Teacher Perceptions of Play in Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

Play is crucial for early childhood development, fostering social-emotional competence, cognition, and language. Despite its recognized importance, screen time, standardization, and academic pressures have led to a decline in play implementation. This study used surveys and interviews to examine teachers' perceptions of the importance of play and challenges they faced in implementing play-based learning. Classroom observations used the ECERS-3, and the CLASS assessments and recorded time spent in play to provide measures of developmentally appropriate practice, including play. Survey and interview data indicated teachers value play but face implementation barriers such as screen time and academic expectations. Data from the ECERS-3 and CLASS indicated play quality and appropriateness had lower scores than other indicators. Observations showed insufficient playtime was associated with increased challenging behaviors. There's a pressing need to promote high-quality play in early childhood education and support teachers in effective play-based learning implementation.

KEYWORDS

Structured play, free play, loss of play, curriculum, policy, early childhood education, child development, perception, standardization, teacher practice

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the relationship between teacher perceptions of play as a learning tool in education and their use of play in their practices, as well as perceived barriers to play from outside sources. To evaluate this purpose three research questions were evaluated using surveys, interviews, and classroom observations. Those questions were: (1) what are teachers' perceptions of the value of play as a teaching tool in their classroom, (2) what factors do they identify as barriers to implementing play-based learning, and (3) how do teachers implement play as they balance competing priorities? The operational definition of play used here is

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a child's active engagement in self-selected activities. Play can and should be used intentionally to scaffold learning in a way that actively engages learners and promotes retainment.

Play is a central component of early childhood education and development. Currently, there is discussion within the field regarding current policies and practices that are negatively affecting the implementation of play in early childhood classrooms nationwide (Bassok et al., 2016; Miller & Almon, 2009; Singer et al., 2009). Early childhood education programs are facing several barriers to implementing quality play. Policy and curriculum play a big role in the current state of early childhood education. Over time national policies such as the No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Act placed the burden of test scores and standardization on the shoulders of educators nationwide. Both policy and curriculum considerations affect the daily classroom schedule for children across the education system. More emphasis has been placed on academic achievement for younger children, taking away valuable time for play and exploration. Play is the cornerstone of early learning and has been shown to be fundamental in teaching vital skills in early childhood such as social-emotion regulation, cognition, behavior, language, executive functioning (Aras, 2015; Ginsburg, 2007; Miller & Almon, 2009; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2022). However, research has shown there has been a loss of play in both educational settings and holistically as a society (Bassok et al., 2016; Christakis, 2015; Fleer, 2021; Jarvis et al., 2014; Singer et al., 2009).

Understanding the lasting impact of our current practices on children's development is a prominent area for further evaluation. It is widely established and accepted that children learn through playing (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Halliday et al., 2023). The implications of this loss of play can be long-lasting for children and their ability to interact with peers, actively learn, and develop skills that are cemented in the early learning years. Consequently, scholars globally are studying this issue (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Lynch, 2015; Nilsson et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2022; Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008) to evaluate the loss of play and the social, educational, emotional, and health implications this decrease in active time in early childhood is producing.

Theoretical Perspectives

The conversation surrounding the definition of play has been an ongoing debate for decades. This discussion can be traced back to the era of Vygotsky and Piaget in the 1900s where they individually attempted to define play and its role in early childhood. They both highlight the crucial role of play in child development and the cultivation of cultural competencies necessary for societal integration. Piaget asserts children use play to assimilate into their environment and connect their experiences and learning to their own conceptualization (Piaget, 1962). Vygotsky leveraged his sociocultural theory and his idea of what he termed the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to explain the role of play in early development and learning emphasizing the social nature of learning, advocating for teachers' active involvement in scaffolding children's play to promote independent task completion (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). Play, for Vygotsky, serves as a platform for imaginative exploration and the development of higher mental functions, facilitated through collaboration with peers and adults (O Alharbi, 2022). This collaborative approach contrasts with teacher-centric methods, aligning with ongoing trends in early childhood education.

More contemporary theories contributing to the growing body of literature addressing the definition of play as well as the role play has in early learning and development come from Stuart Brown, Peter Grey, and Jennifer Zosh with her colleagues. Brown (2009) approaches play from an evolutionary perspective and believes play consists of nine components: apparently purposeless, voluntary, inherent attraction, freedom from time, diminished consciousness of self, improvisational potential, and continuation desire. Grey (2013) also composed a list of play features. He asserts that play is directed and chosen by the child, is as an activity in which the focus is not the end-state or a goal, but the means themselves, consists of structure that comes from the minds of the players and not external constraints, is imaginative and separate from real life and involves mental, non-stressed activity. Finally, Zosh et al. (2018) uses the framework established by previous theorists to establish their position that play exists as a spectrum. Since

there are so many specifics regarding play and the context in which it happens Zosh, and colleagues contend this continuum exists in terms of initiation and direction of the experience and whether or not there is a learning goal. This article takes each of these distinct theoretical perspectives into account when evaluating the definition and use of play by early childhood teachers.

Loss of Play

Innate to all species and cultures, play serves as a crucial mechanism for communication and learning (Rentzou, 2012). Play has been recognized as an integral part of developmentally appropriate practice for decades (NAEYC, 2022); however, several factors are contributing to this decline. The current rise in the use and availability of technology has had a negative impact on play in early childhood. Screen usage is a habit formed in early childhood and reinforced over time (Lee, et al., 2009), and technological advancements have made today's children "digital natives," with excessive screen usage which negatively impacts their learning and development. While technology can have educational benefits, most usage is for entertainment or social use, rather than learning purposes. Children's screen time is surpassing recommended limits (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2019). The average time spent at home using a media screen by children ages 2 to 5 was three hours and thirteen minutes according to a 2014 national survey (Radesky & Christakis, 2016). Increased levels of digital media usage can impact cognition, language and literacy, social-emotional development, executive functioning, child development, attention span, and even sleep (Hinkley & McCann, 2018; Madigan et al., 2019).

Standardization movements in education have contributed to this trend away from play by emphasizing narrowly defined academics over holistic development. As a nation there has been a shift towards standardized education, heavily focused on academic metrics and test scores. This shift began with President Clinton's 'The Goals 2000: Educate America Act' in 1994, gained momentum with President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002 and was solidified with Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 under President Obama. These legislative measures aimed to close achievement gaps and set national education standards monitored by standardized tests. While standardized tests may be useful in identifying educational disparities, they often prioritize rote memorization over authentic understanding and impede teaching creativity as educators tailor instruction to exam content, rather than student needs, interests, or developmental level. Despite the insights they provide, standardized evaluations fail to capture the complexity of individuals, prompting concerns about their efficacy and impact on education quality. Using test results as a starting point for further assessment may offer more meaningful insights into student learning than relying on test results alone (Starr, 2017).

The academic implications of diminished play are profound, as evidenced by the rise in academic expectations in preschool and kindergarten classrooms, where play-based learning traditionally thrived. Research indicates a concerning trend where teachers increasingly endorse formal reading and math instruction in preschool and kindergarten, potentially compromising developmentally appropriate practices (Bassok et al., 2016). Elkind (2012) notes a clear distinction between rote learning and genuine understanding, as early emphasis on rote learning can hinder later problem-solving abilities. Brown & Vaughan (2009) underscore the long-term impact of early exploration and play, illustrating how a lack of play in childhood can impede critical thinking and problem-solving skills essential for success. They cite studies that suggest nurturing a "tinkering mentality" through early exploration that fosters a mindset conducive to innovation and discovery, underscoring the importance of play for lifelong cognitive development.

Recognizing play as essential for children's well-being and development is paramount, requiring a balance between direct academic instruction, playful learning, and unstructured play in early childhood education. The consequences of diminishing play extend beyond academics, affecting health outcomes. Promoting meaningful play experiences in early childhood classrooms is vital for fostering social, emotional, and cognitive development.

Need for Play

Play is not just a pastime for children; it is a fundamental human right, as recognized by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Molu, 2023). Its significance extends beyond mere activity, encompassing a crucial aspect of childhood development and education (Wohlwend, 2023). While defining play remains a debated topic, its importance in early childhood education is widely acknowledged. Play serves as a platform for children to learn essential life skills such as teamwork and social communication, contributing to their holistic development (Cheung & Ostrosky, 2023). The objective of early childhood education should not solely revolve around structured academic pursuits, as this may impede children's exploratory playtime. Self-directed activities during play foster natural skill development and enable children to meet developmental milestones outside the confines of traditional learning environments. Dramatic play has been linked to the development of many skills in early childhood education. Halliday and colleagues (2023) found fantasy play is associated with the cultivation of socio-emotional skills and creativity that endure into adulthood. Other research has found psychological benefits and impacts of play for expressing and dealing with concerns (Honeyford & Boyd, 2015).

Play is not just a pastime for children; it is a fundamental human right.

The diminishing emphasis on play in early childhood classrooms can have adverse effects on children's holistic health, including mental, emotional, and physical. Peer play serves as a crucial avenue for developing emotional regulation and socio-cognitive abilities, which act as protective factors against mental health issues. Research indicates a significant correlation between early peer play engagement and reduced mental health difficulties in later years (Zhao & Gibson, 2022). Yet, despite these findings, early childhood settings continue to curtail playtime opportunities, potentially depriving children of crucial developmental experiences. Considering these findings, it is imperative to reevaluate early childhood education practices to prioritize play as a cornerstone of holistic child development. By fostering environments that afford ample play opportunities, educators can empower children to thrive emotionally, socially, and academically. Yogman (2018) and a team of medical doctors (MD) and PhDs published a seminal article on the effects of play from both a medical and developmental impact perspective. They highlight the effects of play on the brain and how utilizing play influences developmental outcomes as well as the benefits of play with kids for adults. One of the conclusive points they make is that play provides a singular opportunity to build the executive functioning that underlies adaptive behaviors at home; improve language and math skills in school; build the safe, stable, and nurturing relationships that buffer against toxic stress; and build social emotional resilience.

Method

This study was designed to examine early childhood teachers' perceptions on the value of play in early childhood settings and their implementation and quality of play in their classrooms while balancing competing priorities spurred by the current sociopolitical shift away from play. Data were gathered through surveys, interviews, and classroom observations of early childhood teachers to identify: (1) what are teacher's perceptions of the value of play as a teaching tool in their classroom, (2) what factors do they identify as barriers to implementing play-based learning, and (3) how do teachers implement play as they balance competing priorities?

Subjects

Participants were recruited from three different preschool programs in a midwestern town: private, public, and government funded. Program directors were initially contacted to see if they would

be willing to recruit their staff to participate in this study. Once confirmation was received, they were sent an explanatory email including a Qualtrics survey link. Of the 13 teachers who participated in the survey, two were from the government funded program, nine were in a public preschool setting, and two were in a private center. Three of the 13 teachers had half-day programs while the other 10 were full day. The teachers in this study participated voluntarily. Teachers who consented to participate in an interview were the two government funded teachers, four of the nine public school teachers, and one of the private school teachers. Classroom observations were conducted in two government funded rooms, three public school rooms, and one private school room.

Procedures

Recruitment and data collection

Both the private and public programs operated five days a week with full day programs and have a monthly tuition rate. The public program operated on a sliding scale and encouraged families to apply for grant support and gave priority to those with low-income status, ELL students, students of teen parents, those born prematurely or with low birth weight, and other risk factors. The government-funded program is federally regulated and has programs nationally. The three different program types were used to include a more representative sample and minimize confounding variables.

Data was collected in three stages. Prior to any data being obtained participants were asked to sign a consent form to be part of the study that outlined their rights and responsibilities. Once that was signed, they were forwarded to the survey. The last two questions on the survey produced the sample for the second and third stages of data collection.

The second stage consisted of semi-structured interviews. The third and final stage of data collection was 4-hour observations in early childhood classrooms. Teachers participating in the interview received a $10 gift card and if they chose to participate in the observation, they received a toy or learning material for their classroom. Each stage of data collection informed the following stages. The survey gathered demographic data which influenced the conclusions to be drawn from the interview and observation. The interview demonstrated participant perception of play in their classrooms which was then able to be evaluated for consistency of practice through observation.

Instrumentation

The instruments included a researcher-created survey, a researcher-created interview, and two standardized and widely used classroom observation assessment tools. Interviews were conducted via Zoom or phone depending on the preference of the teacher. Transcripts from the interviews were saved in a secure electronic folder with only the primary researcher having access for qualitative data analysis. The interview protocol consisted of fifteen open-ended questions to address the research questions listed above. All protocols and procedures were approved via the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Observations utilized two authentic environmental assessment tools: the PreK Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) and the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS-3), Third Edition.

Survey. The survey consisted of 23 items: demographics, multiple choice, short answer, and Likert scale questions. The questions aimed to gain information about participants' personal experiences with play in their education, personal views on play, the type of curriculum used, and teacher identified barriers to play in their classrooms. These questions were derived by evaluating what information was needed to effectively answer the research questions in this study and tailored them accordingly. The demographic data gathered participant's level of education and experience to evaluate how those factors may be influencing their understanding and attitudes towards play as well as the amount of play utilized in their classrooms. The survey took approximately five minutes to complete. It was pilot tested with three separate individuals to evaluate if the survey was socially valid.

Interview. The interview consisted of fifteen questions in two categories, classroom set-up and personal views. Five questions were asked about classroom set-up including daily routines, use of

classroom time, and teacher's role during play. The second category was designed to get an understanding of teacher perceptions and personal views on play both inside their classroom and at a fundamental level. The interview questions were evaluated to ensure the responses were unbiased in capturing information. On average, interviews lasted about 15 to 20 minutes. To pilot test the interview, a similar method to the survey was implemented. First, several professionals both within the field and outside the field of early childhood examined the questions and gave feedback to make sure they were open-ended and would garner the feedback needed to address the research questions. The interview was pilot tested on an early childhood specialist that was not included in the study to determine if the questions accurately addressed the research objective.

The Prekindergarten Classroom Assessment Scoring System, or CLASS, measures three dimensions: Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support. Within these dimensions, ten domains focus on the different aspects of teacher-child interactions. The dimension 'Emotional Support' includes the domains Positive Climate, Negative Climate, Teacher Sensitivity, and Regard for Student Perspectives. 'Classroom Organization' evaluated the domains of Behavior Management, Productivity, and Instructional Learning Formats. Finally, the 'Instructional Support' dimension incorporates Concept Development, Quality of Feedback, and Language Modeling. The CLASS scale includes 42 indicators with 4 to 5 per domain (Pianta et al., 2008). Several studies have shown that the CLASS possesses adequate reliability and validity in the United States (Rangel-Pacheco & Witte, 2021). The CLASS uses a graduated scoring system with a 7-point Likert scale. The ratings available for each item are Low (1,2), Middle (3,4,5), and High (6,7) with an average calculated per domain at the end of each evaluation.

Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale, Third Edition or ECERS-3 is a widely accepted and used environmental rating system designed to be used in preschool, kindergarten, and childcare classrooms serving children ages 3-5 years. The six subscales of the ECERS-3 evaluate Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language and Literacy, Learning Activities, Interactions, and Program Structure. They include 35 items. The average indicator reliability across all indicator and assessor pairs was 88.71%. In the full item reliability on all 35 items, exact agreement occurred in 67% of the cases, and agreement within 1 point was obtained in 91% of the cases (Harms et al., 2015). The ECERS-3 utilizes a graduated scoring system with a 7-point Likert scale and uses the following definitions for ratings: 1 (inadequate), 3 (minimal), 5 (good), and 7 (excellent).

Statistical Analysis

Quantitative data was collected during the six classroom observations using the CLASS and ECERS-3 assessments. Item ratings are averaged per domain. Each classroom observed was given an assessment total average to evaluate the agreement between the two scales. The statistical analysis was conducted using both Excel spreadsheets and SPSS to evaluate the observation data. SPSS was used to run descriptive statistics and Pearson Correlation that compared the ECERS-3 and CLASS total classroom averages. Excel was used to create average values and compare the classroom averages across the six ECERS-3 and ten CLASS domains including the total average score across each assessment.

Results

This study aimed to answer three questions: (1) What are teacher's perceptions of the value of play as a teaching tool in their classroom? (2) What factors do they identify as barriers to implementing play-based learning? and (3) How do teachers implement play as they balance competing priorities? Evaluation of these questions were conducted in three stages as described above: surveys, interviews, and classroom observations.

Descriptive Data

Survey participants were asked several demographic questions; all participants in this study identified as white (non-Hispanic) females and worked in a central Nebraska early childhood setting. Teachers averaged 11 years working in early childhood (range: 2-23 years). Teachers in this

study were all between 26 and 50+ years old with the most teachers (31%) being in the 26–30-year-old age group. Two teachers had a master's degree, eight held bachelor's degrees, two had an associate degree, and one had some college or a Child Development Associate (CDA). Of those degrees, nine were in Early Childhood, two were in Family Studies, and one was in Psychology. Six (46%) of the 13 teachers indicated 'some' of their schooling was centered on using play as a teaching tool, four (31%) selected 'a lot' and only one (8%) said 'a great deal'. Over half the participants selected 'some' or lower for their level of schooling centered on play. Other demographic data collected included the type of curricula used in the classrooms and who chose it. Of the 13 teachers that completed the survey, five used Creative Curriculum, four used High Scope, and four used a combination of Eureka for Math, Amplify Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA), and Second Step for Social Emotional Learning in their classrooms. All curriculum used across the program types was selected by the administration. To gather more information on the structure of the curriculum being used, a survey question asked if the curriculum allowed for intentional learning through play. Eight teachers (62%) indicated 'yes' while the other five (38%) indicated 'some'. See Table 1.

Table 1
Early Childhood Teacher Demographics (N = 13)

Factor	n=13	%
Gender		
Male	-	-
Female	13	100
Non-binary/other	-	-
Prefer not to say	-	-
Ethnicity		
African American	-	-
Asian/Pacific Islander	-	-
Caucasian (non-Hispanic)	13	100
Latino or Hispanic	-	-
Native American/Aleut	-	-
Other	-	-
Age		
18-20	-	-
21-25	-	-
26-30	4	31
31-35	2	15
36-40	3	23
41-45	2	15
46-50	-	-
50+	2	15
Prefer not to say	-	-
Level of Education		
High School/GED	-	-
Some college/CDA	1	8
Associate degree	2	15
Bachelor's degree	8	62
Master's Degree	2	15
Other	-	-
Schooling on Play		
None	-	-
A little	2	15
Some	6	46
A lot	4	31
A great deal	1	8

Interview participants were asked four demographic questions to better understand their program layout and other demographic considerations. The main difference among the classroom types is that the public-school classrooms were working with their educational service unit this year to revamp their schedules to break up their large group times to allow for more small-group and child-led activities. Otherwise, all classrooms indicated they utilized a standard schedule for a preschool room including breakfast, morning meeting/calendar, free play, gross motor time, lunch, nap, snack, small group times, and dismissal procedures. Overall, play was reported to be used for free and exploratory time in the classrooms, utilizing both student and teacher-led play. Additionally, they were asked what the teacher's roles were during center time to gauge how teachers were using this time and if participants were scaffolding learning during this time. The majority reported that teachers and classroom staff were expected to be engaging with the children during these times as well as acting as mediators for any conflicts that arise. Secondarily, some teachers used this time to document the skills and learning of their students.

RQ1: Early Childhood Teachers' Perceptions of the Value of Play as a Teaching Tool

The research question 'what are teacher's perceptions of the value of play as a teaching tool in their classroom?' was evaluated via survey (n=13) and the interview (n=7) questions.

The survey used three questions to gauge participants' perceptions and attitudes toward play in their classrooms (see Table 2). The results from the open-ended question were thematically evaluated, and four common themes emerged: more time for play, communication between staff, curriculum/using play intentionally as a teaching tool, and none.

All 13 teachers felt play held at least some importance in early childhood with over half (62%) indicating it was extremely important. Most participants (69%) felt they had enough or the right amount in their classrooms, this belief was similarly held by those who participated in the interview. This belief is later challenged by observation results. More time was the most cited (38%) consideration teachers would change regarding play in their classroom. This was followed closely (31%) by the desire to have more play and intentional teaching through play in their curriculums. Time is a re-

Table 2

Teacher Perception of the Value of Play (Survey Results)

Factor	n=13	%
How important do you think play is for early childhood classrooms?		
Not at all important	-	-
Slightly important	-	-
Moderately important	1	8
Very important	4	31
Extremely Important	8	62
To what extent do you feel you use play in your classroom?		
Not enough	2	15
Enough/the right amount	9	69
More than enough	2	15
Is there anything you wish you could do differently regarding play in your classroom?		
More time	5	38
Communication	2	15
Curriculum/Intentional Play	4	31
None	2	15

theme throughout this study as a concern in both the interview and demonstrated as a barrier during the observations.

The interview utilized eight questions to better understand teacher perceptions of play both personally and in their classrooms (see Table 3). Those responses were evaluated for common themes across interviewees.

All seven (100%) interviewees said they felt play held a vital role in early childhood education and believed critical skills are learned through play. When asked if play enhances or detracts from academic learning, all expressed they felt play strongly enhances academics. Although teachers cited many barriers and a desire for more play time both in the survey and in the interview, they felt that play and academics were appropriately balanced in their classroom. An idea that was cited by many (57%) of the teachers when asked about the current role of play in academics and the shift in play throughout their time as educators, they expressed that they felt the role of play in kindergarten and elementary school specifically has seen a dramatic shift away from playtime to more academically rigorous instruction. As one teacher put it:

> Then they get to like the elementary ages you have like the test scores and all of that stuff that you have to get done. So, like when I went to kindergarten, we still had center time, but they don't have that now.

Two teachers (29%) addressed how this has caused a "trickle-down" effect in preschool rooms. One teacher stated:

> I feel like elementary school has increased their expectations so much, especially prior to the last 10 to 20 years. It's almost like that trickledown effect then, to what the kindergarten teachers want to see, more preschoolers coming in with more skills that they used to teach [in kindergarten] and so you feel that pressure.

Another cited shift (n=3) was the need to teach kids how to play with toys, materials, and peers at the beginning of the year. Additionally, participants indicated increased screen time in early childhood as the main factor for students not knowing how to play.

Teachers' definitions of play were thematically similar, with four (57%) saying play meant children using their imagination, with three (43%) adding that this means a freedom to explore. One teacher succinctly described it as "play is everything [in early childhood]". When asked how they would explain the role and importance of play in an early childhood education setting to a parent, all participants (n=7) said they would address it by explaining how important play is to development and learning at this level of education. The final interview question asked if participants felt any stress in their role as an educator and all, but one (86%) said yes citing challenging behaviors, balancing expectations, and personal desires for their classroom as the main sources of stress.

Table 3

Personal views on play interview questions

1. Do you think play and academics are evenly balanced in your classroom?
2. What is your definition of play? What is the role of play in your classroom?
3. How would you explain the role of play to a parent?
4. In your time as an educator do you feel there has been a shift in the expectation of play in the classroom?
5. Do you think there are enough opportunities for play in your classroom?
6. Do you think play enhances or detracts from academics?
7. How does play fit into today's academic environment?
8. Do you feel any stress balancing the different aspects of teaching such as curriculum, best practices, personal wants, and expectations?

RQ2: Teacher Identified Barriers to Implementing Play-Based Learning

To address the second research question, 'what factors do teachers identify as barriers to implementing play-based learning?' survey and interview results were leveraged to understand implementation barriers as they were perceived by participants.

The survey included two questions for evaluating barriers to play in participants' experience: "Do you feel there are barriers to implementing play in your classroom" and "What barriers do you see to play in your classroom?" See Table 4.

Most participants (69%) indicated they perceived at least 'some' barriers to play. The most common barrier reported (77%) was a lack of time in the school day, distantly followed by curriculum (31%). This sentiment was echoed in the interviews and later demonstrated time as a barrier during observations. See Table 5.

The interview used four questions to address perceived barriers to play in the classroom.

Six teachers (85%) echoed survey results citing time as the main barrier to implementing play in their classrooms and their inability to effectively balance classroom responsibilities such as curriculum and other academic activities. One teacher outlined this concern:

> Time, not time in general, but like time balanced with everything else that you're supposed to fit in a day nowadays.

Two teachers (29%) cited screen time as a contributing factor to the cited issue of children 'not knowing how to play' when children enter preschool. One teacher showed frustration with this propensity for screen time, stating,

> It's just crazy that we can't hold their engagement really, you know, [because] there's no screen time [in the classroom].

Table 4

Perceived barriers to play (Survey Results)

Question	n=13	%
Do you feel there are barriers to implementing play in your classroom?		
Yes	2	15
No	4	31
Some	7	54
What barriers do you see to play in your classroom (check all that apply)		
Curriculum	4	31
Administration	2	15
Parental/Societal Attitudes	2	15
Lack of Time	10	77
Policy	1	8

Table 5

Teacher perceived barriers to play

1. Do you feel any constrictions to implementing play in your classroom?
2. Have you experienced any push toward implementing more academics in your classroom?
3. How much emphasis is put on "kindergarten readiness" in your program?
4. Do you feel like this puts more pressure on you to focus on academic achievement?

Additional questions addressing barriers to play included how focused on kindergarten readiness and push for meeting academic standards have impacted their classroom schedule as a potential contributing factor to the reduction of playtime. All (n=7) teachers indicated their classrooms focus on kindergarten readiness to varying degrees. Many (71%) of the classrooms used it as an idea to promote learning and guidance toward what skills still needed to be developed, but it was not a central focus for any of the classrooms in this study. Three (43%) teachers indicated the push towards implementing more academics came indirectly from the types and number of curriculums they struggle to fit into their schedule which are mandated by administrators. The remaining (n=4) participants cited no internal push towards academic instruction.

RQ3: How Teachers Implement Play as They Balance Competing Priorities

This research question became especially salient in this study considering the interview and survey results where many teachers cited struggles balancing priorities as a reality in their programs. To evaluate the prominence of play in classrooms the amount of play was recorded for free play and gross motor play. Additionally, the CLASS and ECERS-3 established the quality and types of play. See Figure 1.

Observations were conducted for 4 hours per classroom in the mornings. The classroom schedule was considered in both the interviews and classroom observations to establish additional time dedicated to play that may not have been observable at the time researchers were in the classroom. All (n=6) classrooms observed had additional time dedicated to gross motor play (recess) in the afternoon but no scheduled time for additional free play using classroom materials and toys. Therefore, time for gross motor play may be higher than reported, but free play is accurately represented. The ECERS-3 takes these times into account when rating items in the 'Learning Activities' domain. The low rates of play in the classrooms negatively affected classroom scores on several items. Many of these items required play materials to be accessible to children for 'at least 1 hour during the observation' to be given a 5 (good) rating or higher. Since all but one classroom failed to meet the one-hour mark of 'free' play, they were given a score of 4 or lower, which negatively affected their overall average both in that domain and their total average (see Figure 2).

Figure 1

Minutes of Play in Classroom

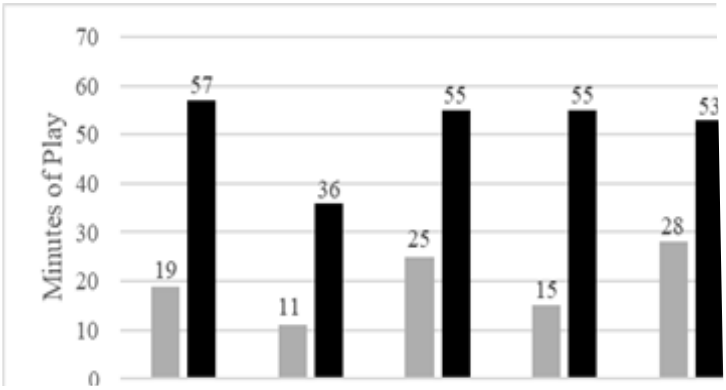
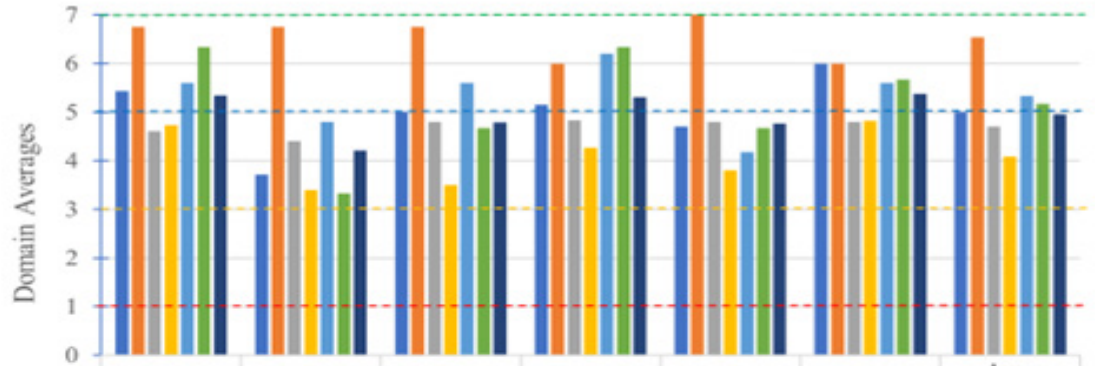


Figure 2

ECERS-3 Domain Averages per Classroom



	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	Area Averages
Space & Furnishings	5.43	3.71	5	5.15	4.71	6	5
Personal Care Routines	6.75	6.75	6.75	6	7	6	6.54
Language & Literacy	4.6	4.4	4.8	4.83	4.8	4.8	4.71
Learning Activities	4.73	3.4	3.5	4.27	3.8	4.82	4.09
Interaction	5.6	4.8	5.6	6.2	4.17	5.6	5.33
Program Structure	6.33	3.33	4.67	6.33	4.67	5.67	5.17
ECERS Total Average	5.34	4.21	4.79	5.31	4.76	5.37	4.96

Note. The green line indicates 'excellent', blue is 'good', yellow is 'minimal', and red is 'inadequate'.

Observation Results

ECERS-3

The ECERS-3 scores were evaluated using the classroom average for each of the six domains and the total average. Classroom scores for the ECERS-3 are listed in Figure 2.

The lowest scoring domain average across all classrooms was the 'Learning Activities' (range=3.4-4.82, average=4.09) domain closely followed by the 'Language & Literacy' (range=4.4-4.83, average=4.71). As addressed above, one of the main reasons for the lower scores in the 'Learning Activities' domain was item scores were limited to a 1-4 score since the rooms were not reaching the 1-hour time minimum outlined by the ECERS-3. The total average ECERS-3 score across all six classrooms was 4.96 with a range of 4.21-5.37.

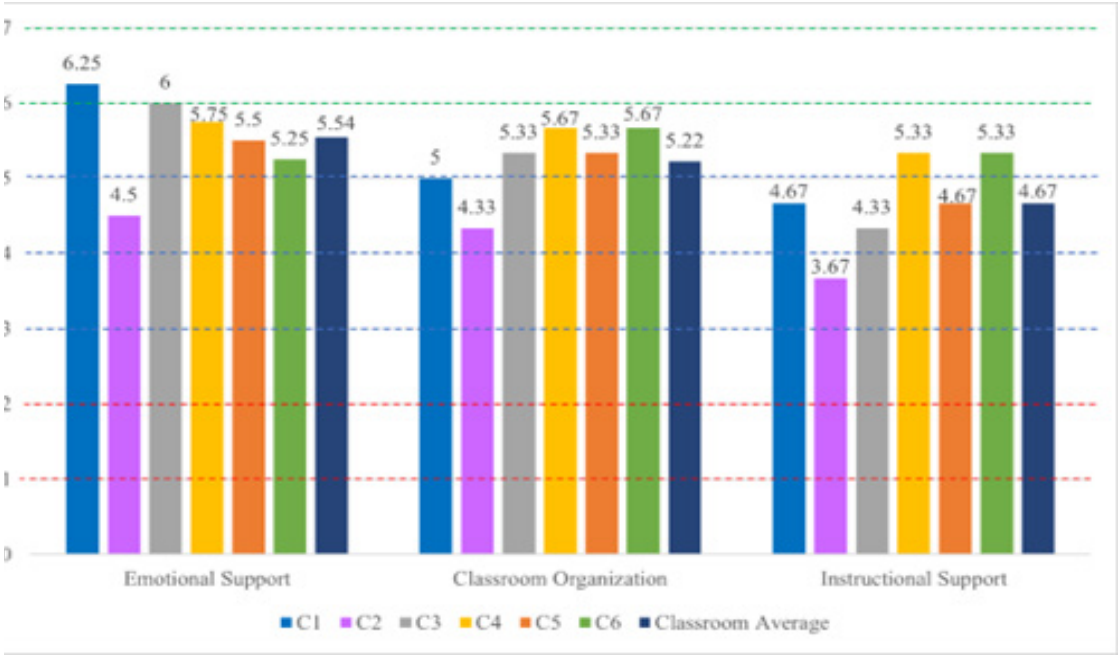
CLASS

The CLASS was used in conjunction with the ECERS-3 to substantiate results and evaluate classroom practices and relationships between staff and students. It is important to note that the 'Negative Climate' score is an inverse rating. The scores for the 'Negative Climate' domain were inverted using the formula: rated score minus eight (#-8 = direct score) for comparison. Averages across CLASS assessment for the six classrooms had a range = 4.2-5.6 with an average = 5.18. This put the classrooms in the 'middle' category as defined by the CLASS rating scale.

Averages for the three dimensions of the CLASS scale 'Emotional Support', 'Classroom Organization', and 'Instructional Support' were calculated for each classroom as well as the total average. Classrooms fell in 'High' or 'Medium'. Classrooms 1 (6.25) and 3 (6) were the only ones to achieve a 'High' rating in the 'Emotional Support' dimension. Those were the only classrooms to reach a 'High' (6-7) score across any of the domains. None of the classrooms got below a 'Medium' score (3-5). The average for the 'Emotional Support' dimension was 5.54 with a range of 4.5-6.25. In the 'Classroom Organization' dimension the average across all six classrooms was 5.22 with a range of 5.67-4.33. The 'Instructional Support' dimension had the lowest average scores both per classroom and as a total across the three dimensions (average = 4.67; range = 5.33-3.67).

Figure 3

CLASS Dimension Averages per Classroom



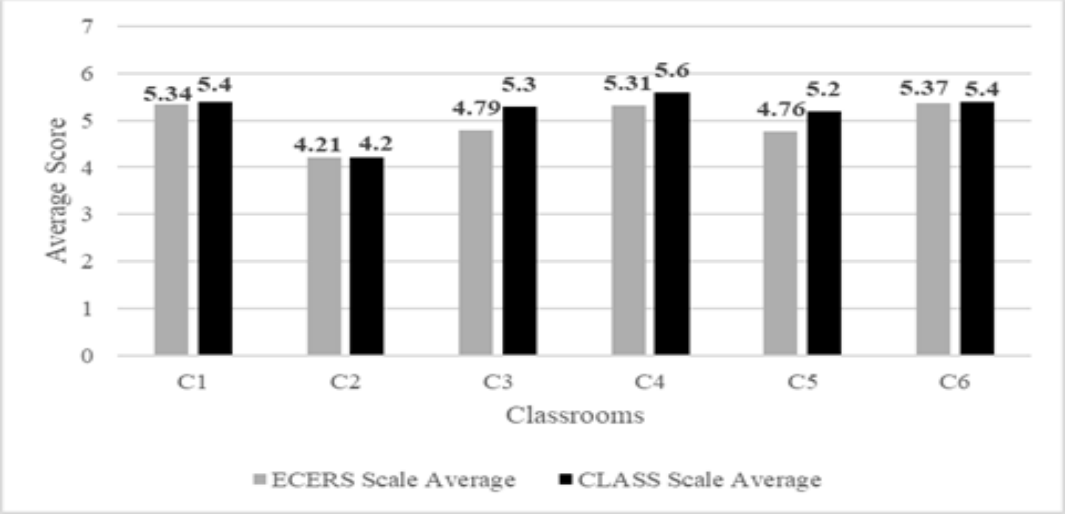
Note. Green lines denote 'high' scores, blue means 'middle', and red is 'low'.

Interpretations of Statistical Results

Evaluating the ECERS-3 and the CLASS averages allowed result verification for correlation. A Pearson Correlation test using SPSS for the ECERS-3 and the CLASS was used to evaluate the averages across the six classrooms. Results indicated a highly positive correlation with a coefficient of R = 0.894. This correlation is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. This positive correlation indicates that classroom scores would likely have a similar score on the CLASS and ECERS-3. The classrooms scored: C1=5.34 & 5.4; C2=4.21 & 4.2; C3=4.79 & 5.3; C4=5.31 & 5.6; C5=4.76 & 5.2; C6=5.37 & 5.4 on the ECERS-3 and CLASS respectively. See Figure 4.

Figure 4

ECERS-3 vs CLASS averages per classroom



The standard deviation for the ECERS-3 (4.96) and CLASS (5.18) averages was less than one at 0.46181 and 0.4997, respectively. The variation for each of the assessment tools was 0.213 (ECERS-3) and 0.250 (CLASS), meaning the scores were statistically similar to the average on both scales. Indicating the ECERS-3 and CLASS produced comparable results across the classrooms and assessments with little variation.

Discussion

This study examined what factors teachers identify as barriers to play in early childhood classrooms, how they perceive play in their classrooms, and the realities of play practices in the classroom as they balance competing priorities. Gathering data from a practitioner perspective establishes a foundation for understanding factors impeding the use of play in the classroom regardless of the value placed on play by teachers as an essential part of learning in early childhood.

Limitations in this study include the limited number of participants and the short timeframe for data collection. The homogeneous nature of the participants in this study was another limiting element. Participants in this study were all similar age, ethnicity, and were all female. This limited diversity impacts the generalizability of conclusions in the study.

Summary of Findings

A common thread emerged through data collection and analysis: a lack of time. Throughout this study participants consistently mentioned a lack of time in survey and interview answers; this was supported by the observation results. This lack of time in classrooms, as teachers reported, was directly linked to the inability to balance the competing priorities that fall to them.

A common thread emerged through data collection and analysis: a lack of time.

The observed classrooms failed to reach the one-hour mark required on the ECERS-3 scale to score a 5 (good) or higher. Only one classroom reached the minimum 30 minutes of gross motor play during the observation period; however, most classrooms had scheduled time for recess in the afternoons which would increase their overall gross motor play time within the school day. Children should be getting at least an hour of unstructured play time in the classroom (Mader, 2022). However, most classrooms in this study were not achieving this minimum. Academically focused programs with rigorous curriculums place heavy requirements on teachers to place emphasis on academic instruction in favor of play.

The classrooms observed had statistically similar scores between the two assessment measures used. The ECERS-3 and the CLASS were designed to be highly correlative with one another; therefore, this was an expected outcome and gave the ratings further validity. Both scales use a 7-point Likert scale, with classrooms scoring averages that fell within 'Medium' and 'Good' on the ECERS-3 and CLASS respectively. The two programs with the two lowest averages on both the ECERS-3 (4.21 and 4.76) and CLASS (4.2 and 5.2) also had the two lowest minutes of free play/centers in their classroom (36 and 53 minutes). The classroom that scored the lowest overall average for both the ECERS-3 and CLASS also had the lowest rate of gross motor time (11 minutes). This classroom had the highest rates of challenging behaviors, need for redirection, and lowest levels of engagement. Identified by the classroom's low scores on two CLASS domains 'Positive Climate' (3) and 'Behavior Management' (3), these were the lowest scores recorded for a classroom. The lowest scoring classrooms were both government funded programs. Conversely the highest scoring program was the private institution. This teacher also was the outlier in the interview that did not indicate feeling daily stress.

Conclusions and Implications

This study, guided by current literature and influenced by the policies and practices that affect early childhood education programs at a grassroots level, shined a light on the current state of practitioner practices, beliefs, and perceptions. An unexpected outcome of this study highlighted possible inequities in play practices between programs depending on the type of institution that could be causing increasing gaps in education and later learning

outcomes. Early childhood teachers in programs nationwide are tasked with the impossible responsibility of balancing demands. This discrepancy between teachers' perceptions of play as a valuable learning tool and their expressed desire to have more play in their classroom indicates there is a need for bridging this divide between policy and practice. Authentic learning occurs when children are engaged in extended periods of play time that can be used to support learning rather than being approached as a dichotomy which has become the current state of learning in many classrooms.

Results highlighted a possible area of inequity between practice and programming in early childhood education. The government funded program that serves lower socioeconomic status families had the lowest rates of play, recorded scores on the observation, and level of practitioner education. Play allows children to learn how to express their feelings, build linguistic skills, and other academic skills important for later learning. Programs with insufficient play in their classrooms are exacerbating the learning gap for these low socioeconomic status children. Teacher advocacy can be a strategy for combating this inequality, but they must have the resources to do so (Alahmari et al., 2023).

The findings of this investigation bear significance for parental and pedagogical stakeholders as well as the current state of inequitable practices and policies that indicate disparities in the implementation of play across various contexts. At home, the prevalence of technology has notably increased over recent decades, often replacing traditional play activities. This shift has led to a decline in outdoor play and exploration, which are recognized for their multifaceted benefits to holistic child development (Koepp et al., 2022). Unstructured play holds positive benefits for educational, developmental, social, and emotional domains. Thus, it is imperative for parents to acknowledge this evolving landscape and prioritize play within the home environment, affording children opportunities that may not be readily available in formal education settings. Contrary to common assumptions, research indicates the amount of play occurring in schools may not suffice to meet recommended playtime guidelines. Given current classroom dynamics, an additional two hours of active play at home is required to meet recommended daily play duration (Gavin, 2019).

Early childhood teachers, as the primary focus of this study, revealed the imbalance of play perceptions by educators and the current state of play practices in the classroom. Burdened by policies and program expectations set by administrators, teachers find themselves facing an uphill battle implementing play within the confines of their curriculum expectations. Mitigating this imbalance necessitates a strategic integration of playful practices within instructional delivery, thereby fostering peer interaction and creative engagement while adhering to curriculum standards.

Policy standards and practices within early childhood education highlight the importance of advocacy for play. Socioeconomic factors influencing the programs in which children enroll have academic implications for next level education. Those from lower SES settings are already lagging by the time of their entry into primary education. The privatization of preschool programs is contributing to the inequity (Janssen et al., 2023). This was the original objective of NCLB to mitigate this learning gap. The demonstrated negative effects of prevailing policies on both educators and learners underscores the need for systemic reform. By fostering a more nuanced, responsive approach to educational policy, stakeholders can alleviate the undue burden placed on teachers to conform to standardized testing, and instead nurture a culture of pedagogical innovation and holistic child development, namely through play.

Future Directions

Future research should allow for further evaluation of more early childhood classrooms and types using a larger sample size and a population from each setting to establish a stronger empirical foundation in this area. This will allow for a more in-depth analysis of program-type as a moderating factor and the implications for play within the classroom. The classroom with the lowest overall scores and time dedicated to play also had the highest rates of challenging behaviors. Future studies should evaluate instances of challenging behavior relating to the amount of free play implemented within the classroom.

An area for future research that arose in the study was the role technology has in relation to

children's ability to play and their level of engagement in the classroom. Research highlighting this potential relationship between technology usage in early childhood across contexts and the impact it has on imagination and creativity as it relates to play and the ability to create meaningful play experiences may be relevant to this conversation. Many teachers indicated children's use of technology pre-enrollment and at home were reducing the level and length of engagement employed in the classroom. The implications from this research study offer a foundational insight into the adverse effects of standardization, program enrollment, competing priorities, and technology usage on teachers' capacity to implement developmentally appropriate practices, particularly through play. These factors not only impede the integration of play-based approaches to learning but also exacerbate the achievement gap and add to the daily workload of educators, potentially contributing to diminished job satisfaction, heightened turnover rates, and increased susceptibility to burnout.

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