries, findings suggest that while play is associated with a broad range of benefits, and is seen as compatible with learning in school, its potential is not optimised due to a myriad of system, school, teacher, and child features. While the prominence of playful pedagogies in the new primary curriculum framework is welcome, the current findings underscore issues which could impact on the fidelity with which it is implemented. The findings from this study affirm the value of surfacing teachers' perspectives during times of curriculum reform. The perceived enablers and barriers, to adopting playful and innovative pedagogical approaches, can inform the provision of resources and design of supports which will be required to embed play successfully in Irish primary schools. To harness existing best practice and to propel and sustain curriculum innovation, teachers clearly need to be seen as partners rather than mere consumers or receivers of curriculum redevelopment.

Introduction

In Ireland, the national curriculum framework for the early years, *Aistear*, recognises play as a key context for learning (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2024). As *Aistear* is a curriculum for children from birth to 6-years, it incorporates those 4-, 5- and 6-year-olds attending the entry junior and senior infant classes in primary school. While conceptually there is synchronicity between *Aistear*, and the primary school curriculum, the implementation of the *Primary School Curriculum* (NCCA, 1999) has struggled in combining playful learning with a compartmentalised, subject-driven curriculum. The primary school curriculum has continued to set out what children learn while *Aistear* has generally been used to support the development of more playful methodologies, in the entry classes (Keane, 2014).

The *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (Department of Education [DoE], 2023a) proposes to strengthen connections between learning in preschool and school through embedding playful pedagogies, more comprehensively, in primary education. This presents a unique opportunity to build a curriculum which aligns with the evidence on how children learn in addition to fostering continuity in learning (Ring et al., 2018). In reality, however, integrating play and learning in primary school remains problematic (Fisher, 2021; Gray & Ryan, 2016; O'Sullivan & Ring, 2018; Parker et al., 2022; Walsh & Fallon, 2021). As embedding play in the primary school curriculum is a current policy priority, this study

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investigated the perspectives and practices of teachers working across junior and senior infants (4-, 5- and 6-year-olds) and first and second class (7- and 8-year-olds). While there is some research on the use of playful pedagogical approaches in foundation classes, the research on playful approaches, beyond the entry grades, is sparse. In illustrating how play is currently viewed and utilised in practice, this paper identifies the opportunities and challenges of translating current policy directions into practice and can inform a more authentic implementation of the new curriculum framework. Authentic implementation of the curriculum will increase the fidelity with which the formal curriculum framework is implemented in the real world of the classroom. It can also ensure consistency in implementation within, and across schools, nationally.

A Rationale for Playful Learning

A growing corpus of research affirms the potency of playful pedagogical approaches in the classroom (Mardell et al., 2023; Parker et al., 2022; Zosh et al., 2018). Playful pedagogical approaches incorporate child-led, teacher-guided, and teacher-led play experiences. Through leveraging the joyful, active, meaningful, iterative, and social characteristics of learning, a playful pedagogical approach can increase children's motivation and active engagement in learning (Zosh et al., 2018). The concept of playful pedagogies is intended to capture the integrated nature of play and learning across a range of child and teacher-led learning experiences in the classroom (Zosh et al., 2018; Parker et al. 2022)

While the idea that children learn better through play, is well established in the early years, primary education is associated more with formal, seat-based, instructional approaches (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Nicholson & Hendry, 2019; Parker et al., 2022; Walsh & Fallon, 2021; Whitebread & Coltman, 2016). Moreover, while early years curricula tend to espouse a holistic and integrated approach which places equal emphasis all aspects of learning, primary curricula have been more concerned with content and academic skills. This has been perpetuated by the global education reform movement or GERM, which in driving the standardisation of education, erodes the status of play in school (Ring & O'Sullivan, 2018; Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019). This practice of introducing academic learning too early has been criticised for its potential to create inequality of educational opportunity, for children, from their first engagement with formal education (Ring & O'Sullivan, 2018). Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek (2016) suggest that in addition to content knowledge, collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creative innovation, and confidence are the core skills needed for "21st-century" wellness and success. Children benefit from opportunities to develop these competences, or 6 C's, across a range of high-quality playful learning experiences. Playful learning can be particularly valuable in boosting the achievement of learners with diverse abilities, closing the gap between low and high achievers (Dowd & Stjerne Thomsen, 2021). Moreover, the evidence suggests that playful approaches have currency beyond the entry grades, benefiting learners of all ages (Mardell et al., 2023; Pino-Pasternak, et al., 2014; Parker et al., 2022). While extending playful learning into the foundation grades is important, pedagogy in subsequent grades must also align with children's learning preferences. As children move through primary school, however, learning tends to become more academically driven and less playful (Conklin, 2014; Devine et al., 2023; Parker et al., 2022; Trawick-Smith, 2015).

Moving towards a Playful Pedagogical Approach in Practice

Research in Ireland and elsewhere attests to the challenge of operationalising a playful integrated pedagogical approach (Fisher, 2021; Gray & Ryan, 2016; Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Nicholson & Hendry, 2019; O'Síoráin et al., 2023; Walsh & Fallon, 2021). At a fundamental level, achieving a shared understanding of playful learning is critical to its success in the classroom. As much of the literature on defining play is more focused on child-directed or free-play, its application in curricula with strong socio-cultural underpinnings, can be limiting. Zosh and colleagues (2018) proffer a useful conceptualisation of playful learning, defining it as learning, which is joyful, meaningful, active, iterative, and social. This aligns with the idea that play is not all or nothing and that activities can be approached with varying degrees of playfulness (Gray, 2013). It is also consistent with the view of playful learning as a continuum which incorporates child-directed play, teacher-guided play and learning opportunities which are led by teachers but maintain elements of

playfulness (Chilvers, 2012; Marbina et al., 2011; Miller & Almon, 2009). As child-directed play, guided-play, and playful teacher-led activities can have a differential impact on various aspects of learning, a balanced curriculum is a pressing pedagogical concern (Goble & Pianta, 2017; Marbina et al., 2011). A balanced curriculum ensures that children are afforded opportunities to work towards curriculum learning outcomes through experiences where leadership oscillates between the teacher and children and where learning intentions are often mutually agreed or co-constructed. Unlike a more traditional pedagogical model of curriculum, a balanced curriculum fosters children's agency and their active engagement in their learning.

Child-directed play provides opportunities for children to follow interests, develop creativity and self-regulation, and consolidate skills and concepts which are the focus of teacher-led activities. In teacher-guided play, the activity remains child-directed but is sensitively scaffolded by teachers to support progression in both play and learning. Effective playful teacher-led activities harness the features of playful learning to build learning experiences which are compatible with children's genuine interests (Chilvers, 2012; Marbina et al., 2011). Project style approaches hold much promise in terms of supporting children to work towards core socio-emotional and academic learning goals across a range of playful, relevant and meaningful experiences (Coltman et al., 2015; Katz, 1994; Mardell et al., 2023). When teachers deliberately connect learning across these various curriculum experiences, they foster integrated learning as children pursue interests and develop important dispositions, knowledge and understanding, skills, and values across a range of playful experiences (Chilvers, 2012; Marbina et al., 2011). This type of balanced, integrated curriculum allows us to locate what Sahlberg and Doyle (2019, p. 309) refer to as the "Sweet Spot" of play in school.

The tensions regarding what and how children learn are well established and difficult to ameliorate. Consequently, changes to the curriculum do not necessarily result in radical changes to pedagogy (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Parker et al., 2022; Mardell et al., 2023; Siraj-Blatchford, 1999). It is also clear that the relationship between play and learning becomes more complex in the context of formal education with more timeworn pedagogies continuing to dominate in many classrooms. While teachers often value play, they do not always integrate it optimally with teaching and the quality of scaffolding can be highly variable (Fisher, 2021; Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Jay & Knaus, 2018). Moreover, as noted by Kagan (1990, p.183),"all totaled, attitudinal, structural, and functional barriers present a nearly unpenetratable panopoly of obstacles", to infusing play in the classroom.

Present Study

At a time of significant change in the primary education landscape in Ireland, we were interested to surface teachers' perspectives on the role of play in learning and their practices in terms of integrating play with the curriculum. Given the emphasis on playful learning for younger learners, we were particularly interested in the views of teachers working with junior and senior infants and first and second class. As teachers will be tasked with implementing the new curriculum framework, understanding their perspectives and practices can support the sucessful transition to a more playful model of curriculum, at primary level.

Method

An online survey was used to investigate the perspectives and practices of teachers working across junior and senior infants and first and second class in mainstream Irish primary schools. A mixed-methods approach was adopted combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The open-ended questions allowed respondents to elaborate on their personal perspectives and reduced the likelihood of artificially created opinions on topics such as beliefs around barriers and enablers of playful learning. Moreover, through adopting this mixed-methods approach responses to some open-ended questions provided further insights into responses to questions with forced-choice responses. Institutional ethical approval was secured for this research which was guided by British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research.*

Participants

Email address for all mainstream state-funded primary schools, in the Republic of Ireland, were sourced from the DoE website. At the point of distribution, there were the 3,104 schools on this list. As teachers are allocated based on total school enrolments, there is no public data in relation to the numbers of teachers working in specific classes. School administrators essentially acted as gatekeepers, distributing the information letter and survey link to relevant staff in their schools. A reminder email was sent two weeks after initial distribution and a notice was circulated in the Irish National Teachers Organisation's *All Member E-Newsletter*. At the close of the survey, 293 valid responses were received. Given this non-probability approach to sampling, it is not intended that findings are interpreted as representative of all teachers working in the focal class grades.

Data Collection

The final survey instrument consisted of 27 items- 21 forced-choice and 6 open-ended questions. Questions were designed to collect information on respondent, school, and class demographics; beliefs about the role of play in learning; how play is incorporated in practice; and on factors which enable or hinder a playful pedagogical approach in the classroom. The survey was hosted on the Qualtrics® platform and was available to respondents in English, and in Irish and English, for those working in Irish-medium schools.

Data Analysis

Responses to closed questions were entered into SPSS®. Simple frequencies and proportions were computed for each item and where relevant, non-parametric statistical tests were conducted to explore for group differences. The Text iQ feature on Qualtrics® was used to code responses to open-ended questions and the principles of content analysis guided the analysis of this data (Denscombe, 2007; Cohen et al., 2018). An initial inductive approach was adopted to coding responses, to the open-ended questions, in twenty initial pilot surveys. The unit of analysis was each response which was coded multiple times, as relevant, to establish the presence of specific words and concepts. The focus of analysis was on the manifest rather than latent content of the text. In addition to investigating the presence of prticular keywords and categories, counts of the occurance of specific keywords inidicated the frequency with which they occurd in the data (Denscombe, 2007; Cohen et al., 2018). This process produced a set of keywords which were then grouped into broader categories creating an a priori framework for analysing final survey responses. This framework was continually reviewed, by the research team, throughout the coding process. Initial categories were modified or elaborated upon i.e., additional keywords, were added, during the analysis. The analysis of data from the forced-choice and open-ended questions revealed significant patterns and prioritiies in the data and allowed for what Cohen and colleagues (2018, p.680) refer to as "speculative inferences" on these respondents perspectives and experiences, to be drawn.

Reliability and Validity

The survey instrument was designed collaboratively by the four members of the research team. The relevant literature and prior survey research (i.e., Walsh & Fallon, 2021) were used to inform the design of the survey instrument. During the pilot phase of the research, an online questionnaire was piloted with twenty teachers with experience working across the focal class grades. Having piloted the questionnaire, the instrument was revised. The presentation and structure were adjusted to make the survey more user-friendly. Questions were added where it became apparent that further information would be needed to answer some questions in adequate depth. To improve the accuracy of results, definitions of key terms such as 'playful pedagogies' were included at the beginning of the survey. The coding framework used to analyse the responses to open-ended questions was reviewed by the research team. Two members of this team were responsible for coding these responses. The Text iQ feature on Qualtrics® allowed both

researchers to code the data simultaenously . During this process, further keywords, occuring in the data were added to the coding framework to enhance reliability.

Limitations

Non-response bias is a limitation in the current study as those who completed the survey may have been more invested in playful pedagogies than those who did not (Denscombe, 2007; Eichhorn, 2021). Non-response bias also occured as not all respondents answered every quesiton in the survey. In addition to non-response stemming from refusal to particiapte, non-response steming from non-contact is a further limitation as not all teachers may have recieved the information and survey link (Denscombe, 2007). Given the non-probability approach to sampling, findings are not interpreted as representative of the perspectives and practices of the entire target population.

Findings

Respondent, School and Class Characteristics

Table 1 provides an overview of respondent demographics. Consistent with national and European data, the majority of respondents were female with lower percentages of respondents in the under 30 and 50 years and over age categories (DoE, 2023b; Organisation for Economic and Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2024). The data in Table 1 reflects the many routes to achieving a recognised Initial Teacher Education (ITE) qualification in Ireland. ITE is offered at undergraduate and at post-graduate level with undergraduate degrees consisting of four-year programmes while the PME (Professional Master of Education) is a two-year programme. Qualifications reported as 'other' included teaching degrees from other jurisdictions. 61% (n =178) of respondents had attained additional qualifications in areas including: early childhood education, social science, and inclusive and special education. 39% (n =115) respondents did not note having achieved any additional qualifications. As illustrated in Table 1, most respondents had more than 10 years teaching experience with the majority also reporting that they had been teaching at the current class level for less than 5 years.

Table 1
Respondent Demographics

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	284	97%
	Male	6	2%
	Other	1	.5%
	Prefer not to say	1	.5%
	Missing	1	
Age	Under 30 years	45	15%
	30-39 years	105	37%
	40-49 years	92	31%
	50 years and over	51	17%
ITE Qualifications	BEd	148	50%
	BEd & Psychology	8	3%
	PGCE	37	13%
	H Dip Education	55	19%
	PME Education	33	11%
	Other	12	4%
Additional Qualifications	Certificate	25	14%
	Diploma	34	19%
	Graduate Certificate	9	5%
	Graduate Diploma	33	18%
	MA	17	10 %
	MEd	35	20%
	Doctorate	1	1%
	Other	24	13%
Teaching Experience	Up to 10 years	87	30%
	More than 10 years	204	70%

	Missing	2	
Number of Years Teaching Current Class	Less than 5 years	182	62%
	Between 6 and 10 years	58	20%
	More than 10 years	53	18%

Geographically, respondents worked across urban (47% n =138) and rural (53% n =154) (missing =1) schools. Reflecting a national trend of reducing class sizes, most respondents (58% n =165) worked in classes with 21 to 30 students, while 4% worked in classes of more than 30 students. Table 2 provides an overview of the class level in which respondents worked. Approximately one-third of primary students in Ireland are taught in a classroom with more than one grade (Quail & Symth, 2014). These classes can involve two consecutive grades (i.e. junior and senior infants in the same classroom) or a multigrade with three or more classes (i.e. junior infants to second class in the same classroom). Children in the entry classes (Junior and Senior Infants) generally range in age from 4 to 6-years and transition to the next class at approximately 7-years. Since the introduction of universal preschool education in 2010, school starting age in Ireland has increased with less 4-year-olds now enrolled in junior infants (DoE, 2024a). In the current sample 39% (n =113) of respondents worked in classes with more than one grade while 61% (n =176) were working in single grade classes. Respondents who selected the Multigrade-other option worked in classrooms catering for: Junior, Seniors and First Class; Junior, Seniors, First and Second Class; First, Second and Third Class; First, Second, Third, and Fourth Class; and Special Classes. 289 respondents answered this question.

Table 2
Class/Classes Respondents were Teaching in

Class	Approx Age	Frequency	Percentage
Junior Infants	5-6 yr olds	68	24%
Senior Infants	6-7 yr olds	56	19 %
Junior and Senior Infants	5-6 yr olds	39	14%
First Class	7 yr olds	30	10 %
Second Class	8 yr olds	22	8%
First and Second Class	7-8 yr olds	18	6%
Multigrade-other	5-12 yr olds	56	19%
Total		289	100%

Beliefs in Relation to the Role of Play in Learning

A number of closed questions explored teacher beliefs about learning through play and formal instruction in school. Four items were adopted from Walsh and Fallon's (2021) survey instrument investigating student teachers' perceptions on play and playful learning experiences: 1) There is too little time for play in primary school, 2) Children learn more through play than formal instruction, 3) Children may not always learn when they play, 4) Teachers can meet the aims and objectives of the curriculum through playful learning approaches. As detailed in Table 3, these closed questions exploring teacher beliefs had response options ranging from 1) strongly disagree, 2) disagree, 3) unsure, 4) agree, and 5) strongly agree. 250 of 293 respondents answered these belief questions.

Table 3
Teachers Beliefs about Learning through Play and Formal Instruction

Level of Agreement with the Staement 'There is too little time for play in Primary School'	
Response	Frequency (Percentage)
Strongly agree	84 (34%)
Agree	101 (40%)
Unsure	28 (11%)
Disagree	34 (14%)
Strongly disagree	3 (1%)
Total	250 (100%)
Level of Agreement with the Staement 'Children Learn more through Play than Formal Instruction'	
Response	Frequency (Percentage)
Strongly agree	55 (22%)
Agree	106 (42%)
Unsure	64 (26%)

Disagree	22 (9%)
Strongly disagree	3 (1%)
Total	250 (100%)
Level of Agreement with the Staement 'Children may not always Learn when they are Playing'	
Response	**Frequency (Percentage)**
Strongly agree	4 (2%)
Agree	70 (28%)
Unsure	41 (16%)
Disagree	100 (40%)
Strongly disagree	35(14%)
Total	250 (100%)
Level of Agreement with the Staement 'Teachers can meet the Aims and Objectives of the Curriculum through Playful Learning Approaches'	
Response	**Frequency (Percentage)**
Strongly agree	89 (35%)
Agree	118 (47%)
Unsure	27 (11%)
Disagree	9 (4%)
Strongly disagree	7 (3%)
Total	250 (100%

Most respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement *there is too little time for play in primary school* (74%, n =185), 15% (n =37) strongly disagreed or disagreed, and 11% (n =28), were unsure. For the purposes of analysis, the data was regrouped into three categories those who strongly disagreed/disagreed with the statement, those who were unsure, and those who strongly agreed/agreed with the statement. Results from an independent-samples Kruskal-Wallis test indicated no statistically significant difference across respondents working in junior and senior infants, first and second classes, and multigrade-other classrooms. Only 10% (n =25) of respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that *children learn more through play than formal instruction,* 26% (n =64) were unsure while a majority of 64% (n =161), agreed or strongly agreed. Again, no statistically significant differences were found in relation to the levels of agreement or disagreement, with this statement, across groups.

When asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement that *children may not always learn when they are playing,* over half of respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed (54%, n =135), 30% (n=74) strongly agreed or agreed, while 16% (n =41) were unsure. For the purposes of analysis, the data was regrouped into three categories those who disagreed (strongly disagreed/disagreed), those unsure, and those who agreed (strongly agreed/agreed) with the statement. Results from an independent-samples Kruskal-Wallis test indicated a difference across groups, H (2) = 7.21, *p* = .03. Follow up pairwise comparison with adjusted p values showed that teachers in junior and senior infant classes were significantly more likely to express disagreement with this statement than those in first and second class (*p* =.02, r = -.2). Results for remaining pairwise comparisons were not statistically significant. Respondents were also asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with the statement that *teachers can meet the aims and objectives of the curriculum through playful learning approaches.* The majority (82%, n =207), strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, 11% (n =27) were unsure, with 7% (n =16) strongly disagreeing or disagreeing. Results from an independent-samples Kruskal-Wallis test indicated a difference across groups, H (2) = 6.46, *p* = .04. Follow up pairwise comparison with adjusted p values showed that teachers in junior and senior infants were significantly more likely to express agreement with this statement than those in first and second class (*p* = .04, r = .4). Results for the remaining pairwise comparisons were not statistically significant.

To investigate teachers' perspectives on the role of play in learning, respondents also answered an open-ended question which asked *what areas of learning do you think play is important for?* 235 of 293 respondents answered this question in the survey. There was consensus that play is important for many areas of learning, particularly for holisitic and integrated learning i.e. *"Where do I start! Independence, problem solving, oral language, writing, SESE, art, drama, Gaeilge (Irish), music - I can't think of any area that it doesn't help!".* References to social competence and communication, language and literacy were also

dominant in the data. Respondents reported benefits across the curriculum subject areas of: SESE (social environmental and scientific education); Mathematics; Arts Education; PE (physical education); SPHE (social personal and health education), and language (English and Irish). There were frequent references to the role of play in supporting children developing mathematical skills and concepts. The value of play for children's emotional wellbeing, cognitive skills, physical skills, imagination and creativity, and self-regulation also featured in the data. The overall frequency of reference to these areas of learning are reported in Table 4.

Table 4

Areas of Learning Play is Considered Important for

Area	Elements	Frequency	Data Extract
Social Competence	Relationships; friendships; empathy; sharing; collaboration; cooperation social skills; teamwork; conflict resolution; interpersonal skills; leadership; play skills; role play skills.	101	"Everything. Especially social skills"
Communication, Language and Literacy	Communication skills; speaking and listening skills; oral language; vocabulary; language fluency; conversation skills; writing; EAL; topic specific language.	99	"Oral language skills, vocabulary development"
Curriculum Content	Science; maths; drama; visual art; physical education; SPHE (social personal and Health education); SESE (social environmental and scientific education); Gaeilge; English; music.	50	"All areas - literacy, numeracy, SESE, SPHE, PE, Visual arts, Music, Drama"
Mathematical Skills & Concepts	Number; pattern; shape; spatial awareness; concrete and abstract mathematical concepts.	35	"Exploring number, shape and patterns"
Emotional Wellbeing	Personality; confidence; self-esteem; self-awareness, empathy; wellbeing; self-help skills; levels of enjoyment; emotional literacy.	35	"Developing their own independence and confidence"
Cognitive Skills	Neurodevelopment; curiosity; problem-solving; abstract concepts; investigating; exploring.	25	"Cognitive development, problem-solving, sustained shared thinking with others"
Physical, Fine and Gross Motor Skills	Physical development; physical skills; gross motor skills; fine motor skills.	18	"Fine and gross motor skills"
Imagination and Creativity	Imagination; imaginative play skills; being inventive.	18	"Developing imagination and creativity"
Self-regulation	Independent learning; adaptability; focus; concentration; perseverance; patience; delayed gratification; planning; adaptability; following rules.	9	"Independent learning"

Playful Learning in Practice

A number of questions were designed to elicit information around how respondents currently utilise play in practice. As indicated in Table 5, respondents were asked how often children experience child-directed play, how long these periods of child directed play are, how often they engage in child-directed play to guide play and learning, and the extent to which they use child-directed play as a context for assessment.

Table 5

How Respondents Utilise Play in Practice

Opportunities for Child-directed Play	
Frequency of child-directed play period	**Frequency (Percentage)**
Less than once weekly	16 (6%)
Once weekly	35 (13%)
On certain days	60 (23%)
Everyday	153 (58%
Total	264 (10%
Duration of Child-directed Play Periods	
Duration of child-directed play period	**Frequency (Percentage)**
Half an hour or less	86 (33%)
Less than an hour	122 (46%)

One hour	48 (18%)
More than an hour	8 (3%)
Total	264 (100%)
Teacher Engagement in Play	
Frequency of Teaching Joining in Play	**Frequency (Percentage)**
Never	12 (5%)
Hardly Ever	31 (12%)
Sometimes	106 (40%)
Regularly	90 (34%)
Always	24 (9%)
Total	263 (100%)
The Extent to which Child-directed Play is used as Context for Assessment	
Child-directed Play used as Context for Assessment	**Frequency (Percentage)**
Never	20 (8%)
Hardly Ever	45 (17%)
Sometimes	105 (40%)
Regularly	80 (30%)
Always	14 (5%)
Total	264 (100%)

There was variation in terms of how often respondents reported providing opportunities for child-directed play in their classrooms. Overall, 42% of respondents (n =111) reported that they do not provide daily opportunities for child-directed play while 58% (n =153) reported that they provide daily opportunities for play. For the purposes of analysis, categories were regrouped into two broader categories-those who reported providing daily play opportunities and does who did not provide for play, daily. Results from an independent-samples Kruskal-Wallis test indicated a difference across groups, H (2) =49.05, p = <001. Follow up pairwise comparison with adjusted p values showed that teachers in junior and senior infants (p = <.001, r = .4), and in multigrade-other classes (p =. <001, r = -.3), reported providing more opportunities for child-directed play than teachers working in first and second class.

Respondents were also asked to indicate how long a typical period of child-directed play lasts in their classroom. Only 21% (n =56) of respondents reported providing play periods lasting for an hour or more with 79% (n =208), providing play periods of less than one hour. For the purposes of analysis, categories were regrouped into two broader categories- those who reported providing play periods of an hour or more and those providing play periods of less than an hour. There was no statistically significant difference across groups with regard to the duration of play periods. Most teachers in junior and senior infants, first and second class, and multigrade-other classes reported providing less than an hour of child-directed play each day.

Respondents were asked how regularly, as teachers, they join in child-directed play to guide play and learning. 263 out of 293 respondents answered this question. Only 43% (n =114) reported regularly or always joining in child-directed play to guide play and learning. Again, for the purposes of analysis, categories were regrouped into two broader categories- those who reported regularly (regularly, always) joining in play and those who did not regularly join in play (sometimes, hardly ever, never). When this data was analysed for group differences, results of a Kruskal-Wallis test indicated significant differences across groups H (2) =12.27, p = .002. Follow up pairwise comparisons with adjusted p values indicated that teachers in junior and senior infants were significantly more likely to report regularly joining in play than those teachers in first and second class (p = .001, r = .2).

When asked how often they use child-directed play as a context to assess children's learning, only 36% (n =94) of respondents reported regularly or always using child-directed play as a context for assessment with the remainder only using play sometimes, hardly ever, or never, as a context to assess learning. 264 of 293 respondents answered this question. For the purposes of analysis, categories were regrouped into two broader categories- those who reported that they regularly/always used child-directed play a context for assessment and those who reported using child-directed play as a context for assessment sometimes/hardly ever/never. When the data was analysed for group differences, results of a Kruskal-

Wallis test indicated statistically significant differences across groups H (2) =11.71, *p* = .003. Pairwise comparisons indicated that teachers in junior and senior infants (*p* = .005, r = .2), and those in mutli-grade other classes *(p = .009,* r = -.2), were more likely to report using child-directed play as a context for assessment than those in first and second class.

When asked when children in their classes get to engage in child-directed play outside, the majority (56% n =148) reported that children get to engage in child-directed play outside during break time, 3% (n =9) reported that his happens during class time, while 41% (n =107) provided opportunities for children to play at break time and during class time. There was no statistically significant difference across groups with regards to the opportunities provided for children to play outside across classes. 264 out of 293 respondents answered this question.

Integrating Play across Curricular Areas

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they incorporated play across teacher-led lessons in the seven subject areas of the primary school curriculum (Gaeilge (Irish), English, mathematics, social, environmental, and scientific education (SESE), arts (Music, drama, and visual arts), physical education (PE), and sSocial, personal and health education (SPHE). Religious education (RE), which is the responsibility of the school patron, in the Irish context (O'Connell et al., 2023), was also included in the question. As outlined in Table 6, for each subject area, response options ranging from 1) never 2) hardly ever 3) sometimes 4) regularly, to 5) always, were provided.

Table 6
*The Extent to which Teachers Incorporate Play during Teacher-led Lessons across Curriculum Subjects*

Subject	Never	Hardly Ever	Sometimes	Regularly	Always	Missing
	Frequency (Precentage)	Frequency (Precentage)	Frequency (Precentage)	Frequency (Precentage)	Frequency (Precentage)	
Gaeilge	6 (3%)	17 (8%)	73 (33%)	105 (48%)	19 (9%)	73
English	5 (2%)	10 (5%)	66 (31%)	101 (47%)	31 (15%)	80
Mathematics	1 (1%)	13 (6%)	54 (25%)	114 (52%)	37 (17%)	74
SESE	3 (1%)	24 (11%)	65 (30%)	99 (45%)	27 (12%)	75
SPHE	2 (1%)	32 (15%)	93 (42%)	72 (33%)	18 (8%)	76
Arts	5 (2%)	31 (14%)	73 (34%)	79 (36%)	29 (13%)	76
PE	2 (1%)	9 (4%)	45 (21%)	92 (42%)	69 (32%)	76
RE	44 (20%)	71 (35%)	73 (36%)	23 (11%)	7 (3%)	75

*values have been rounded and may not sum to exactly 100%

Figure 1. further illustrates these trends in relation to how often play is incorporated with teacher-led learning activities across the various subjects of the primary school curriculum. Play was incorporated, to some extent, in teacher-led lessons in all curriculum areas.

Figure 1
The Extent to which Teachers Incorporate Play during Teacher-led Lessons across Curriculum Subjects
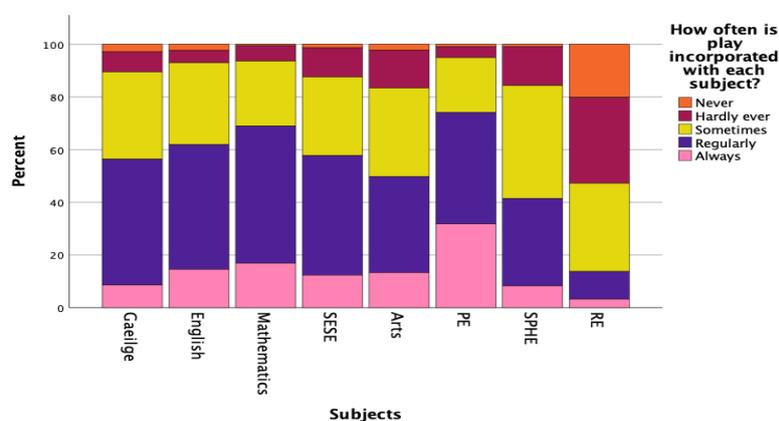
For the purposes of analysis, this data was regrouped into two categories- those who regularly/always reported incorporating play with the subject, and those who reported sometimes/hardly ever/never incorporating play with the subject. The results of a Friedman's ANOVA indicated that there were differences across subject areas, $\chi^2(7) = 305.19$, $p = .001$. Follow up pairwise comparisons found that teachers reported that they were less likely to incorporate play into RE than all other subject areas (Gaeilge (*p* = .001, r =.-5), English (*p* = .001, r =.-5), Maths (*p* = .001, r = -.5), SESE (*p* = .001, r = -.5), Arts (*p* = .001, r =.-4), PE (*p* = .001, r = -.5), and SPHE (*p* = .001, r = -.4). No statistically significant results were found for the remaining pairwise comparisons.

Enablers and Barriers to Playful Learning

Two open ended questions explored perceptions of the factors which enabled and hindered playful learning. Respondents articulated a myriad of factors which impinged on their capacity to implement a playful approach in practice. Analysis of the data suggests that barriers and enablers can be interpreted as occurring at the level of the education system, school, teacher, and child. Notable enablers and barriers occurring in the data are presented in Table 7.

Table 7
Barriers and Enablers of a Playful Approach: System, School, Teacher and Child Features

Education System Features	
Barriers	**Enablers**
• Administration load • Accountability • Student-teacher ratios • Lack of support staff • Overloaded curriculum • Underfunding • Priority given to traditional pedagogical approaches • Expectations around documenting and assessing learning	• *Aistear* (The early childhood curriculum framework) • A more open curriculum • Less emphasis on academic skills • Tools to support planning a playful integrated curriculum. • Tools for assessing learning through play • Government approved and funded continuing professional learning programmes • Teacher agency • Communities of practice
School	
Barriers	**Enablers**
• Lack of space, resources**,** and storage • Teachers responsible for sourcing resources themselves • Lack of time to plan for play • Expectations of management • Parents, colleagues, and management having a lack of awareness around the role of play in learning • Priority given to traditional pedagogical approaches	• A whole school approach to play • Adequate space, resources and storage • Sharing resources across classes • Time for planning for play • Being assigned to same class yearly • Additional support staff • Team teaching • Inclusion of children's voices • Support from management • Peer mentoring • Teacher agency • Supporting parental knowledge and understanding of playful learning • Positive feedback from parents
Teacher Features	
Barriers	**Enablers**
• Poor classroom management skills • Lack of knowledge and skills to implement a playful approach • Reliance on traditional pedagogical approaches • Lack of experience • Lack of confidence	• Teacher experience • Teacher knowledge and understanding • Teacher playfulness • Teacher confidence and motivation • Teacher creativity • Engagement in continuing professional learning
Child Features	
Barriers	**Enablers**
• Younger children • Children assessed with additional needs • Children presenting with self-regulation challenges	• Older children • Well-developed play skills • Playing in mixed ability groups

• Children who do not have well developed play skills	• Children learning through peer modelling
	• Appropriate class rules and boundaries
	• Self-regulatory competence
	• Additional adults to support children's engagement in child-led play and learning

Discussion

Findings from the present survey, coupled with those from previous research in Ireland and elsewhere, illustrate the problematic passage of playful pedagogy, from the periphery, in primary school. The present findings concur with those from previous research which suggest that the value teachers attach to play is continuing to increase (Hunter & Walsh, 2014). Teachers' acknowledgement of the contribution of play to holistic and integrated learning chimes with the proposed shift, in the new Primary Curriculum Framework, from a compartmentalised subject-driven curriculum to a more flexible, meaningful and integrated programme of learning (Ring et al., 2018; DoE, 2023a). In the current study, play was seen as most impactful for social competence, communication, language and literacy. This aligns with the theoretical underpinnings of the redeveloped curriculum which underscore learning as a socially shared process, and communication, language and literacy as a bedrock of learning success. While the majority of teachers believed that there is too little time for play in school, that children learn more through play than formal instruction, notable too are the dissenting and uncertain voices. Teachers working in junior and senior infants were more likely, than those working in first and second class, to believe that they could meet the aims and objectives of the curriculum through playful approaches. Furthermore, those teachers working in first and second class were less likely to express disagreement with the statement that 'children may not always learn when they are playing'. Since the publication of *Aistear*, the early childhood curriculum framework, in 2009, teachers working in junior and senior infants may have more experience utilising playful pedagogical approaches which are often less well embedded beyond the early primary grades (Fisher, 2021; Devine et al., 2023). This may influence first and second class teachers' beliefs around the role of play in the curriculum. Disagreement and uncertainty may also be explained by personal beliefs which are inconsistent with playful learning; a lack of knowledge and understanding of the role of play in learning; or less than optimal prior experience of integrating play in practice (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Irish National Teachers Organisation [INTO], 2023).

Teachers in first and second class groupings were less likely than their colleagues (in junior and senior infants and in multigrade-other classes) to provide daily opportunities for play, to join in play, or to use child-directed play as a context for assessment. This reflects a fairly established pattern whereby play becomes more peripheral as children move up through the more senior classes, often used more as an incentive or reward rather than as a primary pedagogy (Conklin, 2014; Devine et al., 2023; Fisher, 2021; Hunter & Walsh, 2014). It could be hypothesised that in circumstanes where children in more senior classes are taught in the same classroom as infants, they continue to benefit from the play provision for their younger classmates. Through adopting a differentiated and integrated approach, teachers in multigrade classrooms can work towards the curriculum objectives of both infant and subsequent grades. Moreover, incorporating play in multigrade contexts can encourage the type of mixed-age group learning which benefits both younger and older children (Gray, 2013; Leogue-Moran, 2014). While ideally, children benefit from an hour, or more, to plan and develop complex collaborative play, the majority of teachers report that they are not providing an hour or more for periods of child-directed play (Miller & Almon, 2009; Trawick-Smith, 2015; Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019). This supports the contention that a reliance on teacher-led instruction, to achieve curriculum aims and objectives, can have the net effect of reducing the amount of time for child-directed play, in school (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Gray & Ryan, 2016; Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Miller & Almon, 2009). Despite its affordances, the outdoors tends to be underutilised in school and the current findings suggest that for many children, play outdoors is confined to break times (Mardell et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated the benefits of the outdoor environment and while opportunities to play and learn outside are increasing, further expansion is both desirable and achievable (Mannion et al., 2015; O'Donnell, 2022). Sahlberg and Doyle's (2019, p. 82), for example, recommend that

school-aged children experience "at least an hour free outdoor play every day, and give them up to 20% of their indoor time for intellectual free-play and self-directed "passion projects" of their own" (Sahlberg & Doyle 2019, p. 82).

Pedagogical competence is crucial to the success of an integrated playful approach which successfully melds child-directed, teacher-guided, and playful teacher-led experiences (Parker et al., 2022). Given that teacher-guided play has been found to be particularly beneficial for areas of literacy and mathematics learning (Goble & Pianta 2017; Nesbitt et al., 2023; Weisberg et al., 2015), it is notable that more than half of teachers did not regularly become involved in play with the intention of guiding play and learning. Guided play is often seen as a panacea for the play and learning conundrum in so far as it offers a middle ground between child-directed play and more teacher-directed instruction (Fisher et al., 2011; Miller & Almon 2009; Nesbitt et al., 2023). If guided-play occupies a bridge between play and instruction, it seems important that teachers, across grades, would inhabit this space more consummately. Given the emphasis on the '*Aistear* hour of play' in the entry grades (O'Síoráin et al., 2023), it is notable that teachers reported that they incorporated play, to some degree, in teacher-led lessons across the various curriculum subject areas of the curriculum. As articulated elsewhere, full integration of play with the curriculum requires an approach which moves beyond providing for play alongside the curriculum (O'Síoráin et al., 2023; Walsh et al., 2011). We will report, in a separate paper, on the various strategies that teachers reported using to make teaching and learning, across the curriculum, more playful.

In addition to skilful pedagogical interactions, playful learning also necessitates a differential approach to assessment (Miller & Almon 2009; Mardell et al., 2023). In the present sample, child-directed play was not regularly used as a context for assessment. In Ireland and internationally, efforts to promote a more playful curriculum are often at odds with the emphasis on standardised testing. In the Irish context, for example, norm-referenced standardised tests of mathematics and reading ability are administered in 2nd, 4th and 6th class (O'Leary et al., 2019). Standardised testing is noted as impacting negatively on both students and teachers, who can be pressurised to learn and teach to the test (Jay & Knaus 2018; Miller & Almon, 2009; O'Leary et al., 2019). To imbue play more effectually in teaching and learning, concordance is required in relation to the outcomes of education and how these outcomes can be assessed for formative as well as summative purposes (Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Parker et al., 2022). The development of assessment tools which authentically capture holistic learning, without compromising on rigour, will be imperative to developing a more sustainable playful approach (Parker et al., 2022).

The enablers and barriers to facilitating a playful pedaogical approach, articulated in this study, clearly resonate with those identified in earlier research (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Fisher, 2021; Howard, 2010; Hunter & Walsh 2014; Jay & Knaus, 2018; INTO, 2023). Teachers undoubtedly require system level support to operate a playful approach in the classroom. Similar to other countries, the curriculum itself was perceived as an obstacle with teachers feeling pressure to cover the content of what is perceived as an overloaded programme (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Jay & Knaus 2018). High pupil-teacher ratios, large class sizes, and lack of classroom support personnel were commonly articulated barriers. Consistent with other studies, teachers reported often not having a budget to develop places and resources which entice play, in their schools and classrooms (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Howard, 2010; INTO, 2023; Mardell et al., 2023).

Fisher (2021) emphasises the importance of policy giving a clear mandate in terms of the role of play in the curriculum. In reality, however, teachers often receive little support in developing a more playful approach. The current findings corroborate the importance of support for teachers to develop the assessment, planning, and facilitation skills required to make integrated playful learning a success (Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Marbina et al., 2011; Miller & Almon, 2009; Walsh et al., 2011; Parker et al., 2022). Given that play, historically, has existed on the fringes of the school curriculum, it has also been somewhat dispensable in the continuing professional learning space. Respondents to this survey reported a strong desire for funded systemwide continuing professional learning opportunities. It is acknowledged that an emphasis on performativity can undermine the position of play in the curriculum and teachers in the current study

reiterated a desire for greater flexibility, agency, and professional trust (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Fisher, 2021; Parker et al., 2022). While a playful approach obliges teachers to relinquish more control to children, it also necessitates a system and schools which can more flexibility accommodate teacher autonomy.

Support from management, colleagues, and parents were also identified as critical to supporting the transition to a more playful approach (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Parker et al., 2022). The reality, of course, means that the undervaluing of playful learning and the emphasis on academic learning by school leaders, colleagues (particularly those working in more senior grades), and parents, presents a persistent barrier to teachers wishing to travel a more playful path (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Fisher, 2021; Gray & Ryan, 2016; Jay & Knaus, 2018; O'Sullivan & Ring 2018). A whole school approach which leads and nurtures a community of playful practice are decisive to the success of a more playful mode of teaching and learning.

Teachers also acknowledged the role of their own personal characteristics. While there was a belief that the curriculum aims and objectives could be met through a playful approach, similar to previous research, there were also reports of feeling under-equipped to achieve this, in practice (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Hunter & Walsh, 2014). Given the dominance of more formal instructional models which rely on textbooks and workbooks, teachers can lack the motivation, knowledge, skills and experience to execute a more playful approach in practice (Hunter & Walsh 2014; Jay & Knaus, 2018; Martlew et al., 2011: INTO, 2023). Some teachers referred to the importance of teacher playfulness and a willingness to become a co-player. This aligns with Walsh and colleagues (2011), who suggest that playfulness is best interpreted and operationalised as a characteristic of all teacher-child interactions in the classroom, not just those occurring during activities traditionally characterised as play. While counter-intuitive, perhaps, child characteristics were also identified as a potential barrier to playful learning. Comparable with earlier research, respondents articulated concerns around implementing a playful curriculum with children who have just transitioned to primary school, have diverse needs, poor self-regulatory competence, or less well-developed play skills (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Gray & Ryan, 2016; Howard, 2010; Jay & Knaus, 2018). This vision of the child as needy seems at odds with Sorin's (2005) image of the agentic child, co-constructing the curriculum, in a democratic classroom. The concerns are, however, consistent with the contention that many children now enter primary school with lower than expected self-regulatory and play competence (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Stagnitti et al., 2023). This is certainly troubling given the relationship between play and self-regulation, and between early measures of self-regulation and longer-term learning success (McClelland et al., 2013). If children with high levels of need are entering primary school classrooms where teachers feel under-supported, to establish a playful pedagogical approach, this may serve to further perpetuate the gap between low and high achievers (Dowd & Stjerne Thomsen, 2021).

Implications for Policy and Practice

Play is increasingly promoted as medium which can be leveraged to promote the development of the whole child. While it has generally been accepted that play can support wellbeing and the socio-emotional aspects of development, more recent research also illustrates the potential of playful pedagogical approaches for working towards more academic learning goals (Pino-Pasternak et al., 2014; Pyle et al. 2017; Parker et al. 2022; Pyle et al., 2024). This evidence base is important to progressing playful pedagogies and avoiding the 'play ethos' or tendency to overstate the functional role of play in development (Smith, 2010; Lillard et al., 2013). Moreover, many of the theoretical perspectives which guide our curriculum in Ireland, and internationally, align well with playful pedagogical approaches. Taken together, the research on effective learning in school underscores the importance of a curriculum which is underpinned by emotional connections with others, content which is meaningful and harnesses learner interests, opportunities for learner agency and active participation, multiple means of expression and representation, and opportunities for collaborative learning (Ring et al., 2018).

Despite the evidence for playful pedagogies, in many countries the global education reform movement (GERM) has become a "GERM that kills play" (Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019, p.95). Moreover, a recent policy call released to mark the inaugural United Nations International Day of Play, in 2024, identified the undervaluing and trivializing of play as a key barrier to upholding children's right to play

(United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] & United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2024). This has led to many children across the globe, being in school but struggling to achieve their potential in contexts where pedagogical approaches fail to harness the benefits of play and playful approaches in the curriculum. Globally, post-pandemic, where a crisis in children's school attendance has been identified (Burtonshaw & Dorrell, 2023; Addis, 2024; DoE, 2024b), play and playful approaches can play a role in making instruction and school experiences engaging, motivating, relevant and enjoyable. Universal playful early childhood programmes, and the integration of playful pedagogies in schools, are identified as powerful accelerators of children's play and learning (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024). In a review of perspectives and evidence in relation to 'school readiness', Whitebread and Bingham (2012, p.7) concluded that "what we need to consider is not how to make children ready for school, but how to make schools ready for children". In Ireland we now have an opportunity to ensure that our schools are ready for children through providing continuity in how they learn, and opportunities to connect old and new ways of learning. Moreover, through continuing to embed playful pedagogies in early childhood education and expanding the approach up through the school grades, play has the potential to drive more equitable education systems and to close the achievement gap between higher and lower achieving learners (Parker & Stjern Thomsen, 2019). All learners thrive when teachers adopt a pedagogical approach which supports them emotionally, preserves their agency, responds to their unique learning needs and interests, and encourages collaborative learning with others. Such an approach enables children to find the joy in learning and motivates them to achieve their potential (Zosh et al., 2018).

While we know that systems, schools, and teachers, can be resistant to change (Mardell et al., 2023), this paper affirms that play is increasingly valued for its contribution to wellbeing and holistic learning. This is significant as prior research suggests that implementing playful pedagogies is challenging in contexts where teachers find it difficult to justify a role for play in learning (Pyle et al., 2017). Paradoxically, the present findings indicate that children do not always expereince daily extended periods of child-directed play and not all teachers are purposefully guiding play to progress play and learning. As illustrated across a number of earlier studies, there can often be a gap between teacher beliefs and practices (Pyle et al, 2017). Of course, practice cannot be isolated from the myriad of contexual factors which shape it. This paper illuminates the many challenges teachers face when adopting a playful approach and the factors they believe support them integrating play effectively in practice.

Similar to earlier research in Ireland (Gray & Ryan, 2016), and elsewhere (Pyle et al., 2017; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019), respondents identified curriculum demands as a barrier to a playful approach. Being cautiously optimistic the curriculum should prove less of a barrier, in Ireland, going forward. The Irish early years and primary curriculum frameworks now provide a clear mandate for the utilisation of playful pedagogical approaches. Significantly, the DoE Inspectorate in its inspection and evaluation work in schools is clearly promoting the alignment of play and playful learning with the achievement of learning outcomes (DoE, 2024b). An increased focus on learner and teacher agency, and curriclum integration and flexibility, now create more favourbale conditions for play. The key competencies identified in the Primary Curriculum Framework also reflect a more holisitc view of development and include a broad range of important dispositions, attitudes and values, in addition to knowledge and skills. The Primary Curriculum Framework provides "clarity and certainty on the appropriateness and centrality of play and playful approaches in primary and special schools, where they are key elements of learning and teaching" (DoE, 2023a, p. 25). This will be significant given that many teachers in the present study, particularly those working in first and second class, were not entirely convinced that they could meet the aims and objectives of the curriculum through playful approaches. The incompatibility of playful pedagogies with the curriculum has previously been identfied as a barrier to implementing playful pedagogies in Ireland (INTO, 2023) and in other countries (Pyle et al., 2017).

The transition to a more playful curriculum is supported when student teachers have opportunities to develop a playful pedagogical approach, during their initial teacher education programme (ITE) (O'Sullivan & Ring, 2018; Walsh & Fallon, 2021). Consistent with recent curriculum developments, Céim, the standards for initial teacher education, in Ireland, recognise early childhood education as a core

component of primary ITE (The Teaching Council, 2020). In the present study, continuing professional learning (CPL), similar to previous research (Pyle et al., 2017; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; INTO, 2023), emerged as key enabler of playful pedagogies. Research in the early years affirms CPL as a determinant of high-quality provision (Whitebread et al., 2015). Unfortunately, the roll-out of *Aistear*, the early childhood curriculum framework in 2009, was not accompanied by a targeted national programme of CPL to support its implementation in practice (Walsh & Fallon, 2021). CPL which focuses on implementation of the curriculum, includes experiential and classroom-based learning, and opportunities for sharing and reflecting, is particularly impactful on programme quality (Slot et al., 2015; Whitebread et al., 2015). In the Irish context, the government funded the Leadership for INClusion (LINC) in the Early Years Programme (which is designed to equip early childhood teachers to take on the role of Inclusion Coordinator (INCO), may provide a valuable blueprint for a national model of CPL for playful pedagogy (O'Sullivan & Ring, 2023). The roll-out of a national programme of CPL would cultivate consistency across teachers and schools and potentially provide more equitable learning experiences for children. The success of such a programme would, of course, be reliant on adequate investment in programme development, delivery, and evaluation. It would also require buy-in from teachers to effect any real change on the ground. Prioritising a government funded model of CPL also has the potential to ameliorate many of the additional barriers highlighted in the current paper. CPL, for example, can build teacher confidence in adopting a playful approach and support them to develop the competencies needed to effectively plan for, facilitate, and assess learning through play. The prevalence of multi-grade classes in the Irish context, while not unique, also presents as a challenge and CPL would afford teachers the opportunity to tackle the issue of differentiation within a playful multigrade context (INTO, 2023). Any CPL offering would have added value if opportunities for teachers to share professional knowledge and best practice were built in. Furthermore, opportunities for teachers across preschool and early primary contexts, to come together and share practice would further support continuity for children as they transition between settings. Congruent with earlier work in this area (Jay & Knaus, 2018; INTO, 2023), teachers articulated a strong desire for professional communities of practice, and opportunities for team-teaching and peer mentoring.

Echoing the perspectives from earlier research (Pyle et al., 2017; Jay & Knaus, 2018), support from school leaders was also highlighted as a key enabler of a playful pedagogical approach. School leadership has a pivotal role in embedding curriculum innovation in the real world of the classroom (Biddulph & Gibrid, 2024). Consequently, including school leaders in any roll-out of CPL seems imperative to ensuring a whole school approach to playful learning. Support from parents is viewed as similarly enabling and like other countries, in Ireland parents can often champion traditional academic instruction over playful learning (Ring et al., 2016; Pyle et al., 2017; Jay & Knaus, 2018; INTO, 2023). While playful parenting programmes can support parental knowledge and understanding of prevalent pedagogical approaches, they can also encourage playful home learning activities which connect with learning in school (O'Sullivan et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2022). Policy efforts to embed play meaningfully in primary school will clearly need to engage parents and target the provision of effective and accessible playful parenting programmes.

Ireland is not unique in experiencing somewhat of a mismatch in terms of expectations around implementing pedagogical innovation and the allocation of sufficient resources to enable this in practice (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Jay & Knaus, 2018). To ameliorate some of the challenges identified around the lack of space and resources, a dedicated funding stream will need to be created for schools nationally. This may need to include investment in building or retrofitting of school environments to make them more conducive to playful learning indoors and outdoors. Most recent figures from OECD's (2024) Education at a Glance report indicates that Ireland's spend of its gross domestic product (GDP) on education (from primary to tertiary level) is 2.9% which falls below the OECD average of 4.9%. Ongoing investment will be important to maintaining reductions in class size which can support more active and playful ways of teaching and learning. The average class size in Ireland in 2023/24 is reported at 22.5, remaining above the OECD (2024) average of 21. In 2023/24, 9.2 % (less than 1 in 10) of students remain enrolled in classes of 30-34 students. The student teacher ratio in 2023/24, at 12.8 students to every teacher, is the lowest reported across the 2003-2024 period (DoE, 2024a). While smaller class sizes and lower student-teacher ratios can

help address some of the concerns articulated by teachers, how human resources can be deployed to allow more staff to support teaching and learning, through play, requires consideration at both system and school level. Acknowledging that across education systems, educators variously struggle with securing optimal resources, CPL has a pivotal role in supporting the adult and the child to become co-creators of indoor and outdoor spaces that excite, invite, and absorb learners within the existing availability of resources.

Conclusion

In Ireland we now have much welcome synchronicity between the early childhood and primary curriculum frameworks and are working towards extending this synchronicity to the junior and senior cycle in post-primary contexts (DoE, 2023a; DoE 2024b; NCCA, 2024). To embed this curricular continuity in practical terms, the time is ripe for an implementation plan which makes provision for an accessible and effective model of CPL, directs attention to creating appropriate indoor and outdoor environments for play and playful learning, and considers the impact of lower student-teacher ratios in supporting a differentiated and integrated approach to enable each child to achieve their potential. While in many countries the formal curriculum can be at odds with a playful pedagogical approach, the current paper adds to the existing literature through surfacing the perspectives and practices of teachers in a context where the formal curriculum provides a clear mandate for playful approaches. Moreover, through incorporating the views of teachers working beyond the early primary grades, it contributes to research on the implementation of playful pedagogies as children transition from the early to middle school grades. This paper highlights the importance of surfacing teachers' needs and concerns. Teachers are, after all, the linchpin between the formal curriculum and the curriculum which children experience daily in our schools. While teachers value a playful approach, supporting them during this time of curriculum redevelopment is critical to ensuring that the curriculum honours their professional competence as well as children's preferred ways of being and learning.

Declarations

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Teacher's perceptions of usefulness of online PD resources

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Abstract: Despite the rise of online professional development (PD) for early childhood educators, few studies have examined their perceptions of the usefulness of learning resources. We developed an online PD centered on teacher-child interactions, based on the critical features of high-quality PD. The PD was composed of 10 units with a variety of learning resources, including video lectures, research notes, testimonials, classroom videos, quizzes, reflection activities, and sharing activities. We examined teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of such learning resources and explored potential differences based on key demographic variables. Participants were 137 in-service Hong Kong kindergarten teachers. Evaluation surveys and semi-structured interviews were utilized after course completion. Classroom videos, which provided real-life examples, were perceived as most useful resource to improve teaching practices. Participants also considered video lectures, research notes, and testimonials as extremely useful resources, and reflection activities and sharing activities as useful resources. Quizzes emerged as the least useful resource, especially when these involved fact-based questions. Teachers' perceptions were not influenced by their demographic backgrounds. We conclude that teachers place a higher emphasis on online PD resources that offer practical examples compared to those focus on theoretical knowledge and self-reflection. The current study filled an important gap in the early childhood teacher education literature, specifically in the area of online PD, offering theoretical, practical, and policy-related insights.

Introduction

The current study aims to explore teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of specific types of learning resources in an online professional development (PD) course focusing on teacher-child interactional quality. In contrast to conventional training programs, there has been a rise in online PD opportunities that facilitate more continuous interaction and knowledge construction for teachers' learning (Quinn et al., 2019). However, there is limited empirical evidence on teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of specific types of learning resources in the online PD. In this study, we developed an online PD centered on high-quality teacher-child interactions that support children's learning and development (Hamre et al., 2014). Providing professional learning resources can assist teachers in comprehending and developing the essential skills needed to foster teacher-child interactions in the classrooms (Langeloo et al., 2019). In the following sections, we will explain the benefits of online PD courses based on empirical evidence, revise prior literature on teachers' perceptions of usefulness of online learning resources, and indicate how PD improves teacher-child interactions.

Online PD: Teachers' Perception of Usefulness of Learning Resources

Online PD courses have the potential to promote sustained interactions and foster continuous engagement for teachers' learning (Yurkofsky et al., 2019). One significant benefit of online PD is the reduction in travel time and associated costs enables teachers to participate from home or their workplace (Palvia et al., 2018). This is particularly beneficial given the substantial daily workload that leaves teachers

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with limited time and energy (Hu et al., 2019). Learning from home or work facilitates the effective management of professional responsibilities alongside PD opportunities (Safi et al., 2020). Additionally, online PD offers the advantage of engaging in discussions with a diverse range of colleagues without geographical constraints (Onyema et al., 2019). This allows teachers to draw on the expertise of colleagues with varied teaching experiences and backgrounds, fostering a more comprehensive grasp of the subject matter. Moreover, online PD provides the opportunity for teachers to revisit and review previous learning materials (He, 2014), thereby reinforcing their understanding of the content.

Numerous studies in recent years have documented the positive impact of digital learning resources on teachers' professional learning and development (Bryson, 2009; MacWalter et al., 2016). Topal (2016) discovered that online courses featuring seven or more types of materials and resources, such as web pages, PDF/text documents, animations, videos, and graphics/images, significantly enhanced teachers' satisfaction with their professional learning experiences. Online PD resources facilitate teachers' learning by providing anchors for their understanding, enabling them to examine their knowledge from multiple perspectives, draw connections between related concepts, and bridge the gap between theoretical understanding and practical application (Ng & Bautista, 2024; Jeong & Hmelo-Silver, 2010). Moreover, research has shown that the use of videos in online professional learning environments can enhance teachers' pedagogical skills, content knowledge, self-efficacy beliefs, and understanding of children's learning processes (Bautista et al., 2022; Bragg et al., 2021).

The literature outlines essential principles for designing and implementing online courses, workshops, or learning modules for teacher PD (Cowart & Jin, 2024). The first principle, relevancy, emphasizes the importance of addressing teachers' individual professional learning needs to solve real-world problems, foster a sense of ownership, and reduce the prevalence of top-down approaches (Farris, 2015). Second, usefulness pertains to the value and practicality of online PD in meeting teachers' needs and resolving issues related to practice, instruction, and student learning (Booth & Kellogg, 2015). The third principle is interaction and collaboration, which are crucial for teachers to facilitate the social aspects of learning through the participation in learning communities (Holmes et al., 2010). The fourth principle focuses on authentic tasks and activities, which enhance the effectiveness of PD by mirroring real-world classroom situations and directly relating to teachers' practices (Reeves & Pedulla, 2013). Lastly, reflection enables teachers to assess how newly acquired information can be applied to their practice and student learning outcomes, and this reflection can occur throughout the design process to support capacity-building and ongoing PD (Scott & Scott, 2010).

The current study focuses on the usefulness of online PD, as it is the key to help meet the needs of teachers (Booth & Kellogg, 2015). The knowledge gained from online PD should be useful and practical to inform teacher practice (Dede et al., 2009). Méndez et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative study involving 97 preschool teachers in Singapore to assess the perceived usefulness of PD activities for educators. Most teachers rated the usefulness of online PD as "moderate". However, online PD had the highest percentage of teachers indicating "low" usefulness. In another survey study conducted by Parsons et al. (2019), the authors examined 258 teachers perceived usefulness of online PD. Most of teachers rated their online PD experience as largely or moderately beneficial, while some teachers considered it slightly beneficial, and even a few teachers deemed it not beneficial. Most teachers reported being able to apply what they learned to their teaching. Powell and Bodur (2019) conducted a qualitative multi-case study with six teachers, revealing positive perceptions about the usefulness of online PD, particularly in providing instructional ideas and reinforcing effective teaching practices. However, the study noted that while the online format was beneficial, it did not fully reflect a job-embedded PD experience, despite claims to the contrary. The current study aims at investigating teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of specific types of learning resources in an online PD course focusing on teacher-child interactional quality, which will be illustrated in the next section.

High-Quality Teacher-Child Interaction and Professional Learning

Teacher-child interactions refer to the daily reciprocal exchanges between teachers and children, encompassing both social and instructional verbal engagements (Hamre et al., 2013). These interactions create a foundation for bidirectional exchanges of information and experiences, which promote children's development through regular conversations (Hamre et al., 2014). As a crucial indicator of the quality of early childhood education, teacher-child interaction necessitates that teachers provide sensitive and responsive caregiving (Nilfyr et al., 2021). The informative instructions and feedback offered by teachers scaffold children to develop cognitive and socio-emotional skills and acquire relevant knowledge (Pianta et al., 2012).

The quality of teacher-child interactions is closely linked to children's learning outcomes and developmental progress (Schachter et al., 2019). Consequently, research supports the notion that enhancing the quality of these interactions should be a focus of PD initiatives (Karuppiah, 2021). Professional learning programs have the potential to improve teachers' knowledge and skills related to both general teacher-child interactions and specific instructional strategies (Ansari et al., 2020). In addition, teachers can learn and emulate effective behaviors by observing teaching videos (Bragg et al., 2021). The schemas and scripts developed from watching others' teaching practices are crucial for teachers to understand how to interact effectively with children in the classroom (Pianta, 2016). Therefore, participation in professional learning courses equips teachers with greater knowledge and skills, increasing their ability to identify and implement effective teacher-child interaction strategies in their classrooms (Haber et al., 2021; Ramilo et al., 2022). For instance, the widely utilized coaching model My Teaching Partner (MTP) has positive impact on enhancing teachers' growth in teacher-child interactions through cycles of videotaped teaching observations, review, and feedback (Hamre et al., 2010).

While the importance of providing PD courses to improve the quality of teacher-child interactions has been highlighted in previous research (Pianta et al., 2014), early childhood educators often lack adequate training on implementing effective instructional and interactional strategies to engage children (Post et al., 2020). It is well-documented that in-service teachers typically participate in district-mandated workshops, learn from daily classroom experiences with children, and acquire teaching advice in informal settings (Kraft et al., 2018). In addition, teachers seldom receive PD opportunities focusing on implementing effective strategies to enhance the quality of teacher-student interactions. The interactions and instructional methods prevalent in classrooms often exhibit a predominantly teacher-directed approach (Justice et al., 2008). Moreover, although PD courses focusing on teacher-child interactions generally offer adequate theoretical knowledge for teachers to learn about effective interactions, teachers may require actual skills to transfer the coursework into changes in their practices (Wong et al., 2024).

While previous studies provided empirical evidence about teachers' perceptions of usefulness of online PD courses (Méndez et al., 2017; Parsons et al., 2019), little is known about teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of specific types of learning resources in online PD programs. More specifically, how teachers perceive the usefulness of PD courses to improve their interactional quality with children in early childhood settings has not been examined. To inform teachers' professional learning and teaching practices, it is important to understand their perceptions of the usefulness of online learning resources (Dede et al., 2008). Therefore, the current study aimed to address these gaps in the existing research to make theoretical and practical contributions.

Context for the *Chat with Children* Online PD Course

This study was conducted in the context of *Chat with Children*, an online PD course developed and implemented in Hong Kong. In this city, kindergartens are considered the first stage of the formal school system, providing three-year pre-primary education serving children aged 3–6 years (Yang & Li, 2019). *Chat with Children* was designed to improve Hong Kong kindergarten teachers' interactional quality with children. This online PD was composed of 10 sequential units. Table 2 summarizes the topics covered and provides an overview of the course structure. Teachers used a self-paced learning mode to complete the course activities within three months.

Research Questions

We developed an online PD course centered on teacher-child high-quality interactions, which met the features of high-quality PD (Desimone & Garet, 2015; Desimone & Pak, 2017). The course composed of seven types of learning resources, including video lectures, research notes, testimonials, classroom videos, quizzes, reflection activities, and sharing activities. The study aimed to examine Hong Kong kindergarten teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of these learning resources, with the ultimate purpose of understanding teachers' preferences in online learning environments, thereby informing the design of different types of learning resources in subsequent online PD courses. The Research Questions (RQ) investigated in the study were:

RQ1   How do teachers perceive the usefulness of each learning resource, specifically in terms of improving their teaching practices? Are there any differences when comparing teachers' perceptions according to their demographic background?

RQ2   How do teachers perceive the most and least useful learning resources, specifically in terms of facilitating teacher-child interactions in the classrooms?

Method

Participants

A total of 137 teachers from over 30 different Hong Kong kindergartens completed the course and submitted valid evaluation surveys. Table 1 outlines teachers' demographic information in terms of sex, years of experiences teaching children 3-6, academic background (i.e., bachelor's, postgraduate diploma in education, master's degree), relevant qualifications (i.e., whether teachers' academic qualifications related to ECE, Psychology, or Special Needs), and their role(s) in the kindergartens (i.e., principal, head teacher, classroom teacher). As can be observed, most teachers were females with 1-4 years of experience teaching children aged 3-6 and obtained bachelor's degree or above related to ECE, Psychology or Special Needs. In addition, most of them (n = 112, 81.8%) worked full-time in kindergartens as classroom teachers.

Table 1

Demographic Background of Teachers Who Submitted Valid Evaluation Surveys (n = 137)

Variables	N	Percent
Sex		
Female	129	94.2%
Male	7	5.1%
Preferred not to indicate	1	0.7%
Years of experience teaching children 3-6		
Less than 1 year	15	10.9%
1-4 years	48	35.0%
5-9 years	36	26.3%
10-14 years	11	8.0%
15-19 years	14	10.2%
20+ years	13	9.5%
Academic background		
Below bachelor's degree	48	35.1%
Bachelor's degree	58	42.3%
Postgraduate diploma in education (PGDE)	15	10.9%
Master's degree and above	16	11.7%
Academic qualification related to ECE, Psychology or Special Needs		
Yes	132	97.2%
No	5	2.8%
Role(s) in the kindergarten		
Principal / Chief Principal / Vice Principal	7	5.1%
Coordinator / Supervisor / Head teacher	8	5.8%
Classroom teacher	90	65.7%
Assistant teacher	22	16.1%
Subject teacher	10	7.3%
Total	137	100.0%

Design and Instruments

The current study applied a descriptive mixed-method design (Morse & Niehaus, 2009). For the quantitative component, an evaluation survey was developed to collect information of teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of different learning resources. We adapted the evaluation instrument developed by Parsons et al. (2019), who validated a series of items intended to assess teachers' perceived usefulness of online PD resources. The evaluation survey used a 5-point Likert-type scale. Teachers were asked to rate the usefulness of the seven types of learning resources in terms of facilitating teacher-child interactions in their classrooms, from "Not Useful at all" to "Extremely Useful". For the qualitative component of the study, we conducted individual interviews. The interview protocol was developed based on the evaluation survey. Items were discussed by the research team in view of their alignment with our theoretical framework, clarity, appropriateness, and importance for answering the research questions. Certain items were refined and/or eliminated. The following questions were included in the interview protocol:

- Among the seven types of learning resources, which one do you think is most useful to facilitate teacher-child interactions in your classroom? Why?

- Which one do you think is least useful to facilitate teacher-child interactions in your classroom? Why?

- Can you tell me what was your most favorite learning resource of this course? Why?

- How about your least favorite learning resource of this course? Why?

Procedures

We obtained ethical approval (Ref. no. 2021-2022-0354) from our University before the data collection procedure commenced. At the recruitment stage, we disseminated the information of the PD course widely using different approaches, including cold calls, emails, posters with the QR code to register, and the registration link shared via social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. After collecting all the soft copies of the consent forms signed by teachers, we distributed the demographic questionnaire for teachers to complete online. Teachers who submitted the complete demographic questionnaire were given access to the PD course. We prepared a tutorial video for teachers to understand how to navigate the online PD course via Google Classroom and complete the various activities. Every two or three weeks, we sent emails to follow up on teachers' progress. The emails reminded participants of the expected completion date of the units, encouraging them to finish the course tasks and activities within the three-month schedule. Additionally, we encouraged them to collaborate with the course facilitators and other colleagues. At the end of the course, we distributed the evaluation surveys for teachers to complete online. Teachers were asked to rate the learning resources based on their usefulness to facilitate teacher-child interactions in the kindergarten classrooms. In addition, selected teachers were invited to attend the semi-structured interviews individually. Each interview lasted for 30 minutes approximately. The audio recordings were made with the approval of participating teachers.

Data analysis

To address RQ 1, we conducted descriptive frequency analyses (Morgan, 2013) to look at differences in teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of learning resources (Mathias et al., 2016). In addition, we conducted One-way ANOVAs (Kim, 2017) to analyze if teachers' demographic background, including teachers' sex, years of experiences teaching children 3-6, academic background, relevant qualifications, and their role(s) in the kindergartens, would influence their perceptions of usefulness of learning resources. To address RQ 2, conventional content analysis was applied to analyze the ideas that participants brought up in their responses (Serafini & Reid, 2019). We noted and categorized related topics that emerged from teachers' responses based on the interview questions. Codes such as "real-life examples", "improvement of teaching practices", "fact-based questions", and "reflective learning" were used to capture teachers' perceptions.

Table 2
Overview of the Chat With Children Online PD Course

UNIT	TOPIC
Unit 1. Chat with Children: Introduction	
	Starting point of the learning journey: a brief introduction to the *Chat with Children* online PD course.
Unit 2. Chat with Children: Why is it important?	
	Foundation: Why and how teacher-child interactions are the backbone of a child-centered curriculum
Unit 3. Child-centered conversations: Learning from children	
	Benefits of conversations for teachers and children and classroom strategies to spark conversations in different classroom situations.
Unit 4. The importance of exploring children's intuitive ideas	
	How to interact with children when they articulate misconceptions?
Unit 5. Thick conversations: Fostering quality chats in the classroom	
	Engaging children in thick conversations to accelerate deeper conceptual development, language and vocabulary growth.
Unit 6. Narration can be the start of conversations	
	Parallel talk and self-talk and how teachers can incorporate such strategies in their classroom.
Unit 7. Notice, predict and infer: How to elicit children's thoughts?	
	to elicit children's thinking and support higher order thinking in classroom settings (e.g., in science, sensory play).
Unit 8. Fostering discussions among children	
	Understanding the importance of group dialogue and peer-talk among children and how teachers can facilitate or spark such conversations.
Unit 9. High-quality conversations during play	
	The importance of conversations during play and strategies to increase interaction during playtime.
Unit 10. Chatting with children over meals	
	Sharing ideas that can support teachers' efforts in increasing conversations with children during mealtime situations.

Each Unit comprised a variety of learning resources.

- Video lectures (around 10-15 minutes each) were presented by the Principal Investigator of the project, introducing the content of the unit and sharing research findings related to the topic of the unit at hand.
- Research notes summarized the key points of the video lectures, helping teachers to review what they have learned in each Unit.
- Testimonials were 2 to 4-minute-long videos that featured teacher educators, kindergarten principals, and teachers in Hong Kong sharing their perspectives and experiences regarding the specific topic of each Unit.
- Classroom videos (2-4 minutes per video) demonstrated teacher-child interactional activities in Hong Kong kindergartens. These videos showed spontaneous teacher-child interactions in Hong Kong kindergarten classrooms, illustrating how high-quality interactions of different topics can be implemented in the local context.
- Quizzes were simple fact-based questions that examined if teachers were paying attention in the testimonials and classroom videos. To answer the questions in the quizzes, teachers might need to re-watch the videos if they missed the information.
- Reflection activities were reflective questions proposed based on the topic of each unit to help teachers foster their thinking and reflect on what they had learned in the course.
- Sharing activities were open-ended questions appeared at the end of each unit for teachers to leave their comments and feedback. We encouraged teachers to share their ideas, perspectives, and experiences with other participants and the course facilitators.

We delivered the online PD course via Google Classroom, including all learning materials and course activities. Google Classroom is a low-cost, easily accessible, and sustainable learning platform. The learning platform allowed teachers to review the classwork and communicate with other participants and course facilitators by making posts.

The design of the *Chat with Children* online PD course met the five critical features of high-quality PD

programs (Desimone, 2009; Desimone & Garet, 2015), as explained below:

- Content focus: *Chat with Children* focused on how to improve teachers' interactional quality with their children. It provided theoretical principles and practical strategies through video lectures, testimonials, and classroom videos in a variety of important topics (i.e., How to foster quality chats in the classrooms; How to elicit children's thoughts).
- Active learning: The course offered teachers opportunities to observe, analyze, and discuss the theoretical ideas presented in the video lectures and research notes, and the real-life practices of other Hong Kong kindergarten stakeholders featured in the testimonials and classroom videos. Moreover, the questions raised in quizzes, reflection activities, and sharing activities facilitated active communications and exchanges among teachers and course facilitators.
- Coherence: *Chat with Children* aimed at improving teacher-child interactional quality, which is consistent with the kindergarten curriculum framework in Hong Kong (Curriculum Development Council, 2017). Teacher-child quality interaction also serves as one of the performance indicators of the Quality Assurance Framework of Hong Kong kindergartens (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2017). In the classroom videos, we filmed spontaneous teacher-child interactional activities in Hong Kong kindergartens for teachers to understand how to interact with children more effectively in real-life situations.
- Duration: *Chat with Children* was conceptualized as 10 sequential units, with each unit involving approximately two hours of work, totaling approximately 20 hours. The units were distributed across three months. The timespan and number of hours spent in the program are considered to be sufficient to foster teachers' intellectual and pedagogical change (West & Bautista, 2022).
- Collective participation: We encouraged teachers from the same kindergarten to register and join the *Chat with Children* online PD course together. Within a collective group with familiar colleagues, teachers could learn and collaborate with each other more easily.

Results

RQ 1: Teachers' Perceptions of Usefulness of Each Learning Resource

Table 3 presents the observed frequencies and percentages of teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of each learning resource. Overall, teachers' responses demonstrated that most learning resources provided in the *Chat with Children* PD course were perceived as "Useful" or "Extremely Useful" in terms of improving teaching practices. For most of the learning resources, only one or two teachers rated "Not useful" or "Not Useful at All". Among the seven types of learning resources, classroom videos (n = 74, 34.1%), followed by testimonials (n = 72, 33.2%), video lectures (n = 68, 31.3%), and research notes (n = 65, 30.0%), were rated by the highest percentage of teachers as "Extremely Useful" learning resources. The highest percentage of teachers rated reflection activities (n = 71, 32.7%) and sharing activities (n = 62, 28.6%) as "Useful". Some of teachers (n = 31, 14.3%) considered the usefulness of quizzes as "Neutral". In addition, among the seven types of learning resources, the highest number of teachers rated quizzes as "Not Useful" (n = 6, 2.8%) and "Not Useful at All" (n = 10, 4.6%). Results of One-way ANOVA showed that the group means were not significantly different ($p > .05$), which indicated that teachers' demographic background did not affect their perceptions of the usefulness of the online learning resources.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of Teachers' Perception on Learning Resources

	Frequency (percentage)						
Teachers' perception	Video Lectures	Research Notes	Testimonials	Classroom Videos	Quizzes	Reflection Activities	Sharing Activities
Extremely useful	68 (31.3%)	65 (30.0%)	72 (33.2%)	74 (34.1%)	33 (15.2%)	47 (21.7%)	54 (24.9%)
Useful	57 (26.3%)	51 (23.5%)	56 (25.8%)	57 (26.3%)	57 (26.3%)	71 (32.7%)	62 (28.6%)
Neutral	11 (5.1%)	17 (7.8%)	7 (3.2%)	4 (1.8%)	31 (14.3%)	16 (7.4%)	18 (8.3%)
Not useful	0 (0.0%)	2 (0.9%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)	10 (4.6%)	2 (0.9%)	2 (0.9%)
Not useful at all	1 (0.5%)	2 (0.9%)	2 (0.9%)	1 (0.5%)	6 (2.8%)	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.5%)

Figure 1

Ranking of the Usefulness of Each Learning Resource
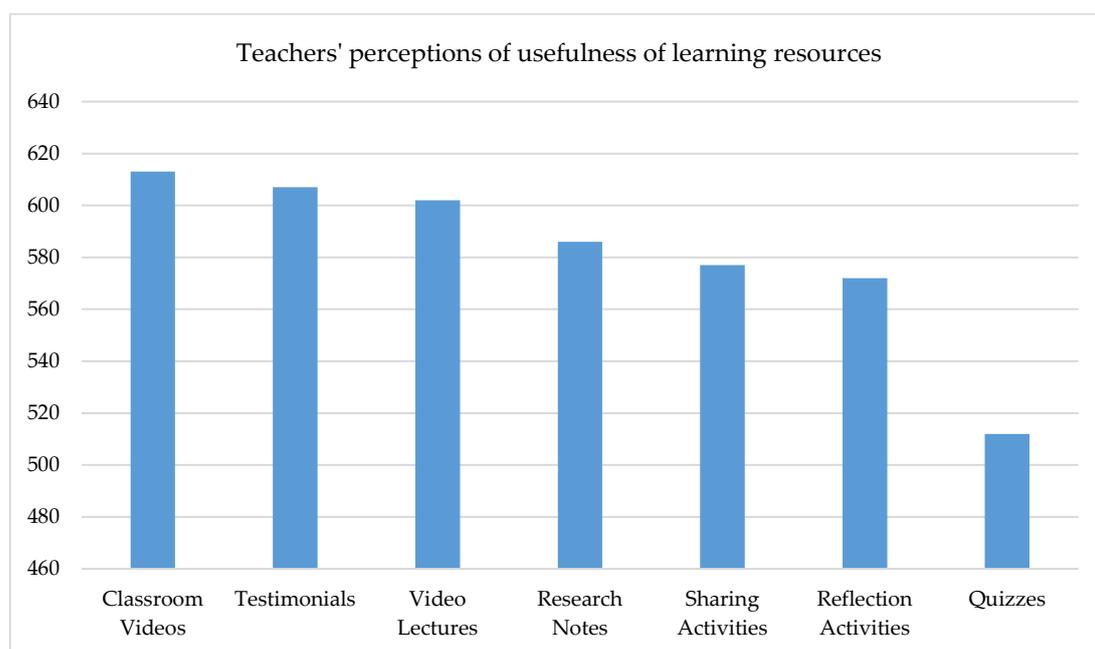
We produced a bar graph to provide a visual representation of the findings, comparing the perceived usefulness of learning resources (see Figure 1). Values were assigned to different categories of teachers' perception ("Extremely Useful" = 5; "Useful" = 4; "Neutral" = 3; "Not useful" = 2; and "Not Useful at All" = 1), and multiplied by the number of teachers in each category to calculate teachers' overall ratings of the usefulness of learning resources provided in the online PD course. Scores could theoretically range from 137 (if all participants had indicated "Not useful at all" for all resources) to 685 (if all participants had indicated "Extremely useful" for all resources).

As can be observed in Figure 1, total usefulness scores ranged from 512 to 613, which indicates that all the learning resources were perceived to be useful to some extent. However, the degree of perceived usefulness varied. Teachers perceived learning resources that demonstrate practical examples, such as classroom videos and testimonials, as most useful to facilitate their teaching practices. Learning resources that provide theoretical knowledge, such as video lectures and research notes, were considered moderately useful. Finally, learning resources that focused on self-reflection, such as sharing activities, reflection activities, and quizzes, were perceived relatively less useful to improve teachers' teaching practices.

RQ 2: Usefulness of Learning Resources in Facilitating Teacher-Child Interactions

In this section, we analyzed the teachers' qualitative responses to the four questions asked in the individual interviews. Teachers evaluated the usefulness of learning resources and shared their most and least favorite learning resources of the PD course.

Which Learning Resource is the Most Useful to Facilitate Teacher-Child Interactions?

Most teachers (20 out of 35) agreed that the most useful learning resource of the PD course was the classroom videos. From these teachers' perspective, classroom videos brought new insights for them to improve the interactional quality when chatting with children. For example, Ms Luna explained that

> The classroom videos show real examples of teacher-child interactions, how teachers engage children in the conversations, and how teachers inspire children with different interactional strategies. They are very helpful for me to reflect on my own teaching practices.

This idea aligns with prior literature indicating that online learning resources have the potential to bridge the gap between theoretical understanding and practical application (Ng & Bautista, 2024). Furthermore, six teachers emphasized that the classroom videos linked the theory and practice for their

learning process. As Ms Yvonne pointed out,

> The classroom videos visualize the theories demonstrated in the Video Lectures with practical examples. They are more helpful for frontline teachers like me. I can learn a lot from different styles of teacher-child interactions.

Some of teachers (6 out of 35) believed the most useful learning resource of the PD course was the sharing activities, which promoted the process of self-reflection. For instance, Ms Patricia argued that

> Sharing activities are quite useful. Because you have to share something, and thus teachers have opportunities to reflect what they have learnt in the course. Also, you can learn a lot from other teachers' perspectives and posts.

As discussed in the theoretical framework, these quotes show that online learning resources can facilitate communications among fellow teachers (Onyema et al., 2019).

Which Learning Resource is the Least Useful to Facilitate Teacher-Child Interactions?

Among seven types of learning resources, most of teachers (21 out of 35) noted that the quizzes were the least useful compared to others. Among these teachers, some argued that the questions asked in the quizzes were not helpful for them to reflect on their learning. For example, Ms Laura shared that

> The questions are fact-based. But I prefer reflective questions which are more useful for me to reflect what I have learnt in this course.

Other participants pointed out that the way the quizzes was delivered was not useful to facilitate their teaching practices. For instance, Ms Hannah indicated that

> I understand that you (course facilitators) wanted to reduce the working load for teachers, but the yes/no questions are so easy to answer. The quizzes did help me to review the details in the videos, but I think more challenging questions could further improve my teaching practices.

Consistent with the findings of previous studies (e.g., Dede et al., 2009), teachers may perceive as less useful those learning resources that do not have clear potential to enhance their practices. Meanwhile, some teachers (8 out of 35) agreed that the least useful learning resource was the reflection activities. As Ms Cassy claimed,

> I would say the reflection activities were the least useful. Because sometimes I would just skip them, and only watch the videos.

What is Your Most Favorite Learning Resource?

Many teachers (15 out of 35) who participated in the interviews argued that their most favorite learning resource in the course were the classroom videos, which showed spontaneous teacher-child interactions in real-life situations. Teachers argued that these videos were short, easy to follow, and allowed them to learn interactional strategies from natural conversations between teachers and children. For example, Ms Whitney shared,

> I really enjoy watching classroom videos. They provide real-life examples for me to learn how to naturally interact with children in different situations. The interactional strategies demonstrated in the videos can be implemented into my own classroom.

This echoes with prior literature demonstrating that the use of videos in online professional learning environments can improve teachers' pedagogical skills (Bautista et al., 2022; Bragg et al., 2021). In addition, some teachers (7 out of 35) liked the testimonials the most. For instance, Ms Becky pointed out that

> Teachers and principals always have different examples to share. You can have a lot of learning moments from their sharing in different context. It is very eye-opening.

What is Your Least Favorite Learning Resource?

When asked about the least favorite learning resource in the course, many teachers (12 out of 35) expressed that in general, they highly enjoyed this PD. They did not specify any learning resource that they dislike. These teachers argued that they liked all the learning resources provided. For example, Ms Eileen shared that

> "I like everything of this course. It is very easy to go through. The videos are not very long. I can complete a Unit of

the learning resources easily. Each Unit is very fruitful, and I can always have some takeaways".

Some teachers (9 out of 35) stated that they liked the quizzes the least. As Ms Bonnie claimed,

"Some questions in the quizzes are quite tricky. To recall the details, I have to go back and watch the videos again. To be honest I do not really like the quizzes".

Table 4 summarizes the online PD resources that teachers found most and least useful to facilitate teacher-child interactions, and their most and least favorite resources in the Chat with Children PD course based on the findings of individual interviews.

Table 4
Summaries of Qualitative Findings

Resource type (no. of teachers)	Most useful learning resource	Least useful learning resource	Most favorite learning resource	Least favorite learning resource
	Classroom videos (20)	Quizzes (21)	Classroom videos (15)	Enjoyed everything (12)
	Sharing activities (6)	Reflection activities (8)	Testimonials (7)	Quizzes (9)
	Testimonials (4)	Testimonials, Research notes, Sharing activities (2)	Video lectures (5)	Reflection activities (5)
	Research notes (3)	Video lectures, Classroom videos (0)	Quizzes (3)	Sharing activities, Research notes, Video lectures (3)
	Video lectures, Quizzes (1)		Sharing activities, Research notes (2)	Video lectures, Classroom videos, Video lectures (0)
	Reflection activities (0)		Reflection activities (0)	

Discussion

This study revolves around *Chat with Children*, an online PD centered on teacher-child interactions. We examined Hong Kong kindergarten teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of different types of learning resources, including video lectures, research notes, testimonials, classroom videos, quizzes, reflection activities, and sharing activities.

Based on the descriptive analyses we run to address RQ1, we found that teachers expressed a positive perception of the usefulness of all the learning resources provided in the PD course. Most teachers found *Chat with Children* to offer valuable guidelines and strategies for integrating high-quality teacher-child interactions into their classrooms. Similar to Topal (2016), our online PD course featured seven distinct types of learning resources, addressing the various needs of teachers seeking to enhance their teaching practices. We took into account the potential different learning styles of participants (Cheng & Chau, 2016) when designing these resources. Understanding that teachers may respond differently to practical, theoretical, and self-reflective materials, we included an array of rich, diverse, and multi-sensory resources to maximize the effectiveness of their learning.

While the online PD course was perceived useful overall, teachers found specific types of learning resources to be more useful than others in facilitating their teaching practices. Those learning resources that demonstrated practical examples in real-life situations, such as classroom videos and testimonials, were perceived to be the most useful. Consistent with the study by Bautista et al. (2022), teachers argued that the classroom videos included in the course offered an authentic glimpse into the reality of kindergartens. These videos facilitated the bridging of traditional theoretical education with actual classroom practices (Gaudin & Chaliès, 2015). Learning resources that provided theoretical knowledge, such as video lectures and research notes, were perceived to be moderately useful by teachers. In *Chat with Children*, video lectures and research notes offered teachers theoretical and explicit knowledge, thereby unpacking essential concepts and strategies for high-quality teacher-child interactions. While rooted in formal logic (van Schaik et al., 2019), these resources were perceived to be comparatively less useful than practice-based resources, even though theoretical knowledge is foundational to inform practice (Li & Sang, 2023). Being aware of

this trend is important for PD providers and facilitators to provide useful learning resources for teachers to improve their teaching practices.

Furthermore, learning resources that focus on self-reflection and assessment (such as sharing activities, reflection activities, and especially the quizzes) were perceived as relatively less useful to improve teachers' teaching practices. This finding supports the evidence from the study by Saric and Steh (2017), who identified a significant disparity between teachers' professional goals and their actual reflective practices. Teachers' goals to engage in professional learning may vary. Not all teachers are equally inclined to explore the potential significance or meaning of their daily work experiences (Selkrig & Keamy, 2015). Therefore, teachers may find self-reflection learning resources are least useful for them to guide their work.

In the interviews we conducted to address RQ2, we found that teachers perceived the most useful learning resources as their favorite learning resources. Similar to prior research (Wong et al., 2024), teachers showed a strong preference for resources centered on instructional practices, featuring concrete examples of teacher-child interactions in various settings. This preference is aligned with the Hong Kong's Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide (Guide), which claims that "Teachers should encourage children to actively participate in various activities and give them sufficient time for interactions to experience the norms in social life" (Curriculum Development Council, 2017). This may explain, as least partially, why the favorite learning resources for kindergarten teachers were the ones perceived to be most useful in terms of improving their teaching practices.

To address RQ1, the findings of the current study showed that teachers' demographic background did not influence their perceptions of the usefulness of different types of learning resources. There was no difference when comparing teachers' responses based on their sex, years of experiences teaching children 3-6, academic background, relevant qualifications, and role(s) in the kindergartens. One possible reason may be due to the design of the course, which was based on the five critical features of high-quality PD (Desimone, 2009). In addition, the Guide encourages Hong Kong kindergarten teachers to understand children's developmental and learning needs, and to provide them with interactional opportunities in the daily context (Curriculum Development Council, 2017). However, kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong have limited access to PD programs aimed at enhancing teacher-child interactional quality (Li et al., 2020). Therefore, *Chat with Children* may have the potential to increase teachers' interest and motivation to engage in online PD, regardless of their backgrounds.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence collected, we conclude that:

• Online learning resources that demonstrate practical examples in real-life situations are perceived as most useful to enhance teachers' teaching practices. Compared to learning resources that focus on theoretical knowledge and especially those focused on self-reflection and assessment, videos of practice featuring high-quality interactions transfer abstract concepts into concrete teaching practices in a variety of circumstances (Valle-Flórez et al., 2024).

• Online PD that includes different types of learning resources has the potential to meet teachers' learning needs, regardless of teachers' demographic backgrounds. Exposing teachers to a wide variety of professional practices and stimulating their professional reflection may facilitate their teaching practices in the classroom (Santagata & Guarino, 2011).

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged and overcome in future studies. First, we have only measured teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of learning resources, but not the impact of these learning resources on teaching practices in real-life situations. Future studies should involve the assessment of teaching practices before and after taking PD courses. Second, the study was conducted during the process of piloting an online PD course. Hence, the intent of this exploratory study was to share

observed teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of the learning resources. Future research should therefore consider using controlled experiments to investigate the impact of specific design features (e.g., materials, prompts, procedures, duration) (Bautista et al., 2022) on how teachers perceive the usefulness of the learning resources for enhancing their teaching practices. Third, the study has only included Hong Kong kindergartens. Whether the results generated in the current study can be observed in other socio-cultural settings is uncertain. Therefore, similar studies should be conducted in other societies to explore if the findings can be generalized.

Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, our study addressed a significant gap in the literature by highlighting teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of various types of learning resources within online PD courses. Teachers may perceive the theoretical knowledge and concepts acquired in PD courses as more abstract and less applicable to their practical school settings compared to real-life examples (Clarà, 2014). Furthermore, even with the support of course coordinators, teachers may find it challenging to reflect on what they have learned (Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014). In this sense, we advise that researchers could further explore how different types of knowledge presented in online PD courses influence teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of various types of learning resources.

We suggest that PD designers and facilitators should pay attention to the designs of different types of online learning resources, so as to raise their awareness of the need to improve the quality of their interactions with children. The Hong Kong curriculum Guide upholds of the core value of "child-centeredness", encouraging kindergarten teachers to understand children's developmental and learning needs, thereby providing them with interactional opportunities in the daily context (Curriculum Development Council, 2017). However, it has been documented that there is a lack of systematic and effective PD programs on improving teacher-child interactional quality (Li et al., 2020). In this case, policy makers should provide more online PD opportunities with different types of learning resources that allow teachers to align learning experiences and resources with their needs (Yurkofsky et al., 2019), enhancing teachers' professional skills and competences to support children's development.

Declarations

Authors' Declarations

Publisher's Declarations

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