UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS USE AND PERSPECTIVES OF PLAY AS A LEARNING STRATEGY WITHIN TEMA METROPOLIS

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MASTER OF EDUCATION

2022

UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA

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A dissertation in the Department of Early Childhood Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of Master of Education (Early Childhood Education) in the University of Education, Winneba

APRIL, 2022

DECLARATION

CANDIDATE'S DECLARATION

I **Sabina Ferguson-Haizel,** hereby declare that except for references to other people's work which have been dully cited, this dissertation is the product of my own effort and that it had neither in whole nor in part been presented elsewhere.

Signature: …………………………………

Date: …………………………………

SUPERVISOR DECLARATION

I, hereby declare that the presentation of this dissertation was supervised in accordance with the guidelines for the supervision of Long Essay laid down by the University of Education, Winneba.

Supervisor: Prof. Hinneh Kusi

Signature: ………………………………………

Date: ………………………………………

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

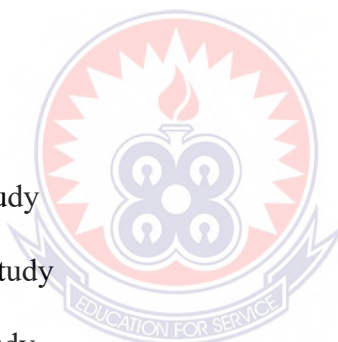# DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to lovely parents Mr. and Mrs. Haizel and sweet husband Mr.

Daniel Agyei Sakyi and all my children.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore early childhood educators' use and perspectives of play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms at Tema Metropolis within the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. The study sought to examine early childhood educators' perspectives on play as a learning strategy, assess how early childhood educators' implement play as a learning strategy, identify the barriers early childhood educators' encounter in using play as a learning strategy and find out the support systems that could be put in place to enable early childhood educators' implement play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms within Tema Metropolis. Twenty (20) participants were sampled for this study. Those participants were purposively sampled. Semi-structured interview guide was used to data for the study. The inductive analysing approach was considered and all data were manually coded. The study found that, participants' perspectives of play as a learning strategy included but was not limited to the following: enjoyable, it provides opportunities for interaction and socialization with peers. Also, the study found that participants implemented play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms using play scenarios, thematic learning centres, and storytelling. Insufficient knowledge in creating a playful in their classroom, lack of time and space, large class size and inadequate of playing materials were barriers participants encounter in the implementation of play as a learning strategy in the classroom. Moreover, the study found that collaborative planning, more space, more adults who are skilled, more play materials and more time would be great support system to have in place in the classroom to enable them implement play as a learning strategy. The study recommends that, early childhood educators needs more than minimal professional trainings in order to gain more knowledge on play-based learning and on how to create a playful classroom. For that reason, designers of teachers' training programs should review the current programs and make relevant adjustments, so that these programs would not just focus on the teaching of knowledge and basic skills with play-based learning but also on the link between teachers' belief and practice. The study also recommends that, policy makers of Ghana Education Service under the Ministry of Education should make appropriate and relevant policy for early childhood educators to implement play in their classrooms. Thus, they need to clarify the expectations of early childhood educator and provide guidance in implementing play based learning in their schools.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Early childhood is a highly critical period for learning. Students who attend preschool programs typically come to kindergarten better prepared to start elementary school, socially and academically (Hansen, 2018). Preschool-age children are capable of reaching a plethora of academic goals. By the time, they enter kindergarten; most children can identify colours, basic shapes, numbers, and letters. Many can also read, write, and solve simple mathematics problems. The way early childhood educators present this information to young children is often an area of debate (Hansen, 2018).

In 1816, Fred Froebel created the concept of kindergarten, which means 'child's garden'. The kindergarten and preschool teachers of today struggle with implementing play as learning strategy in their classrooms (Edwards, 2017). Often teachers use playtime as a reward for good behaviour. Due to the belief that it would help children learn more, early childhood education began moving away from play in the 1930s and moving toward teacher-directed activities. In the 1980s and 1990s, academics were added to early childhood classrooms and, as a direct result, playtime was limited (Edwards,).

Play, as a learning tool is a spontaneous, voluntary, pleasurable, and flexible activity involving a combination of body, object, symbol use, and relationships. In contrast to games, play behaviour is more disorganized, and is typically done for its own sake (i.e., the process is more important than any goals or ends (Broadhead, 2011). Recognized as a universal phenomenon, play is a legitimate right of childhood and should be part of all children's life. Between 3% to 20% of young children's time and energy is spent in play (Isaacs, 2012). Over the last decade, there is an on-going

reduction of playtime in favour of educational instructions, especially in modern and urban societies. Yet, play is essential to young children's education and should not be abruptly minimized and segregated from learning. Not only play helps children develop pre-literacy skills, problem solving skills and concentration, but it also generates social learning experiences, and helps children to express possible stresses and problems. (Laine & Neitola, 2004; Lawrence, 2012; Erikson, 2006).

Play has long been a dominant feature of early childhood teaching pedagogy, deeply rooted in the historical roots of early childhood education (Rogers 2011). Philosophers, theorists, educationalists, and, more recently, policymakers have worked hard over many centuries to define the nature of childhood, play, and the purposes of education (Fisher 2008). Researchers have become increasingly interested in how traditional and contemporary theories on play and childhood have influenced childhood conceptualizations and the development of early childhood curriculum (Grieshaber and McArdle 2010; Graue 2008). According to Wood and Attfield (2005), 'childhood was seen as an immature form of adulthood until the nineteenth century, and children from all social classes had little status in society.' Through the strongly held belief that play was critical to children's learning and development, Wood and Attfield proposed that the studies of classical play theorists such as Rousseau, Froebel, and Dewey dramatically changed societal views and attitudes toward children, to the extent that 'freedom to learn could be combined with appropriate nurturing and guidance' (Platz and Arellano 2011).

Play is not a single event, but rather a continuum of playful behavior that children engage in based on the degree of interaction support (Gerkushenko & Gerkushenko, 2014). When a young student is allowed to play, it may appear that no learning is

taking place. It takes time for students to become comfortable with play and the various activities available at each center. The more at ease they become, the better they will be at playing, and educators are encouraging them to develop these learning skills. Preschoolers who have numerous opportunities for pretend play often improve their cognitive skills (Nicholson, 2019). Children use play to develop decision-making skills and self-control. These abilities are required for children to succeed in elementary school and beyond (Prairie, 2013). Educators who participate in play help to create a rich and targeted literacy practice environment during the play activity (Pyle et al., 2018). Engaging in play with students helps to make it more realistic, and educators can ask students questions about the specific center to encourage outside-the-box thinking. This also helps to maintain the flow of play and reduces distractions (Nicholson, 2019).

In play, all aspects of development and learning, particularly the affective and cognitive domains, are intertwined (Cullen, 2013). When children have time to play, their play becomes more complex and cognitively and socially demanding (Fagen, 2007). Children explore materials and discover their properties through play, use their knowledge of materials to play imaginatively, express their emotions and reveal their inner feelings, come to terms with traumatic experiences, maintain emotional balance, physical and mental health, and develop a sense of self-worth and the worth of others learn social skills such as sharing, turn-taking, and negotiation, deal with conflict, learn to negotiate and solve problems, gradually progress from dependency to independence, develop communication and language skills, repeat patterns that reflect their current interests, and use symbols as forms of representation (Cullen, 2013). Children seek out risks in play because they develop their self-esteem and confidence this way (Fagen, 2007). The child directs play, and the rewards come from within the

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child. Play is enjoyable and spontaneous, and it helps children learn social and motor skills as well as improve their thinking abilities (Fagen, 2007). Play can be used not only for learning with children, but also for teachers to assess students. Play can be used to assess children and determine whether any interventions are required (Walther, 2019). Communication, physical, social-emotional, and cognitive development can all be assessed through play. Teachers observe children's development through play. These observations are used to determine where the children are at this time in their development.

In play, children seek out risks, because through these they develop their self-esteem and confidence (Fagen, 2007). Play is directed by the child and the rewards come from within the child. Play is enjoyable and spontaneous which helps the child learn social and motor skills and improves the child's thinking ability (Fagen, 2007). Play can be used for not only learning with children but also for teachers to use as a way to assess children. Play can be used for evaluating children and determining if any interventions are needed (Walther, 2019). Play can be used to assess communication, physical, social-emotional, and cognitive development. Teachers use play as a way to observe children's development. These observations are used to determine where the children are now developmentally and for the teacher to plan what play experiences they will provide next (Walther, 2019).

Using play as a learning strategy is an activity can be either child-initiated or adult-initiated, but it is emphasized as a child-directed practice where the locus of control is placed with the child (Weisberg et al, 2013). Children direct their own learning within the established play contexts, while teachers enhance the learning experience by playing the role of commenters, co-players, questioners, or demonstrators of new

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ways to interact with the materials involved (Fisher et al, 2013). Pyle and Danniels (2017) argued that play and learning are inseparably tied in a child's early life and learning does not stop once a lesson is over. Play can facilitate student learning by allowing children to build on and extend their previous knowledge and skills through interacting with others and/or the environment. Research has demonstrated the developmental and educational benefits of play. Despite these benefits, teacher-directed academic instruction is prominent in kindergarten (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). For teachers to foster the growth and development that they want to see in the children and also lay the foundation for development into a bright and well-adjusted future, the use of play must be adequately be utilised in the early childhood setting (Edwards, 2017). It is against this backdrop that this study examines the assignment of play as principal learning strategy used at the early childhood classrooms.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Although, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has recognized play as a right for every child and has emphasized the importance of play to child development (OHCHR, 2016). Yet, play is not given adequate attention by adults, teachers, and caregivers in their various settings or classrooms due to the hurry-up, fast-paced, tightly scheduled, high pressured and achievement-based worlds of many children today (Edwards, 2017). Despite overwhelming evidence supporting play as a learning strategy, many preschool teachers still feel pressure to use it in the elementary school (Hansen, 2018). Thus, early childhood educators in preschool classrooms in the Tema Metropolis are not exceptional. Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2009) states that educators should resist this pressure: "children need both free play and guided, playful learning to best prepare for the entrance into formal schooling" (p. 15).

In recent years, kindergarten classrooms have become more academically focused, with questions emerging regarding the educational and developmental benefits of play (Ashiabi, 2007; Russell, 2011). The current standards have become heavily focused on teaching academic skills as early as possible in order to maximize children's future academic success. This has led to an increased focus on teacher-directed academic instruction, with children taking on the role of passive recipient of knowledge (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). As a result, the length of time many kindergarten children spend in play is decreasing (Pyle & Danniels). Since there is, no guidelines for play based learning, teachers have different perspectives on play and learning, and therefore this makes it challenging to integrate play within their classroom (Baker, 2014).

Many schools in Tema Metropolis have become assembly lines in which children are treated like a car frame in a factory. At each stop or grade-level, additional pieces of information are added to the child or frame. In order to 'have a complete car', teachers rely on nonstop academic instruction. They emphasize children's memorization of facts and use of distinct skills; children's learning is measured with standardized tests (Edwards, 2017). In this highly structured environment, little time is available for play. With playtime non-existent, children do not have the opportunity to develop the ability to pretend play, which grants them the chance to use make-believe, fantasy, and symbolic behaviour in representing one object as another (Edwards,).

In a six-hour day in kindergarten: 90 minutes on early literacy drills, 60 minutes on mathematics, and 30 minutes on science. There is no time in the schedule for indoor play and only 30 minutes for outdoor play. In actuality, the word "play" may not even appear in most kindergarten curricula. In comparison to 10 to 20 years ago, three- and

four-year-old children today are expected to employ high levels of reading and writing activities (Almon, 2003 cited in Edwards, 2017). The annihilation of play assuredly will have serious ramifications for children and for the future of childhood itself. Neighbourhood pickup games of baseball and the freedom to explore open fields and woods are a thing of the past (Edwards, 2017). The freedom to play in an unstructured environment has been replaced with the convenience of video, television, and computer screens; organized youth leagues begin at an increasingly earlier age than ever before. Children naturally imitate adults; therefore, it is very important that they witness adults being lively and creative with playful learning. This will inspire play in young children. Observing adults coupled with their own inquisitive nature will provide the underlying basis for play. The ability to play is one of the principal criteria of mental health (Edwards, 2017).

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore early childhood educators' use and perspectives of play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms at Tema Metropolis within the Greater Accra Region of Ghana.

1.4 Research Objectives

The following are the objectives of the study.

1. Examine early childhood educators' perspectives on play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms within Tema Metropolis.

2. Assess how early childhood educators' implement play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms within Tema Metropolis.

3. Identify the barriers early childhood educators' encounter in using play as a learning strategy in the preschool classroom within Tema Metropolis.

4. Find out the support systems available to enable early childhood educators' implement play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms within Tema Metropolis.

1.5 Research Questions

The following questions were formulated to guide the study.

1. What are the perspectives of early childhood educators' on play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms within Tema Metropolis?

2. How do early childhood educators' implement play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms within Tema Metropolis?

3. What barriers do early childhood educators' encounters in using play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms within Tema Metropolis?

4. What support system is available to enable early childhood educators' to implement play as a learning strategy in the Tema Metropolis?

1.6 Significance of the Study

Findings from this study could be useful to the Department of Social Welfare, which has a mandate to run day care centres together with the Ministry of Education, in planning how to equip pre-primary school teachers with appropriate skills and knowledge to use play as a strategy to assist learners in learning. Also, the findings may prompt formulation of refresher courses for pre-school teachers that may contribute useful knowledge on policy formulation for the teaching/learning of the young children. The study findings may also highlight gaps in research that may prompt the need for further investigation.

Moreover, the findings from this study is a source of information to both parents and teachers about how play can facilitate the physical, emotional, and psychosocial

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growth of children and prepare them for the future. The findings of this study will also be useful to curriculum planners as it serves as a further body of knowledge in knowing what to incorporate, what to remove, what works and what does not work. Finally, the findings from this study will be a source of knowledge to educational planners in early childhood education. It will reveal literature on the use of play as principal learning tool for the children, thereby giving these planners greater empirical platform on which to establish their teaching paradigms.

1.7 Delimitations of the Study

Geographically, the scope of the study was delimited to public preschools within Tema Metropolis even though the scope of the problem demands a country wide investigation in both public and private preschools. In terms of population coverage, the study included all early childhood educators' at the preschools within Tema Metropolis. Content wise, it is restricted to exploring early childhood educators' use and perspectives of play as a learning strategy in the study setting.

1.8. Limitations of the Study

This study offers new interpretations of early childhood educators' perspectives and use of play as a learning strategy within the preschool classroom; however, every research has its limitations and by reflecting on the entire process, the researcher recognizes following limitations that exist in the present study.

The first limitation was related to neutrality, and the researcher's bias was potentially a major limitation. The researcher of this study was a kindergarten teacher in the Tema Metropolis and a student at the University of Education, Winneba. Her personal experiences and understanding of early childhood education may influence her role as a researcher, how she sets herself to interpret research data and findings. As data were

interpreted through the view of the researcher, her knowledge and experience shaped how the research was being conducted (Gall, et al. 2007). She was aware of this limitation and tried to be reflective during the whole research process; yet this study was seen as her interpretation of how early childhood educators perceived and adopted play-based learning in preschool classrooms in Tema Metropolis.

The second limitation was related to the limited number of participants. Considering the accessibility of this study and the time constraint of the participants, only twenty qualified participants could join this study. Because of this limitation, even though a general picture of how early childhood educators perceived and adapted play-based learning were revealed, the findings cannot represent the overall situation of play-based learning in Ghana.

1.9. Organisation of the Study

The study is organized as follows: Chapter One, which is the introduction, captures the background to the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study and objectives of the study, research questions, delimitation, and limitations of the study and organization of the study. Chapter Two dwells on the review of related literature. Chapter Three is the methodology of the study which covers the research approach, research design, study area, population of the study, sample size and sampling procedure, data collection instruments, trustworthiness, data collection procedure, data analysis procedure and ethical consideration. Chapter Four gives details of the results and discussion. Chapter Five deals with the summary, conclusions, recommendations, and suggestions for further studies.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.0. Overview

This chapter review literature relevant to the study. It presents the theoretical framework underpinning the study. Also, it reviews literature under the following themes: Early childhood educators' perspectives of play as a learning strategy, implementation of play as learning strategy in preschool classrooms, barriers early childhood educators' encounter in using play as learning strategy in preschool classrooms, and support systems for the implementation of play as a learning strategy in preschool classrooms. Finally, this chapter ends with the summary of the study.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study was underpinned by two constructivism theories namely Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1976). Constructivism is based on the premise that the learner has his or her own experiences and understanding that help create new learning. All learners have their own experiences and therefore all learners develop their own understanding of the world's concepts through application (Moore, 2020).

An early researcher of play, Jean Piaget, believed that play was necessary for children's cognitive growth. Piaget's constructivist theory identified play as a means by which individuals can integrate new information into their already existing schemas (Moore, 2020). It is important to note that children's new information includes their degree of success or failure they inhibit. Children make sense of their world through play by experimenting with new materials and exploring their surroundings. An appropriate environment for children's cognitive development

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includes play. Problem-solving skills and divergent and convergent thinking abilities support the executive function and build the foundation for literacy skills to be cultivated (Moore, 2020).

With regard to play, Piaget's (1962) emphasis was on two stages of play: practice play that Piaget related to sensory motor activity, which evolves to symbolic play due to involvement of representational thought. To Piaget (symbolic) play is an area of activity whose motivation is not adaptation to reality but on the contrary, assimilation of reality to the self, without coercions or sanctions (Subilaga, 2017). Piaget further argues that imitation in play nevertheless facilitates adaptation through accommodation to new experiences leading to new behaviours. For Piaget therefore, developmental functions of play are immediate (Subilaga, 2017). The representation of symbols through play connects to the learning skills students need for academic skills.

Another researcher, Lev Vygotsky, enhanced the constructivism theory by suggesting that learning is social. Vygotsky is known for the social constructivist theory which is described as what children (or more generally people) can learn with the help of more knowledgeable others. Vygotsky termed this notion as the zone of proximal development. It is the idea that between what children can and cannot do can be done with the help of a more knowledgeable peer or an adult (Moore, 2020).

To Vygotsky (1976), play is regarded as a leading activity of the child's development during the preschool and Kindergarten years. As the young child develops, his actions, which used to be determined by objects seen and experienced, develop to being determined by thought. This transition shows how imagination develops and Vygotsky sees play (through imagination) as providing a transition between the two

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stages of human perception (being dominated first by object and then by meaning). Therefore, through creation of an imaginary situation, play provides a transitional stage from the merging of meaning with object to the development of abstract thought. Development of abstract thought is the developmental accomplishment typically expected between the ages of 4 and 6 (Subilaga, 2017).

Vygotsky's theory is what sets children's play and play-based learning (or guided play) differently from each other. For play-based learning to occur, there needs to be an adult to act as a facilitator for prompting and support. Children will be guided to build onto their existing concepts and create new ones from help from the facilitator or teacher (Moore, 2020). According to Lev Vygotsky, developmental change in early childhood is motivated by pretend play because of the mental structures inside change from the outside from the strong social push that results in cognitive change (Moore, 2020). With adult guidance, pretend play and integrated literacy components will result in cognitive change appropriate for this age level.

With using students' prior knowledge and existing schema, teachers can help children build new knowledge structures through guided play. Throughout this study, the constructivism theories from Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky were applied so that the early childhood educator could enhance students learning through play and academics that was developmentally appropriate for this age group. By connecting age-appropriate academics and play, the early childhood educator will be able to facilitate activities to enhance learning while students will explore and discover new learning constructs.

Both Piaget and Vygotsky emphasize the representation inherent in symbolic (pretend) play, which leads to abstraction. They both make a significant contribution

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to understanding the relationship between play and literacy mainly because of the relation between the symbolic nature of play and the symbolic nature of literacy (Saracho & Spodek, 2006). Nevertheless, they differ in how they perceive its developmental consequence. For Piaget, play is mainly a mechanism for assimilation by incorporating new experiences into existing thinking. On the other hand, Vygotsky viewed such play as having greater significance for developmental outcomes, mainly the development of understanding in social roles and from object meaning separation, the development of abstract representation, a pre-requisite for literacy learning.

2.2. Early Childhood Educators' Perspectives of Play as a Learning Strategy

Play as a learning strategy as a way for children to learn through play with the adult as a facilitator but also to enhance learning through conversation with friends (Asahri & Baharuddin, 2017). Cutter-Mckenzie and Edwards (2013) multi-faceted approach defines play through the interaction and relationships between students and teachers. Play includes activities that are culturally and contextually mediated, and the relationships and activities are not valued based on free play. A common perspective many have about play is that it is free and unstructured time (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013; Feesha & Pyle, 2016; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018). The teacher does not facilitate nor do guide students during this time in fear of hijacking play (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Due to this negative perspective of play based learning, administration avoids supporting this type of instructional strategy. However, a research study showed that students who did not have a teacher to facilitate their time roleplaying did not engage in reading or writing activities outside of this time (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

There have been different studies focused on in-service and pre-service teachers' perspectives on play. According to some studies (Badzis, 2003; Bennett et al., 1997; Dako-Gyeke, 2008; Vu, Han, & Buell, 2015; Gülhan, 2019; Parsons, 2013), teachers perceive play as a valuable activity for children. Moreover, Sandberg and Samuelsson (2005) examined teachers' play perceptions and attitudes in terms of gender. According to the study results, while female teachers preferred calm plays to improve children's social development, male teachers choose active plays to advance children's physical development. Additionally, it was also concluded that male teachers have more positive views towards play than female teachers do.

In a study which specifically examined Canadian teachers' approaches to integrating play into the classroom, Pyle and Bigelow (2014) conducted interviews with three teachers, as well as classroom observations. The two researchers identified three play-based learning approaches: play as peripheral to learning, play as a vehicle to social and emotional development, and play as a vehicle for academic learning. These approaches were derived from the teachers' perspectives as revealed in the study findings. Pyle and Bigelow argued that the differences in approaches highlighted challenges in integrating play into Kindergarten. A study by Lynch (2015) on the perspective of kindergarten teachers on play in the classroom also found out that kindergarten teachers felt pressures from other teachers, principals, and school policies to focus on academic goals and that these pressures lead them to limit play.

Moreover, some studies conducted to compare cultural differences in perception of play (Van der Aalsvoort, Prakke, Howard, König, & Parkkinen, 2015; Wu & Rao, 2011). In the study conducted by Van der Aalsvoort et al. (2015), trainee teachers' perspectives on play characteristics and teachers roles were examined in four different cultures: German, Dutch, Wales, and Finnish. According to them, the reason of the

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differences among the participants might be a result of the teacher education systems in their country. Thus, they implied the importance of teacher education curriculum in terms of play because they stated those teachers' perceptions and practices might be shaped regarding of the education they take. Wu and Rao (2011) investigated 10 Chinese and seven German kindergarten teachers' conceptions of play and learning. They selected six video clips from two kindergartens in China and two from German for teachers to watch. Teachers watched the videos and they talked about video clips in group discussions. The findings demonstrated that teachers from different countries have different perspectives about the teachers' intervention to play and learning function of play. According to the researchers, differences might be result of different environment and pre-set beliefs coming from the cultures. Thus, they indicated the importance of people's beliefs in the culture should be considered before preparing a curriculum.

Also, teachers' understanding of the relationship between play and learning also influences how children conceptualise this relationship. Wu (2015) investigated the views of 48 children between the ages of three to five years old. Half of the participants were German children and the others were Chinese. Data for the study were collected through observations of children's classroom learning and play activities and through interviews with children. Wu (2015) reported that in contrast to the German children, who viewed play and learning as inseparable, most of their Chinese counterparts viewed learning as separate from play. This, in Wu's view, was due to the structure of the individual classrooms. Chinese classrooms reflected an academic orientation, while the German classrooms allocated much time to free play. What is implied here is that the teachers' philosophical orientation regarding play and learning is usually made evident in their classroom arrangement and organisation.

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In terms of positive experiences, teachers have expressed that play as a learning strategy has helped them define what their role is, has promoted a sense of inclusivity, and has allowed them insight on how to set up the classroom to support learning (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Martlew et al., 2011; Karia, 2014; Bennett et al., 1997; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). Play as a learning strategy has brought different positive experiences for teachers. Firstly, teachers were expressing through their experience teaching kindergarten, they were able to gain insight on what their role is within the classroom. They understood their role to be that of co-learners, facilitators, and scaffolds of children is learning (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Martlew et al., 2011). Teachers are engaged in co-constructing the curriculum with children in mind so that it includes children's interests as well as meeting curriculum expectations (Van-Oers & Duijkers, 2013). While children are playing, teachers are acting as observers (Karia, 2014; Bennett et al., 1997); as the children are problem solving, observing provides a clear understanding of what is happening within a child's mind to understand how they learn and how to assist them (Bennett et al., 1997). Within a daily routine, play would include students sharing knowledge with each other, asking questions, and demonstrating individual skills (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015).

Secondly, play as a learning strategy provides inclusivity within the classroom. Martlew et al (2011) conducted a study on six teacher experiences with a play-based environment and concluded that it gave students a sense of inclusion. Regardless of what the children were doing or where their abilities are at, children were still learning different skills. In an inclusive environment, Martlew et al. concluded that teachers notice a faster rate of learning and collaboration between peers. Lastly, teachers have an understanding of how to set up classroom activities to support play-based learning. In relation to the first theme of teachers being co-constructors of

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knowledge, teachers often choose themes within the classroom that are based on children's interests (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013).

In fact, Van Oers & Duijkers concluded that children are constantly adding new ideas to their play, and they take what they have learned and put it into practice. For example, in the dramatic centre, children are playing and taking on different roles, incorporating different tools, and deciding what scenario they would like to engage in. From these positive experiences, it is evident that teachers do understand their role is within a play based learning classroom. Not only does it have an impact in the classroom, but also has an impact to their teaching and student learning. With the suitable classroom set up of activities, students are able to practice their skills while feeling included. Children have different learning styles that should be acknowledged within the classroom, making learning centres vital to optimize their abilities (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013).

Recent studies have shown that early childhood teachers' understanding and views of the relation between play and learning impact greatly on their pedagogical decisions and practices such as classroom arrangement, the level of their involvement in children's play and the provision of support to children (Einarsdottir, 2014; Fleer, 2013). Wu and Rao (2011) conducted a study in which they examined early childhood educators' perceptions of the relationship between play and learning in German and Chinese cultures. The researchers reported that, teachers' views of play and learning were mirrored in their classroom arrangement, influenced their level of participation in children's play.

According to the study, Chinese teachers linked the acquisition of pre-academic and cognitive skills with children's play and frequently intervened; their German counterparts believed that children's free play allowed them to acquire social and decision-making skills and to deal with life. Both views are in agreement with Ghanaian early childhood educators' views regarding how play relates to learning. One group of educators believes that children learn both academic and social skills as they play (Abdulai, 2016); another group portrays kindergarten as a place for preparing children for formal school. The emphasis of this group is on "getting children ready for formal schooling" (OseiPoku & Gyekye-Ampofo, 2017:78).

A few studies from South Africa, Ghana, Tanzania, and Kenya, depict perceptions on the meaning and benefits of play. Sekhukhune (2014) reported how two teachers interviewed in South Africa perceived play as non-serious, spontaneous activity that was beneficial in children's language acquisition and mathematics development. Various researchers have explored the beliefs and practices of teachers with regard to play in an effort to tease out teachers' understanding of play, their approach to the integration of play into the curriculum, and teacher roles assumed to promote learning in the play-based curriculum (Subilaga, 2017).

Consequently, more research examining kindergarten teachers' perspectives on play in the classroom has been frequently recommended (Hyun 2003; Jeynes 2006; Nelson and Smith 2004; Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett 2006). To date, all of our knowledge about teachers' perspectives of play in kindergartens has been derived from traditional methods such as interviews, focus groups, and observations methods where issues of social desirability have been identified (Hedge and Cassidy 2009; Nelson and Smith 2004; Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett 2006; Lynch, 2015). Thus, this study also intends

to use interview guide to solicit early childhood educators' perspectives on play as a learning strategy in preschool classrooms within Tema Metropolis.

2.3. Implementation of Play as Learning Strategy in Preschool Classrooms

How teachers perceive play-based learning decides how play is implemented in the classroom (Fessha & Pyle, 2016). Teachers can implement play as a learning strategy through games that intentionally target literacy skills through rich, integrated curriculum and instructional materials of high quality (Paciga, Hoffman, & Teale; 2011; Pyle, et al., 2018). In school settings, teachers gently guide play, using play-based teaching, and learning activities to promote curricular goals while maintaining the critically important aspects of play such as children's intrinsic motivation to engage in play (Bordova et al, 2013; Eberle 2014). Whether free or guided play in the classroom fosters improvements in such subjects as mathematics, language, early literacy, and socio-emotional skills, and it does so for children from both low- and higher-income environments (Gülhan, 2019).

Cavanaugh et al. (2016) researched the use of games for 15 minutes once a day for three weeks with two similar kindergarten classrooms that focused on phonics and phonemic awareness skills. Two different groups were studied with a control group that kept the same rules from the teacher throughout, and the experimental group that had the same rules but were able to change them as the weeks went on. Results from the study revealed that students in the control group did not score better on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIEBELS) assessment than those who were in the experimental group (Cavanaugh et al., 2016). When the teacher's role is used as a way to enhance student learning, engagement in developmentally appropriate play is maintained while teacher-directed components are emphasized and

effective. Chin and Effandi (2015) researched and concluded that game-based learning enhances positive learning behaviours, prosocial behaviour, and self-regulation as an effective strategy to play-based learning (as cited in Mohamad Ashari & Baharuddin, 2017).

A study completed by Van Oers and Duikers (2013) suggests theme-based centres as an effective way to implement play as a learning strategy. In the study, themes were created for six to eight weeks, and children would adopt roles, learn about rules, use tools, and learn about sociocultural practice (Van-Oers & Duijkers, 2013). Similar to Mohamad Ashari and Baharudin, (2017), a specific interest of the children or stimulation would provide motivation and engagement to students. In the 6-8 weeks, students improved in participation, focusing on writing numbers, words, and building social relationships with their classmates and transfer skills to other parts of their learning day (Van Oers & Dujkers, 2013). Paciga et al. (2011) concur with Mohamad Ashari and Baharudin (2017), and Van-Oers and Duikers (2013) in that when a curricular theme was integrated, multiple opportunities provided productive and high-quality conversations from the teacher or assistant for language exposure.

Loizou, Michaelides, and Georgiou (2019) also studied how early childhood teachers improve socio-dramatic play and use it. The focus is the drama and its usage in education regarding of scaffolding. In the study, 17 in-service teachers who had drama education were videotaped. The findings demonstrated that using drama in education create an environment for teachers to provide material use and improve scenarios. They also emphasized that teachers used "teacher in-role" drama technique in videos, which let them to improve socio-drama. Furthermore, Trawick-Smith and Dziurgot (2011) also conducted a study regarding of Vygotsky's ZPD. In their study,

they observed teachers and their behaviours in play. In the study, teachers tried to understand what children need and respond regarding of their needs. The findings revealed that teachers 'good-fit' responses sustain children's play and improve their motivation.

In 2003, a study was done by Demirdalıç in Turkey with 95 preschool teachers in order to examine their skills of planning, practicing, and evaluating play activities and skills of selecting and using toys via survey. At the end of the study, it was concluded that the teachers spent an hour for free playtime in daily routine and consider children's needs and attention to decide how much time children have time for play. Additionally, it was noted that the teachers considered educational purposes while they were planning the play activity. Driscoll and Pianta (2010) also stated that teachers' active involvement in children's play advances their relationship with the children. They conducted a study focusing on banking time, which means that teacher and a child spend one to one time together. During that time, child-led play occurs, and teacher-child relationship is improved. In the study, they worked with 29 Head-Start teachers and 116 children. At the end of the study, the findings demonstrated that children and teacher relationship was improved through banking time, in which teachers' participation was seen.

Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Newcombe, and Golinkoff (2013) conducted a study also involving guided play as an instructional method for mathematics. The study focused on pre-schoolers' acquisition of geometric knowledge. The results of the study revealed that, compared to the other two conditions children in the guided-play group showed improved shape knowledge. Children in the guided-play group were able to identify more typical and atypical shapes as 'real' compared to children in the didactic

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and free play conditions (Fisher et al., 2013). The researchers made note that the children in the didactic condition learned about the properties of the shapes but had difficulty explaining why a shape was 'real' or 'fake'. The children in the free play condition typically chose to create designs or tell stories about the shapes, rather than focusing on their properties, and thus struggled more with the shape-sorting task after the intervention. The Fisher et al. (2013) study highlights the importance of scaffolding techniques and the role of the teacher in guiding student learning and asking open-ended questions.

Tsao (2008) explored two approaches to teaching literacy though play, both involving guided-play methods. One approach is literacy play models in which educators integrate elements of literacy into the play in which children naturally engage. Another approach involves using a storybook-based curriculum. A storybook-based curriculum consists of focusing the entire program and classroom on one story at a time. Teachers prepare the classroom with places for reading the story, dramatizing the story, and engaging in sensory and motor play related to the story (Tsao, 2008). Tsao (2008) argued that educators can teach important literacy skills through play when guiding, based on a specific theme (i.e., story) or learning goal. "In other words, children's developing literacy occurs in a social setting through the process of scaffolding. With appropriate materials and supportive adults, young children construct knowledge about print and gradually become more literate" (Tsao, 2008, p. 517). This type of focused play can enhance the creativity and conversation skills of preschool children.

Tsai (2015) examined the importance of proper teacher interactions during student playtime. Over the course of the observations, Ms. Li interacted with the children in

different ways during their playtime. She was careful to scaffold interactions based on previous interactions with the children (Tsai, 2015). She often provided assistance and guidance, based on the children's requests. For example, she helped one child count a group of colour straws by giving step-by-step directions. Ms. Li occasionally engaged in make-believe play with the children but was careful to allow the children to create their own narratives. For example, 1 day, children in the doll area had set up a store and wanted Ms. Li to be the customer. She was careful to ask the children open-ended questions such as, "What kind of store do you have?" or "What kind of food can I order?" This helped ensure the children's play was child-led rather than teacher-led (Tsai, 2015).

In one situation, Ms. Li approached a child in the language area and conducted a "spot test" or type of quiz (Tsai, 2015). The child had been playing independently with a device that helps children identify phonetic sounds. Ms. Li asked the child a series of questions that were a bit too challenging and the child quickly became frustrated and lost interest. This example highlights the importance of knowing each child's capabilities through careful observations. Interrupting this child's play for a "quiz" that was clearly outside of their ZPD did not serve an educational purpose because it only resulted in frustration. Proper scaffolding and meeting the child at their current level would have better supported learning in this situation (Tsai, 2015).

One very positive aspect of Ms. Li's classroom was that she always took time to show the children how to properly use new items and materials (Tsai, 2015). This is an extremely important aspect of guided play. Ms. Li would first introduce the items to the entire class and show them how they work. Then, after she placed the new items in the learning areas, she would make herself available in those areas until the

children were comfortable with the new items. This type of scaffolding helps support student learning and ensures children make the most of the available items (Tsai, 2015). Tsai (2015) concluded that teacher interactions were an important component of learning during student playtime. The importance of scaffolding these interactions was apparent through the observations. Thus, prior to participating, the teacher needs to first observe the situation, while keeping in mind the children's character and ability; for only after doing so will the teacher is able to participate in such a way as to enhance the children's ability (Tsai, 2015).

Moreover, a study done by Jones, Reutzel, & Fargo (2010) found an interactive way for teachers to incorporate literacy into the classroom. During this time, teachers have commented that they encourage students to invent spellings and mistakes are not corrected (Jones et al., 2010). When the students have completed their work, they come back to share their writing with a teacher or a peer (Jones et al., 2010). Teachers have expressed that over the course of the school year, their students have engaged in authentic and meaningful writing, and improved in their writing skills and spelling (Brown, 2010; Jones et al., 2010).

Besides literacy development through writing workshops, teachers found that read-a-loud were effective as well (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). McGee & Schickedanz describes that read-a-loud is where teachers are reading out loud to students while students are actively listening, asking questions, and making predictions. They concluded that teachers within their study who used read-a-louds, found a significant difference in students learning. Students were able to comprehend the story better, recall, and were able to increase their vocabulary skills.

Goouch (2008) discussed the role teachers can play when helping children create play narratives and stories in the preschool setting, advocating the importance of play based learning and teachers taking an active part in this learning. "Adults, sensitive to children's intentions in play and in functional acts, are said to 'scaffold' children's learning in conversational contexts" (Goouch, 2008, p. 97). "Intuitive teachers are able to lead by following the interests, desires, intentions of the children, with children maintaining agency" (Goouch, 2008, p. 100). Thus, teachers can gently guide play to help children create narratives without coercing the children. Similarly, this study intend to examine how early childhood educators' use play as a learning strategy in preschool classrooms within Tema Metropolis.

2.4. Barriers Early Childhood Educators' Encounter in Using Play as Learning Strategy in Preschool Classrooms

Implementing play as a learning strategy in preschools may be challenging for teachers. Some studies show that preschool teachers have difficulties and some barriers in applying play-based approach, which may be result in lack of knowledge on how to be involved in children's play (Badzis, 2003; Bennett et al., 1997; Wood, 2010; Wood & Bennett, 1997). UNICEF (2018) added that there is lack of understanding of the value of play as a foundation for academic concepts. Rote memorization and recall of information remain the norm in many settings. Education officials and staff, as well as administrators and principals, may not realize the critical role of play in building young children's understanding of mathematical, scientific and literacy concepts (UNICEF, 2018).

Studies have shown that early childhood educators all over the world are facing difficulties in implementing play-based pedagogy due to pressure from governments,

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parents and school principals to meet set targets in the form of completing topics in the curriculum (Broadhead, Howard & Wood, 2010; Bodrova, 2008; Lynch, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009; Moyles, 2010; Ogunyemi, 2016; Rogers & Evans, 2008). Yahya (2014) indicated that while it is generally accepted that play is central to children's early development, learning, play is in danger of being displaced in school curriculum due to the pressure of school readiness, and a lack of understanding of the role of play in children is learning.

Rogers (2011) also agreed that there are problems in reconciling play and pedagogy. Play-based pedagogy means that play has become an instrument for learning. Yet, play and pedagogy seem to be divergent concepts in which reconciliation may result in conflict of interests. In her study exploring co-construction of pedagogy, Rogers reports a conflict of interests experienced by both the teacher and the child. The teacher is limited by the pressures to meet specific learning objectives although she would have preferred child-led play as a pedagogical approach. The child's desire to act a certain role is in conflict with what is deemed the acceptable and correct role as defined by his teacher. Wood (2010) also suggests that there are possible tensions between the policy involving play and learning and the actual practices. Cooney (2004) supports the presence of such tension with the findings of her study which reported a difference between children's actual classroom experience and teachers' perceptions of what children should experience. The emphasis on academic skills at a progressively younger age and the limited time that children spend in school may cause play to be viewed as a luxury rather than a necessity (Bodrova and Leong, 2003).

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Roberts-Holmes (2015) observed that government's focus on children's performance in numeracy and literacy, for example, has influenced the pedagogy early childhood educators in the UK employ in the early childhood settings. Roberts-Holmes stated that the teachers feel under pressure to fulfil government demands of producing data for education authorities instead of employing child-centred play-based pedagogies. This is how one of the teachers in Roberts-Holmes' study put it: "It's all based on data the data is driving the pedagogy" (Roberts-Holmes, 2015:206). Roberts-Holmes (2015) explained that as much as the teachers tried to hold on to their philosophy of child-centred, play-based learning in their learning centres, they could not implement play-based pedagogy.

Also, parental or caregiver misconceptions about play. UNICEF (2018) noted that many people, if asked, express the beliefs that play is frivolous and that play opportunities take time away from 'true learning'. These misconceptions are caused by a lack of understanding of the benefits of play in children's education, with the result that families might not demand play opportunities in pre-primary education settings. Bennett et al. (1997) state that the only problem of applying play-based approach is not only lack of knowledge, but also lack of space and time and number of children per teacher, administrators' expectations and values of parent on play would also influence the quality of play in early childhood education.

Another barrier is that, curriculum and early learning standards that do not address play. UNICEF (2018) indicated that many countries have curricular standards yet they seldom include play-based learning activities and teaching methods. For example, a review of Early Learning and Development Standards of 37 countries conducted by UNICEF revealed that only in one third of the standards, the concept of playful

learning was well integrated. Furthermore, 'play competencies' are unlikely to be part of stated desired outcomes for children's development.

Bodrova and Leong (2010:1) concur and point out that 'play' and 'curriculum' contradict each other. The conceptualisation of play as a spontaneous, child initiated activity that does not fulfil any practical need contradicts the concept of a 'curriculum', which is concerned with intentional teaching planned to achieve set learning outcomes. To resolve such a contradiction, Bodrova and Leong recommend that curriculum documents should be specific in the way the word 'play' is used. They suggest that the term "playful learning" should be used in curriculum documents to express the intentional use of play for teaching purposes. They add that the distinction between play and playful learning must be reflected both in their objectives and in the exact pedagogies that go with each of them. What emerges here is that early childhood educators could fail to implement an early childhood curriculum with the recommended play-based pedagogy due to lack of adequate and clear guidance from the curriculum document itself.

In addition, researcher Janice Pelletier, at the University of Toronto, found similar findings when she conducted a longitudinal study at the Peel District School Board (2014) on the beginnings of implementing the new FDK. Pelletier (2014) concluded that during the first and second years of implementation, teachers expressed concerns about curriculum areas. Similarly, having a less structured kindergarten program makes it difficult to plan and integrate subjects into play for students each day (Karia, 2014). Planning a curriculum such as this causes teachers to feel unsure and frustrated (Martlew et al., 2011; Karia, 2014).

Martlew et al. (2011) suggested that, "an approach based on both curriculum-generated play to support the development of specific skills and knowledge and a play-generated curriculum based on teachers responding to the interests of the children is the best approach to curriculum planning" (as cited in Wood & Attfield, 2005, p. 32). Also, teachers are expected to move away from traditional uses of workbooks and worksheets in order to assess students' learning. This has left them with challenges in assessing and measuring progression in students teaching (Martlew et al., 2011).

Again, there is inadequate of teacher professional development that focuses on learning through play. According to UNICEF (2018), many teachers are not adequately prepared to implement play-based learning in their classrooms. They may think of 'learning materials' only as workbooks or charts on the wall, rather than objects that children can explore and use in their learning. Even if teachers see the need for such hands-on materials, there are often inadequate resources, and no training to help teachers find or create play materials with low cost-locally available materials. Many teachers have not seen learning through play in practice and as a result lack confidence in implementing in their classrooms (UNICEF, 2018). Wen, Elicker and McMullen (2011) confirm that contextual factors such as parental expectation and professional training prevent preschool teachers from practising their beliefs regarding teaching and learning in the preschool. Their results further reveal that although almost all the teachers strongly approved of child-led learning, in actual practice they did the opposite, mostly giving direct instruction.

Moreover, studies reveal that teachers expressed how there is a lack of time when creating a play-based classroom (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Karia, 2014). Van Oers

& Duijkers (2013) acknowledged that teachers are constantly changing their classrooms to fit children's needs and expressed how providing a supportive classroom does not happen immediately. In fact, Van Oers & Duijkers (2013) stated that providing a supportive classroom for students requires teachers to seek constant support from colleagues and reach out to different schools to see good examples of practices (Tharp et al., 2000). This connects with the results found in Karia (2014), whereby teachers described how there is not enough time to plan while keeping up with the children's interest. Playing all day is a big concern for teachers because playing is non-stop within the classroom and has no limits or little structure (Karia, 2014). When teachers provide activities that are based on children's interest, they have to be observant in order to acknowledge when activities turn less exciting for students (Karia, 2014; Bennett et al., 1997). In order to regain the children's interests, teachers must think of new ways to excite them. This may mean changing the entire learning centre (Karia, 2014).

Furthermore, large class sizes limit children's freedom to play. UNICEF (2018) indicated additional challenges exist when classes are too large. When more than 30 children are in a relatively small space, it is challenging to give children active experiences with materials or even have enough materials for all children. Large classes also make it difficult for teachers to support children's play through personal conversations and thought provoking questions (UNICEF, 2018). Karia (2014) added that with class sizes slowly increasing, gaining insight on students' development is difficult, especially when there is a lot of movement going on within the class. Throughout, teachers must find the time to constantly observe children and create activities (Karia, 2014). To be able to assess children, teachers would have to be

involved in play. Teachers within Karia's (2014) study state that assessing play is not the only concern, but meeting curriculum expectations is difficult as well.

More so, different definitions and perspectives of play and learning make it challenging teachers to integrate play within their classroom (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). Teachers' understanding of the meaning of play is different across various research (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015; Baker, 2014; McInnes et al., 2011; Walsh et al., 2010). Yahya (2014) stated that due to the increasing focus on academic skills for young children, lack of common definition of play contributes to the challenges in advocating play in the school curriculum (Yahya, 2014). Baker (2014) suggested that there should be a common understanding of what play based learning is so that teachers would have a general understanding and guideline to follow. One of the main reasons behind the confusion is that teachers often view play and learning as two separate entities (Moore, 2020). Teachers who believe this are often planning their activities with a heavy reliance on teacher-directed learning with difficulties in interpreting children's learning (McInnes et al., 2011). Also, another way teachers view play and learning as separate is when teachers are withdrawing students for teacher-directed instructions and assessment (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). Through this thinking, they believe that to assess students, it is done when the child is no longer playing and is taking part in teacher directed activities. Play would not be seen as a way of demonstrating student teaching (Moore, 2020).

Finally, inadequate preparation of early childhood educators could hinders the way they employ play-based pedagogy in the early childhood settings. Smith (2015) reported that early childhood teachers were unable to teach through play because the pre-service training the teachers received did not equip them with the relevant

knowledge to understand and implement play-based teaching. The teachers explained that during their university training, the lectures they received did not explain in depth, with practical demonstrations, how they could plan; implement play-based learning in their classroom situations. The teachers stated that they felt like they did not even understand what play-based learning entails. This view agrees with Cunningham's (2014) assertion that several teacher education programmes are struggling to design instructional models that can equip early childhood teachers with the competencies they need to teach young children.

While it is true that lack of adequate training results in early childhood teachers not being equipped sufficiently with the skills, knowledge and attitudes to implement child-centred, play-based pedagogies, it is also important to note that some teachers, though adequately trained, could not implement the things they learned during their training Atmore, van Niekerk and Ashley-Cooper (2012) assert that qualification (in other words, training) does not necessarily determine the quality of teaching. Atmore et al. advance three possible reasons why teacher training or a qualification does not necessarily produce quality teaching: a lack of practical demonstration and instruction during training; a lack of on-site support to assist with implementation of theoretical training; and a lack of follow-up after the completion of training to ensure consistent implementation.

Rose and Rogers' (2012) results are in line with these findings, but went further to explore the link between teacher training and the pedagogical practices of preschool teachers in the actual teaching context (teaching practice). Rose and Rogers (2012, p.47) affirm that, "the theoretical input students received regarding contextually appropriate practice was frequently in conflict with a very different reality." The

authors note that 95% of the student teachers in the study agreed that they could not apply the child-centred, play-based teaching strategies they learned during their teacher education because of the circumstances prevailing in those settings, where they were under pressure to introduce learners to more formal academic work. Hence, the teacher-trainees could not do otherwise, even though they knew that the right thing to do was to engage children in child-centred, play-based activities. As Cunningham (2014) pointed out, new teachers face the risk of being resisted by their principals and older teachers in their attempt to change the way instruction is given in ECE settings.

A study by Abroampa and Gyeabour (2020) on the perceptions and challenges in using play activities as pedagogy in public kindergarten schools in the Ablekuma South Metro of the Greater Accra Region. The study found out that teachers had positive perception about using play activities. It also came to light that lack of adequate funding; teaching learning resources, and inadequate qualified practitioners inhibited the use of play in kindergartens. There was ass statistically significant difference between male and female kindergarten teachers on the basis of the challenges encountered in the use of play activities. Thus, this study intends to bring to bear the barriers early childhood educators encounter in using play as a learning strategy in preschool classrooms within Tema Metropolis.

2.5. Support Systems for the Implementation of Play as a Learning Strategy in Preschool Classrooms

The key practices to support effective play-based learning include creating a classroom to meet the diverse needs and interest areas of the students; using curriculum knowledge to notice and recognise the learning within the play

experiences; building on the prior knowledge of the students; participating in purposeful conversations to broaden the students' ideas and scaffolding the interactions between students to support their social and emotional competence (Hunter, 2019). A study by Hunter (2019) on supporting teachers to successfully implement a play-based learning approach. The research results highlighted that there is a need for sustained professional development on the implementation of play based learning and the establishment of a mentoring partnership to further develop the competence and confidence of teachers working within a play based learning environment.

In addition, support for the implementation of play is for teachers to promote children's collaboration through peer interaction. In ECE classrooms, play is an important context for cooperative peer interactions that can support children's cognition and socio-emotional development (Ramani, 2012). Evidence suggests child-centred play can better support and promote cooperative problem-solving skills in younger children than adult-centered, direct instruction (Ramani, 2005, p. 89; Whitebread et al., 2014). Two studies in Ethiopia and a similar study in Rwanda found that having children engage in high-quality, playful games in different kinds of ECE programs led to growth in child outcomes (Borisova et al., 2017; Dusabe et al., 2019). ECE teachers can provide opportunities for peer interaction by varying instructional groupings (e.g., whole group, small group, and pairs) so that children have "regular, frequent opportunities for extended conversations with their peers and teachers" (National Research Council, 2015, p. 258). This also supports children's language development by providing them access to different kinds of language experiences. Working in pairs and small groups is particularly beneficial for rich

language interaction, though ECE teachers play an important role in ensuring that discussions in these settings are productive (Whitebread & Sitabkhan, 2014).

Ingersoll and Perda (2010) reported that 40% to 50% of teachers leave the profession within the first five years of teaching. Consequently, implementing supports beyond a four-year preparation program are imperative. Supports may include induction programs and mentoring opportunities for novice teachers, but these require attention from policy makers, administrators, and higher education faculty to ensure successful implementation. Ingersoll and Strong (2011) cited lack of support as a reason educators leave the teaching profession, affirming that providing support to teachers in high needs positions, such as early childhood education, should be a priority. Teacher retention must also become a consideration for teacher preparation programs as institutions of higher education reflect the current needs of early childhood education. Darling-Hammond and Sykes (2003) confirmed that in order to retain successful teachers supports need to begin during the pre-service years, and then follow the novice teacher into the induction years in comprehensive and cohesive ways.

According Hidayah et al (2019), EC Teacher need support system from government as regulator which includes; 1. The socialization of the new point of view in EC Curriculum that can promote sustainable development for EC Teachers to implement play in preschool classrooms. 2. Adjusted education budget to support sustainable development programs in EC School. 3. Award and reward for EC School or teacher who had been successful to run the sustainable education in school. This need a challenge that Gradual event to celebrating and promoting the sustainable

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development program in EC education that can be seen by public (Hidayah et al, 2019).

One of the support system for the implementation of play in preschool is to lay an effective policies and legislation governing play. UNICEF (2018) indicated that, policies specific to the pre-primary are important because they can clearly affirm children's right to play and can state that play based learning is a distinctive and essential feature of effective early learning. Policies and directives can reflect a child-centred approach to learning and teaching; such policies create an expectation that playful learning will be taken seriously and implemented across levels of the early grades (UNICEF, 2018).

Another support system for the implementation of play in preschool is public demand. According to UNICEF (2018), support for pre-primary services among parents and caregivers is key and it should be informed by strong awareness of what quality means in pre-primary education. Awareness-raising should focus on young children's unique learning needs, e.g., the need to make meaning through playful investigations supported by knowledgeable teachers. A key aspect of fostering public support and demand for learning through play is to ensure that parents recognize their role in providing meaningful play experiences in the home environment, and to empower them to do so. Garnering public support and demand for learning through play will enhance the pre-primary system's commitment to and recognition of the benefits of play (UNICEF, 2018).

Moreover, ministerial leadership is one of the support system for the implementation of play in preschool. According to UNICEF (2018), High-level leadership that is convinced or aware of the value of child-centred and playful approaches for teaching

and learning can give visibility to these issues and put pressure on all parts of the sub-sector to integrate meaningfully in their strategies and implementation plans. Ministerial leadership can facilitate coordination of this philosophy across early grades as well, promoting continuity between pre-primary and primary education. Additionally, relevant child development expertise across key arms of the lead ministry and other institutions can validate the importance of play in making pre-primary learning effective (UNICEF, 2018).

Finally, financing play is also one of the support system for the implementation of play in preschool. Both public and private investments in the pre-primary sector should take into account essential financing for appropriate learning materials, equipment and professional supports that make a strong emphasis on play possible. In the context of limited financing, where quality elements are often neglected, public funding estimates for pre-primary education should be based on achieving quality pedagogical goals. Service expansion targets should be reasonable, balancing access with achieving minimum quality (UNICEF, 2018). Financing for appropriate learning materials, equipment, and professional supports that promote play does not need to be costly but does need to promote relevance and diversity in scope. For example, nationally relevant, low cost materials can be explored as governments develop pre-primary learning resource packages for each classroom (UNICEF, 2018). For example, some Africa Countries, UNICEF supported the development of a local preschool classroom kit of play and learning resources (modelled after the ECD kit for emergencies settings) ensuring the use of local toys, games and other resources that promote play.

2.6. Summary of Review of Related Literature

This chapter looked at the theoretical framework which was underpinned by Piaget and Vygotsky views on play. It also discussed teacher perspectives of play, barriers to play and support system for the implementation of play in preschool classrooms. Through these various concerns, it is evident from the literature review that not all teachers will have positive experiences with play-based learning. Without a clear understanding of play and learning, it would be difficult for teachers to plan such an environment. If teachers were to understand play and learning as being interconnected with each other, then assessing, managing time, and balancing between teacher and child directed learning would be easier to address. UNICEF (2018) noted that teachers need to understand the importance of play and child-centred pedagogy in early learning, and be equipped with the necessary skills and dispositions to put into action play-based learning. Other education personnel such as education inspectors, training providers, specialized staff, and directors and principals must also be sensitized to and embrace learning through play as an effective tool for supporting learning and child development.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.0. Overview

This chapter presents the methodology that was used in the study. It includes research approach, research design, study area, and population of the study, sampling procedure, and sampling size, data collection instruments, trustworthiness, data collection procedure, data analysis procedure and ethical considerations.

3.1. Research Approach

The study employed qualitative research approach. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative research lies in the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their surrounding environment. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) states that qualitative research is described as focusing on the aspect in research whereby human thinking relies primarily on human perception and understanding in an effort to enlighten the meanings, actions, and social contexts of the participants. Qualitative research is rooted in the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm and that meanings are constructed by individuals as they engage with the world they are interpreting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In other words, qualitative research is descriptive and inductive, focusing on uncovering meaning from the perspective of participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative researchers, therefore, are interested in "how people interpret their experiences," "how they construct their worlds," and "what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 46).

The primary goal for qualitative research is to uncover and interpret how meaning is constructed and how people make sense of their lives and their worlds (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016). That matches with the purpose of this study, which aims to gain an insider perspective and use of play as a learning strategy for early childhood educators in the preschool classrooms within Tema Metropolis. Also, the use of qualitative research approach in this study helped the researcher to focus on an interview process because it complemented the purpose of the study. The researcher goal for choosing an interview process was to give early childhood educators a voice to tell their stories. Thus, the early childhood educators to reflect on their practices and acknowledge their strengths and limitations within the role of play in their classrooms.

3.2. Research Design

The case study research design was used in the study. A case study research design is a detailed description and analysis of a bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).Yin (2013) provides a two-fold definition that captures the comprehensive nature of case study research comprising the logic of design, data collection techniques, and approaches to analysis. He describes it as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon, are not evident. The case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, relies on multiple sources of evidence and benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis.

Yin's (2013) definition clarifies and confirms the importance of the use of this design in qualitative research, and supports the use of a case study in this project. The perspective of Yin is in line with the fundamental goal of a case study that is obtaining detailed description of a phenomenon in its context utilising multiple data

sources. This ensures that the phenomenon's exploration is not limited to one lens, but a variety of lenses that help understand the multiple facets of the phenomenon. Therefore, the use of a case study as a research design was deemed appropriate because not only did it help create knowledge and understanding of play and learning at the preschool classrooms, but also served as evidence for the recommendation of applicable solutions. Also, the use of this design enabled the researcher to understand early childhood educators' interpretations of play; how they implement play in their classrooms; barriers that hinders their implementation of play in their classroom and support systems that could be in place for successful implementation of play in their classroom. Case study was an appropriate design choice because of its suitability in describing, interpreting, or explaining occurrences (Yin, 2013).

3.3. Study Area

The study was conducted at Tema Metropolis within the Greater Accra region of Ghana explore early childhood educators' use and perspectives of play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms. Tema Metropolis is a coastal district situated about 30 kilometres East of Accra, the Capital City of Ghana. It shares boundaries in the northeast with the Dangme West District, southwest by Ledzokuku Krowor Municipal, north-west by Adentan Municipal and Ga East Municipal, north by the Akuapim South District and south by the Gulf of Guinea. The Ashaiman Municipal is an in-lock enclave within the Tema Metropolis. The Metropolis covers an area of about 87.8 km^2 with Tema as its capital. The metropolis lies in the coastal savannah zone (Appiah & Ofosu-Dankyi, 2014).

The Greenwich Meridian (i.e. Longitude 0º) passes through the Metropolis, which meets the equator or latitude 0° in the Ghanaian waters of the Gulf of Guinea. The

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Metropolis proximity to the sea with its low lying terrain which projects into the sea makes it a natural endowment for a harbour. This evidently informed the decision of the construction of the Tema Harbour in 1957, making the Metropolis 'the Eastern Gateway of Ghana' (Appiah & Ofosu-Dankyi, 2014).

The population of Tema Metropolis, according to the 2010 Population and Housing Census, is 292,773 representing 7.3 percent of the region's total population. Of the population 11 years and above, 91.1 percent are literate and 8.9 percent are non-literate. The proportion of literate males is higher (94.8 %) than that of females (87.8%). The Metropolis has many public and private tertiary and pre-tertiary educational institutions. Out of the 338 schools in the Metropolis, 185 are private and 153 are public schools. Also, the Metropolis has one full fledge private university, the Datalink University, and satellite campuses for three other universities, namely, Presbyterian University, GIMPA and KNUST (Appiah & Ofosu-Dankyi, 2014).

3.4. Population of the Study

Population of a study is the larger group upon which a researcher wishes to generalize. It includes members of a defined class of people, event, or object (Cohen et al, 2011). The target population for the study was all early childhood educators in public and private preschools in the Tema Metropolis. The accessible population for this study comprised public early childhood educators in the Tema Metropolis. At the time of conducting the study, records obtained from the Tema Metropolis Education Directorate showed that there were 27 public preschools and 81 early childhood educators in the Tema Metropolis.

3.5. Sample and Sampling Technique

Appropriate sample size is an important factor in any research and it should fulfil the requirements of the study (Cohen et al., 2011). As a result, the sample size for this study was twenty (20) participants (early childhood educators) from Tema Metropolis public preschools. According to Green and Thorogood (2004), the experience of most qualitative researchers conducting an interview-based study with a specific research question is that after interviewing 20 people, little new information is generated. Ritchie et al (2003) suggest that studies employing individual interviews conduct no more than 50 interviews so that researchers are able to manage the complexity of the analytic task. Creswell (2012) argued that selecting a larger number of interviewees for a qualitative research, in particular, will result in superficial perspectives …the overall ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture diminishes with the addition of each new individual or site.

According to Cohen et al (2011), sampling technique is a research plan that explains how the participants for the study are to be selected from the population. Public preschools were randomly selected in the study area. In selecting the public preschools, the researcher wrote numbers from 1 to 27 on pieces of papers together with blank papers. The pieces of paper were folded and put in a box. The box was turned repeatedly to ensure that the pieces of paper were well mixed to guarantee that each preschool had an equal opportunity of being selected. The preschool heads were required to pick the pieces of paper at random. Preschool heads who selected the pieces of paper which have number responses were enrolled as study preschool for this study. Out of the 27 public preschools visited, 10 public preschools were able to pick a paper which has a figure on it. Random sampling was used here because the

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researcher wanted the sample size to be free from preconception and unfairness just as Creswell (2012) asserted.

For participants (early childhood educators), the researcher used purposive sampling to select them. According to Creswell (2012), the primary consideration in purposive sampling is the judgment of the researcher as to who can provide the best information to achieve the objectives of the study. Considering the public preschools sample for the study, each early childhood educator at the preschool was automatically chosen to form part of the sample. In all, 20 early childhood educators were chosen to form part of the study. As Merrian and Tisdell (2016) stated that, in purposive sampling, researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand phenomenon.

3.6. Data Collection Instrument

The semi-structured interview guide was the research instrument used to collect data for this study.
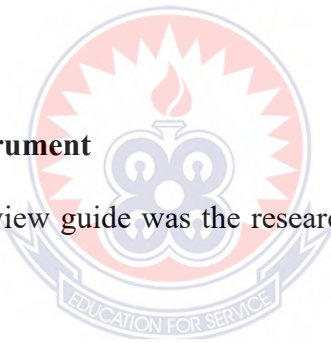
3.6.1. Development and Administering of Data Collection Instrument

Interview is defined as a conversation between researcher and participant that attempts to gather data through communication. The interview allows the researcher a window into the viewpoint of the participants and clarifies participants' perceptions (Cohen et al, 2011). Thus, the use of interviews in this study allowed the researcher to gain access to the participants' views on the phenomena in question.

Semi-structured interviews were deemed the most suitable as it maximizes the comprehensiveness of the data, allowing participants to elaborate on their responses, and the researcher to rephrase or prompt as appropriate. As the wording and

sequencing of questions were predetermined, the format facilitated the organizing and analysing of the data through enabling comparison of responses from different participants (Patton, 2015). Semi-structured interview was picked, partly because this method is considered as well-suited to in-depth and personal discussion, and partly because it can be easily managed and give participants space to think, speak, and be heard (Creswell, 2013).

The researcher first prepared an interview schedule or guide in order to enable participants to provide a detailed account of the experience through facilitating comfortable interaction with participants. As stated in Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the schedule helps both researchers and participants to stay focused on the research area to anticipate possible difficulties. It is essential to note that verbal input from the researcher was minimal. When phrasing interview questions, open-ended ones are included.

In developing interview questions, the researcher used the study's research questions as a guiding framework. An interview guide was developed in order for the researchers to build relationship with the participants and for the participants to feel comfortable when sharing ideas. The first section looked at the demographic background of participants. The second section focused on participants' perspectives of play as a learning strategy. The section three looked at the implementation of play as a learning strategy in preschool classroom. The section four looked at the barriers participants encounter in the use of play as a learning strategy in preschool classroom and the final section looked at the support system for the implementation of play as a learning strategy in preschool classrooms.

During the interview process, the first interview lasted for 10 to 20 minutes, aiming to describe the study to the participants and gain informed consent from them. The researcher asked some background and demographic questions of the participants. The second interview lasted for about 30 to 40 minutes. The second interview aims to obtain information on participants' perspectives of play as a learning strategy in preschool classrooms. The third interview lasted for about an hour, aiming to obtain information on how participants implement play as a learning strategy in preschool classrooms. The fourth interview lasted for about 20 to 40 minutes, aiming to obtain information on the barriers participants' encounters in using play as a learning strategy in preschool classrooms. The fifth interview lasted for about an hour, aiming to obtain information on the support system that could be put in place to enhance the implementation of play as learning strategy in preschool classrooms. Finally, the researcher use 10 to 40 minutes to ask follow-up questions and to review transcripts with the participants (see Appendix A for the interview guide).

The interview guides were tested in two different public early childhood centres in Cape Coast Metropolis in the Central Region of Ghana. Cape Coast Metropolis was chosen because it shares the similar characteristics to the study area (Tema Metroplis). Some of the items were found to be either irrelevant or observing the same activities under the strict supervision of the researcher's supervisors. Items found to be irrelevant or performing the same activities were deleted, while those that were not specific were rebuilt. Pre-tests, according to Sarantakos (2005), are small tests of single elements of a research instrument that are mostly used to check the instrument's mechanical structure.

3.7 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection refers to the gathering of information to serve or prove facts. It involves collection of views on the attitudes of the people about the state of affairs of the phenomenon. Data collection is important in research as it allows for the dissemination of accurate information and development of meaningful programmes (Gray, 2014).

Before data collection could begin, the researcher obtained an introductory letter from the Department of Early Childhood Education which was used to obtain permission from the appropriate authorities of the selected preschools to enable her conduct the study. After granting the researcher access to the various preschools, the researcher met the early childhood educators in the school to explain the purpose of the study them. All necessary data was collected by the use of interview guide. Through the establishment a cordial relationship between the researcher and early childhood educators of the school. This paved way for the researcher to have access to every necessary information. All data collected through interviews had their themes explained to the participants and the needed responses were given. The data was then played and transcribed for analysis.

3.8. Data Analysis Procedure

The inductive analysing approach was considered and all data were manually coded. After each day's interviews, the recorded interviews as well as the field notes were kept confidential. Two research assistants who were experienced in transcription and qualitative data analysis helped to transcribe the interviews. The assistants systematically read the transcripts independently. After this was done, they generated themes and subthemes and assigned codes to them. The codes developed were

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combined into set of codes. The recorded interviews and the soft-copy version of the transcription were stored safely to prevent a third party from having access to them. It was guided by an inductive content analysis approach. This approach involves thorough reading of data before analyses (Kusi, 2012). It helped to identify the major themes as well as sub-themes that emerged from the data. First, the recorded interviews were transcribed. The transcripts were studied and, subsequently, organized into four main sections similar to the sections in the instrument. Secondly, general themes that emerged were developed. After that, sub-themes were created and assigned codes. Both similar and different views and experiences on the subject were identified under sub-themes to aid comparison. Finally, quotations from the participant were used to support the views they raised on the various issues.

3.9 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness or rigor of a study refers to the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study (Kusi, 2012). The trustworthiness of this study was based on credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability.

3.9.1. Credibility

Muijs (2004) noted that credibility is the confidence in the truth of the findings of a study. To ensure the credibility of the interviews, member checking was used. Generally, member checking happens informally with the participants, checking for the accuracy of their responses (Gray, 2014). The researcher had an opportunity to clarify with the participants about their responses in the interview guide; member checking was applied simultaneously during the interviews. The researcher in this study restated or summarised the information that was given by the participants and

checked with the participants if this interpretation was correct. The participants either agreed or disagreed that the summaries reflected their perspectives, feelings, and experiences.

3.9.2. Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the results could be confirmed or verified by others (Kusi, 2012). To establish confirmability, participants had the opportunity to use their own words to describe their personal practices in their classroom. Also, the researchers provided an audit trail, which highlights every step of data analysis that was made in order to provide a rationale for the decisions made. This helps establish that the research study's findings accurately portray participants' responses.

3.9.3. Dependability

Dependability is based on the assumption of repeatability which means whether it would be possible to obtain the same results if the same research is carried out again (Kusi, 2012). In other words, if a person wanted to replicate the study, they should have enough information from the research report to do so and obtain similar findings as this study. The researcher used inquiry audit in order to establish dependability, which requires an outside person to review and examine the research process and the data analysis in order to ensure that the findings are consistent and could be repeated.

3.9.4. Transferability

Transferability refer to the degree that the findings of the study can be generalized (Kusi, 2012). Cohen et al. (2011) called this 'external validity', and it involves identifying possible comparison groups. In this type of validity, consideration is given to how data might translate into different settings and cultures, or the wider population or situations (Cohen et al., 2011). By considering transferability, this

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research could provide insights that may apply to other settings. For example, as the data was collected in Tema Metropolis, it may transfer to other Metropolis areas but not necessarily District or Municipal areas.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

To ensure compliance with all ethical standards required for research, the following ethical guidelines were followed. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants in order to ensure informed consent and participation in the recruitment processes. Participants were also given a written consent form before the interview began. Furthermore, each interview was recorded with the participant's permission. To ensure participant anonymity, no information that could reveal the participants' identities was included in the study report. Participants were told they could opt out before the third week of data collection. Finally, participants were assured that any information they provided would be kept strictly confidential and would not be disclosed to anyone other than those involved in this study. After the study is completed, all collected data will be securely stored and destroyed.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.0. Overview

This chapter addressed the presentation, interpretation, and discussion of data from the field of study. The study's findings are presented in accordance with the research questions posed, which are based on the interview guides completed by early childhood educators in the study area. As a result, this chapter is divided into two phrases. The first phrase is concerned with data presentation and analysis, which is divided into five sections. Participants' bio-data, Early childhood educators' (ECEs) perspectives on play as a learning strategy in preschool classrooms, implementation of play as a learning strategy in preschool classrooms, barriers ECEs encountered in the use of play as a learning strategy in preschool classrooms, and a support system that could be in place for the implementation of play as a learning strategy in preschool classrooms are all included. The second phrase discusses the findings gleaned from the interview guide in relation to the research questions.

4.1. Presentation of Results and Analysis

4.1.1. Participants Bio-Data

The first section 'A' of the early childhood educators semi-interview guide contained four items that sought background information on sex, age range, academic qualifications, and play-based learning training attended (See Appendices; section A). The data revealed that, of the twenty participants who took part in the study. There were eighteen female participants and two male participants. In terms of age, three participants were between the ages of 21 and 30, sixteen were between the ages of 31 and 40, and one was between the ages of 41 and 50. In terms of qualifications, ten of the participants held a diploma in education, six held a bachelor's degree, and four

held a master's degree. Finally, eleven of the participants had received play-based learning training, while nine had received no play-based learning training. According to participant bio-data, the majority of the participants were females between the ages of 31 and 40, held a diploma in education, and had received training in play-based learning. Based on this, the researcher believes that participants will be best suited to contribute meaningfully to the study.

4.1.1. Early Childhood Educators Perspectives of Play as a Learning Strategy in Preschool Classrooms

The first objective of the study was to examine participating educators' perspectives on play. The researcher was guided by the question: 'What are the perspectives of early childhood educators' on play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms within Tema Metropolis?' (See Appendices; section B). An early childhood educators' perspectives on play as a learning strategy can affect the way they run and create their classroom. Therefore, a way to gain this information is through interviewing participants on their understanding about play as a learning strategy in preschool classroom and their experiences on play as learning strategy in their classroom. When examining the data, majority of the participants displayed similar understanding of play as a learning strategy and shared positive experiences on play as learning strategy in their classrooms. The following were participants' responses.

One of the participants believes that,

> *'Play as a learning strategy is learner-centred where learners are able to engage with their environment to construct their knowledge. I am having a positive experience in using play as a learning strategy because it encourages learners to critical thinkers and problem solvers'* (Early Childhood Educators, 1).

Another participant added that,
> *'Play as a learning strategy is giving learners the opportunity to learn through inquiry and discovery while also acknowledging that they learn through their own friends. My experience in using play as a learning strategy is a positive one because it my lesson interesting and understandable'* (Early Childhood Educator, 2).

Early Childhood Educator 1 and 2 views recognized the importance of allowing learners to have a voice within the classroom and the impact of peer-to-peer interaction on learner learning.

Similarly, one of the participants indicated that:
> *'Play as a learning strategy consists of learner inquiry, discovery, and social interactions; however, it also includes hands-on activities and centres. It is a nice experience in using play as a learning strategy due to learners' engagement'* (Early Childhood Educator, 3).

One of the participants also believes that,
> *'Play as a learning strategy involves a lot of hands-on activities and taking the learners interests and turning it into learning opportunities and social interactions. I have a positive experience because it always enhances my learners' communication skills'* (Early Childhood Educator, 4).

Another participant said that,
> *'Learner are learning in different centres throughout the classroom, such as the drama centre, the science centre and all of those centres involve different topics that are of interest to the learners but they are carried out through a play-based approach. Have a nice experience due to the fun learners derived from it'* (Early Childhood Educator, 5).

Early Childhood Educator 3, 4 and 5 views acknowledged that play, as a learning strategy is where learners learn through different play centres while including learner voices and connecting to the curriculum. Also, having hands-on activities within the centres would allow learner inquiry to unfold.

Again, one of the participants points that,
> *'Everyone loves to play. I love to play, and of course, learners love to play. I think my learners remember what they did during playtime more than what they did during teacher-directed lesson. So, I think*

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play is a good learning strategy for learners. My experience is positive because I always speak less when using such strategy' (Early Childhood Educator, 6)

Another participant expressed a similar notion,
'Play as a learning strategy stimulates my learners remembers what they did during playtime more than what they did during teacher-directed lesson. My experience is positive because this strategy allows learners to think for themselves and come out with their solution' (Early Childhood Educator, 7)

One of the participants said that,
'Play as a learning strategy makes learners actively and physically engaged in lesson which helps them to learn best. Learners simply love to play, and play is the time when they get to make their own decisions. Therefore, I agree that play is an effective way to help children learn. Although, I experienced some difficult for the first time but the training I realised that it was the best strategy hence makes my lesson delivery achievable' (Early Childhood Educator, 8).

Early Childhood Educator 6, 7 and 8 responses indicated that a play is a natural instinctive response of learners, and probably no, learner dislike play. Therefore, they all believed that play is one of the best pedagogies to use in the kindergarten classroom as children learn best through play. As play is a natural instinct, they believed that it helped to boost learner's interest in learning, which made their teaching easier and more effective.

One of the participants claimed that,
'Through play as a learning strategy, learners tended to remember newly-learned concepts more easily because they could concentrate on the task' (Early Childhood Educator, 9).

Response from Early Childhood Educator 9 indicates that learners remember the knowledge better over time if they learned through play.

Moreover, one of the participants shared that,
'My experience is positive. When learners engage in play, they laugh, they giggle, they talk loudly; they run… they are simply happy. The participant recognized that play is different from normal class time. Play is free and enjoyable for learners. I think play as a learning strategy enable learners get to be their own boss and they do not need

to listen to me as a teacher. They can do whatever they think is fun'
(Early Childhood Educator, 10).

One of the participant commented that,
> *'Play as a learning strategy are activities that learners are willing to participate in and free to make their own decisions. When children were involved in play activities it generates positive feelings such as happiness, fun, smiles, and laughter. The experience is always positive because it enhances my learners learning'* (Early Childhood Educator, 11).

Another participant commented that,
> *'I think play, as a learning strategy is a kind of strategy which makes learners happy. For example, a lot of time was needed when I was designed games that required patience and discipline. All of them (learners) wanted to try and they were willing to follow the rules I set. They were happy during the process, and I think that should be considered as playtime too. The experience is always nice which I encourage every early childhood educator to use in his or her classroom'* (Early Childhood Educator, 12).

Similar notion was shared by one of the participant,
> *'The experience is good. Play as a learning strategy is attached with rules and arguments, but willingness to play is one critical feature for distinguishing if children are playing or not. I see that learners set rules when they play, and they keep changing the rules. Sometimes they argue about it but I seldom see them quit playtime. They never tell me they do not want to play. I think play can have rules attached. As long as learners are having fun and want to keep doing it, let them play. That is my view'* (Early Childhood Educator, 13).

Early Childhood Educator 10, 11, 12 and 13 perspective, the main features of play as a learning strategy should be fun and enjoyment, and learning should have intrinsic motivation while playing. Therefore, no matter if, learners are involved in free play or teacher directed activities, so long as they are having fun and are willing to participate, they are playing.

Furthermore, one of the participant said that,
> *'Play as a learning strategy involves physical actions and so activeness of the body serves as a key indicator of participation in play. In describing my experience of play as a learning strategy, I think play was outdoors and in groups. These kinds of games involved hide and seek, jumping to throw or catch the ball, and similar physical*

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activities. The experience of using play as a learning strategy is always positive' (Early Childhood Educator, 14).

One participant commented that,
>*'Play as a learning strategy involves the use of games which helps learners to learn. Play as a learning strategy makes learners become very active and makes teaching and learning interesting. Although, the strategy is good but due to my experience it waste time'* (Early Childhood Educator, 15).

From the Early Childhood Educator 14 and 15 responses, physical actions imply movement of the body involving jumping, swinging, dancing, running, throwing, and catching and physical exercises. When the word play as a learning strategy was mentioned, for the participant, it seemed to denote a physical action which may be a simple action that can be performed while seated (e.g., playing with objects, throwing and catching) or by movement of the whole body.

One of the participants communicated that,
>*'Play as a learning strategy in my classroom environment gives them the opportunity to grow physically, emotionally, socially, and cognitively. It fun and interesting'* (Early Childhood Educator, 16).

Also, one of the participant said that,
>'*Play as a learning strategy was a valuable learning activity in and of itself that gave learners the 'freedom to explore, to make mistakes, to investigate, to try trial and error. They are doing that on their own terms and knowing they are in a supportive environment'* (Early Childhood Educator, 17).

Early Childhood Educator 16 and 17 responses embraced play as both its own developmentally appropriate activity and as a pedagogical tool that had the potential to support children's learning of academic skills.

One of the participants commented that,

> *'Play as a learning strategy is extremely important but it is a chance for learners to practice the skills that they have been taught. When the direct teaching happens and then they are allowed to play and explore and change things up within their play, their play changes. It gives them a chance to process, to ask questions about that, to share their knowledge with other people and feel really good about themselves, and with all that happening through play it comes out in the ways that they are most comfortable'* (Early Childhood Educator, 18).

Another participant described the intentionality needed in embracing this particular aspect of a play-based learning strategy. The participant shared the perspective that ensuring a connection between direct instruction and learner's play was important to supporting children's true understanding of academic concepts:

> *'Sitting in a big circle is a good way to introduce something, but they will go away and start doing something else and it will be gone. You have to figure out how to connect it and give them ownership'* (Early Childhood Educator, 19).

Finally, one of the participants commented that,

> *'Play, as a learning strategy is a kind of strategy that explain and motivate learners to understand concept well. It helps learners to be self-directed and lifelong learners who learn effectively in any environment. The positive aspect was that they are able to add with the help of materials'* (Early Childhood Educator, 20).

Response from Early Childhood Educator 20 presented play as the opportunity to connect play and academic instruction. This implies that the play-based part is to be there to help learners when they ask questions, and to help give learners the tools to explore, and to ask learners the tough questions to make them conscious learners as to how they are going to get that information.

4.1.2. Implementation of Play as a Learning Strategy in Preschool Classroom

The second objective of the study was to assess how early childhood educators' implement play as a learning strategy in their classrooms. The researcher was guided by the question: 'How do early childhoods educators' implement play as a learning

strategy in the preschool classrooms within Tema Metropolis?' (See Appendices; section C). Understanding how early childhood educators' implement play create a play-based classroom which helps to explain how educators applied the learned concepts and beliefs in their own classrooms. All participants were interviewed about how they implement play in their classrooms, and they claimed that they integrated and interspersed play into different activities. No matter if it was the learning-corner time, language learning time, mathematics and science activity, physical activity, art or music time, play was always blended in. The following were participants' responses.

Four of the participants commented that they needed to be creative, so they could create their own stories that would help them teach specific curriculum concepts. In this way of implementing play, learners could understand concept taught in their classroom. They said:

> *'I used an Anansi story to teach parts of the body. I accompanied the story with the box; it is like a television, so when I was telling the story then I was showing them the pictures. After that, I asked them some questions and then I asked them to mould the characters in the story'* (Early Childhood Educator, 1).

> *'I tell stories about our daily schedules, emphasizing the fact that they were flexible with the day-to-day operations of the classrooms. Sometimes I am even tempted to create my own story because I know that through that the children learn a lot'* (Early Childhood Educator, 2).

> *'I prepare the learners before the lesson. I ensure that the needed stories for the lesson are available. I incorporate play in my classroom when I met learners learning the print on the wall. It take a lot of time and was about the personal hygiene'* (Early Childhood Educator, 3).
> *'I engaged learners in outdoor activities in order to provide different learning environments that engaged the emotions of the learners. When I am teaching, I try to change the environment. When I am using a story and the play to teach, I take the learners outdoors. This helps to change their mood and they feel free to express themselves'* (Early Childhood Educator, 4)

Another participant expressed that,

> *'Within the classroom, I model learner's learning and engage in explicit teaching. As an early childhood educator, I listen, observe, and then at times ask questions to allow learners come up with the answers. Learners listen to each other and come out with their own solution'* (Early Childhood Educator, 5).

Early Childhood Educator 5 response appeared to be engaged in more teaching that is direct where the educator modelled certain skills and behaviours for the learners to follow.

In contrast, one of the participants focused on being the facilitator to her learner's learning and co-teaching with the learners.

> *'Being observant of the learners and what their interested in and seeing how I can take those interests and kind of bridge it throughout the centres together. I focus on learner inquiry and used that to guide my teaching with the learners'* (Early Childhood Educator, 6).

Again, four of the participants said that in teaching learners in their class on a certain topic, they used a play activity called 'Anhwe akyire (do not look back). Two of participants said they were treating part of the body and the rest of the two participants were treating rotation of the earth. They gave a description of how they incorporate play into their learning process:

> *'The learner squat in a circle facing inward. One learner runs around the circle with an object such as a handkerchief or a small stone in his or her hand. The other learners (who are squatting) sing and clap their hands. The learner surreptitiously drops the object behind any learner she chooses and continues the rotation, pretending to still have the object in his or her hand. If the learner behind whom the object was dropped behind finds out, she or he quickly picks up the object and runs in the opposite direction, trying to reach his or her original place before the first learner (the one who dropped the object). Of the two, the one who reaches his or her place last takes the object and runs with it around the group. On the other hand, if she or he does not notice that the handkerchief was dropped behind his or her back and the first learner goes around and reaches his or her at the same place, she or he (the first learner) gently pats her on her shoulders. It is then the second learner's turn to go around the circle with the object. During the game, none of the learner who are squatting are supposed to look back; and no learner is supposed to draw the attention of the*

child behind whose back the object was dropped'. After this play activity, learners were able to tell me the part of the body they used during the Anhwe akyire (Early Childhood Educator 7 and 8) while the two participants said, the play activity helps them to explain to learners how the earth rotate on its axis' (Early Childhood Educator 9 and 10).

In addition, two of the participants described using physical activities as warm up activities to make learners ready for the lessons. As described by the two participants, these activities involve simple sports and physical exercises including jumping, jogging, and simple (military) parade activities that are usually carried out in the beginning of the day. While these activities may be viewed as contributing indirectly to learner's learning, the participants' responses shows they consider them peripheral to teaching and learning activities. Two of the participants described as:

'On play activities issues, mainly like the one I have told you, parade for the learners, I found it very useful before going into class. A learner should be made active, he should do the parade after that it means the body is already active so when he goes to class he will be ready to receive what he is taught' (Early Childhood Educator, 11).

'I make learners run/jog every day before I start my lesson. This makes my learners active and ready for the lesson' (Early Childhood Educator, 12).

Moreover, two of the participants gave a similar description on how they incorporated play into their teaching process. They said they teaching counting of numbers from 1 to 15. For them to achieve this objective, they implement a play activity called Ampe. Ampe is a jumping game that can be played by two or more learners. The participant states that Ampe is always played by girls but these days boys also partake in the Ampe. The participants note that at the end of the play activity, their learners were able to count from 1 to 15 correctly. Two participants gave their description:

'As many as fifteen learners stand in a semicircle. The first learner stands facing the group. The learner starts the game with the second learner. They clap their hands as they jump, flinging forward one leg each at a time in the process. If a right leg meets a right leg or a left meets a left, it is "diagonal meeting," which wins the leader a point. The learner then plays on with all the learners in the row until the end,

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and then the next person starts. On the other hand, if there is a "parallel meeting" where right is meeting left, then the two learners jump and clap again. Should there be another "parallel meeting," the leader is out, and the learner stands at the end of the row to await another turn. The second learner becomes the new leader to take her turn, jumping with the rest and following the same rules. The jumping and clapping are done rhythmically, accompanied by a jingle' (Early Childhood Educator, 13).

'Ampe is played in twos or in teams. Before the game starts, each side agrees on the type of meeting to win a point, for example, diagonal meeting for Adwoa group, and parallel meeting for Afua group. They decided that a diagonal meeting wins a point for the leader; and any of them who reach ten points wins the game' (Early Childhood Educator, 14).

Building upon the ability of the learners as they developed their personal play skills and interacted with one another, the participant took advantage of the imaginative play opportunities that naturally occurred. The participant follows a theme until the learners are no longer interested. The participant said that:

> *'We pretended that we were going to the park. On the way, we stopped for ice cream and we had to rescue a puppy. I also set up a bank firm in the school centre. The learners pretended to take orders and exchange money for food. They then pretended to eat the food at the table and clean up the area as well'* (Early Childhood Educator, 15).

A few participants were of the view that in the classroom, play has its place but one not directly related to learning. The participant expressed their opinion that play is used to introduce the lesson and it should stop when the real teaching (serious learning) begins. One of the participants stated the following:

> *'As an early childhood educator, I use play during the introduction of every lesson I start. On introduction, learners will enter the class, when I come in they will greet me, or I might start to greet them and they would respond after that I might, for example if it is science session I might ask about their parts of the body, they may name them. Or I would show a game, for example in Mathematics, that song they sang, 'the bird song', But in the middle there I cannot bring in any play, in the middle of Mathematics, in the middle of reading, in the middle of writing, I cannot, but in the beginning at the introduction. This helps the learners to follow the lesson'* (Early Childhood Educator, 16).

Early Childhood Educator 17 response reveals the peripheral position of play in the class. Games and other play activities are used to usher the children into real learning but they are stopped when it is time to focus and pay attention to the teaching.

Another participant described the process in the class as follows:

> *'As an early childhood educator, I usually do this in the morning as I teach Number activities. As soon as I enter the class, I let them stand, and we sing, because I know that if they jump around they become active. I let them stand, and sing the songs they like that make them jump. I let them do some physical activities, you see. After that then I tell them to sit down and be attentive because it is time to learn'* (Early Childhood Educator, 17).

Responses from Early Childhood Educator 16 and 17 indicates that singing is the most used play activity possibly because of the physical actions involved. Although educators have recognized a variety of play activities that they can use, they see singing as the best activity in their situation. The educators also described introducing play in the middle of lessons to activate and motivate students, whose attention may be waning.

In some instances, the participant described the possibility of having play activities that can be integrated into instructional activity. Some play activities the participant claimed to be useful in enhancing learner's learning were role plays, flash card games, and counting games using various objects. These activities may help the participant in attaining the lesson objectives. The participant described how a number cards game could be used in enhancing number recognition:

> *'For example, we make a line, as you know we teach at the black board, we make a line this way and we say 'when I say one you should immediately run fast', when I say two, immediately run fast and learners rejoice shouting eeeeh! Learners shout joyfully so that is one type of play but at the same time I teach there I just want them to understand more, one two three up to ten. Yes, I have my objectives but I use that way yes'* (Early Childhood Educator, 18).

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In enhancing the same competence, another participant describes how number cards and objects could be used in a different way.

> '*For example, we can make number cards or small cards of a certain kind and then you ask a learner, you just throw them down for learners to look for numbers. Those are the things, that we can make and they are easy to make, so a learner will be looking for a number, and as he looks for the number, he will be studying as he plays. Or we can take things like stones and throw them down for every learner to pick, later on he comes to count how many did he get, so already he has counted although he was playing the picking up game*' (Early Childhood Educator, 19).

One of the participant believes that games, as part of play, can be used to teach and/or illustrate concepts in various subjects. The participant described how he implemented play in teaching mathematics concepts.

> '*I could say, Like yesterday when you were playing, how many were there? And we respond 6 by 6, and so I can say ok this group of six people you are supposed to be under this one and this one. Ok, so if there are 6 people on this side and 6 on the other. How many are they going to be altogether? So here, we are supposed to add. So I have taught addition using a game and there you recall your game and the teacher's sum. So that really helps, even in other subjects you find play in there, yes*' (Early Childhood Educator, 20).

4.1.3. Barriers ECEs Encounter in the Use of Play as a Learning Strategy in Preschool Classroom

The third objective of the study was to identify the barriers early childhood educators' encounter in using play as a learning strategy in their classroom. The researcher was guided by the question: 'What barriers do early childhood educators' encounters in using play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms within Tema Metropolis?' (See Appendices; section D). In order to identify the barriers that prevented participants from incorporating play elements into their classrooms. Participants were asked about the barriers they experience when using play as a learning strategy in their classroom. Participants' responses were as follows.

One of the participants commented that,

> *'I have play activity in the lessons but the number of learners hinders, as the number of learners is higher than the space we have in this classroom, is the main thing that hinders. I don't give it enough chance, for example maybe I was supposed to have the learners in groups, and tell them may be to play a certain game, or maybe to take some objects and count, but now because of the large number of learners in the class, the space available is not enough'* (Early Childhood Educator, 1).

Therefore, the main concern for the Early Childhood Educator 1 is the number of learners, which limits her freedom to make available activities that learners may find enjoyable. This large number makes it difficult for educator to provide for play.

Two of the participants expressed concern about the unavailability of play areas and materials in the school. They said that,

> *'My school is unable to afford sports items and playing materials'* (Early Childhood Educator, 2).
>
> *'As you can see, our school is closer to the road. And there is no appropriate learner's play areas in the school, hence the risk of learners being knocked down by cars as they play close to the roads* (Early Childhood Educator, 3).

Four of the participants viewed the lack of space and time as the two barriers when using play as learning strategy in the classroom. Since a lot of them related play with physical movement, they mentioned that they could not design a lot of fun play activities when the classroom was too small and filled with furniture.

> *'Learners need to run and jump, but how can they do that when they are always stuck in a small classroom? Sometimes we even need to share the classroom with another class. That is horrible'* (Early Childhood Educator, 4).
>
> *'I have very packed schedule. Learners need to learn English, Mathematics, Science, and much more every day. Including snack time and bathroom time: how much time can we really do play activities? Yes, I incorporate some fun games in every activity, but teaching a new concept takes time, and honestly not every child gets to play my game due to the time limit'* (Early Childhood Educator, 5).

'*Physically transporting my notes, playing materials, and having the time required to bring them into the classroom has become a real problem. If I am blessed with a larger classroom I could keep items of interest out at all times and add to my collection depending on the theme. This would help my learners stay engaged'* (Early Childhood Educator, 6)

'*A larger budget would solve many problems. Not just for my classroom but I mean a larger budget for the entire school. We could expand our outside play area, which would allow classes to share the outdoor play space and not be so limited on outdoor playtime'* (Early Childhood Educator, 7).

Moreover, one of the participants claimed that,

'*You see, it hard to design games to solidify my learners knowledge of phonics'* (Early Childhood Educator, 8).

Early Childhood Educator 6 response indicates that she had to accomplish specific learning tasks for each lesson, and she encountered certain difficult to incorporate play in every single subject.

Four of the participants felt that the school management team, especially their school head teachers, did not support them to incorporate play activities in class.

'*My school head teacher prioritized learning time. I sometimes got blamed for making a mess when learners are playing, and I felt that more support was needed from the school'* (Early Childhood Educator, 9).

One of the participant recalled a time when the school head teacher requested to stop a play activity. Participant said,

'*The school teacher would say that she supported play, but she did not. There was a time when my learners were doing some messy play on the table. She asked me to clean up immediately'* (Early Childhood Educator, 10).

One of the participants was confused about the school policy. Participant said,

'*I am not really sure about the school policy. It said we are supposed to incorporate play in their daily routine, but learning always comes first in reality. The schedule constantly needs to change because students did not get their school work done, which reduces their playtime'* (Early Childhood Educator, 11).

Another participant provided an example about how the school head teacher commented on her class management ability and she felt sad about it. She recalled,

> *'A few days ago, the learners were doing pretend play in class and they talked louder than usual. The school head walked by and she warned the learners to speak quietly. Later she asked me to pay attention to classroom management. I felt disappointed because I was just trying to incorporate play into my class time, as requested by the school'* (Early Childhood Educator, 12).

Four of the participants felt pressure from their learners' parents. They explained that parents would complain if they planned too many play activities for the learners. They claimed that parents did not know much about play-based learning and were quite ignorant of the fact that educators were in fact using play as pedagogy to make learners learn better. Even when they explained to the parents, parents did not seem to understand.

One of the participants stated that

> *'parents were fine if they knew that she was using games to teach academic contents, but parents were not supportive if learners were doing free play'* (Early Childhood Educator, 13).

One of the participants had similar experiences and got complaints from parents. The participant said that some parents believed that

> *'school is for learning and home is for playing. I specified that parents did not understand educators were using play to boost learner's interest in learning. I tried to explain to parents about the aim of incorporating play into the curriculum; yet, those parents did not agree with me, which made the implementation of play more difficult and* challenging' (Early Childhood Educator, 14).

Another participant commented that,

> *'I think, a parent sees play as wastage of time, instead he would wish a child to be given lots of classwork, forgetting that play entertains, it makes the child active, it makes him exercise physically, yes. But when he sits at one place, and everything is provided there that is not good, I think it is not good, but parents do not recognize this, and regard it to be wastage of time'* (Early Childhood Educator, 15).

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One of the participants described from her experience, the concerns of parents.

'Most of the parents do not know that we start with singing and playing, they do not know, they want the same day they come with a writing book and a pencil, they start to write. It is very hard especially in these lower classes, most of them say that, educators do not teach, the learners go there just to play and sing' (Early Childhood Educator, 16) .

Therefore, Early Childhood Educator 13, 14, 15 and 16 responses indicates that they are faced with a challenge to justify to the parents any school time designated for play especially because parents see no evidence that their children are learning when engaged in play.

One of the participants commented on timetabling as a hindrance for children's full participation in play. One of the participants expressed her dissatisfaction with the lack of time allocated on the school timetable for pre-school class play. In her opinion,

'The school activities on the timetable limited the time the young learners may have to play. The participant remarked, our regulations limit learner's play because the school timetable directs me to do what I plan to in the classroom until recess, during recess children are having porridge meal outside, after that they come into class so there is no time for a child to play, so after that according to the timetable they have to be in class so they do not have any other time allocated for play, it is not on the timetable, if you look at our timetable, you cannot find periods allocated for outdoor games' (Early Childhood Educator, 17).

Response from Early Childhood Educator 17 indicates that, the time that learners would be expected to be playing is taken up by their recess meal. The participant cannot keep the learners outside, as the timetable requires them to have them back to class when the recess ends.

One of the participant complained about the course on play-based learning which she took was not helping her to apply such knowledge in real kindergarten setting. She said,

> '*I know play-based learning is not a new teaching method in the field, but I only had one course talking about play and most of the time the teacher just taught us some play theories. I found it useless*' (Early Childhood Educator, 18).

Another participant had similar feeling and she learned about how to create a play-based classroom through her work. She said,

> '*I learned how to do play-based learning through actually doing it in my class. I can tell if I am successful or not by observing children. If they are happy, I am successful. I do not think the school taught me a lot on how to incorporate play in the class*' (Early Childhood Educator, 19).

One of the participants further confirmed the lack of formal training on play-based learning in the compulsory training courses. She said,

> '*I had practicum, but only for a short period of time. During teaching practice, I did not get to try many things. The support teacher focused more on how I achieved the learning objectives. So, I did not learn much about how to incorporate play in class. I was a bit nervous when I was being told to incorporate a play element in formal learning time*' (Early Childhood Educator, 20).

Responses from Early Childhood Educator 18, 19 and 20 shows that they still lacked the knowledge on how to create a playful classroom. It can be deduce that, the educators training courses at college focused more on theories. Thus, they could not put theories into practice. For that reason, educators believed that they mainly learned relevant knowledge through their working experience.

4.1.4. Support System That Could Be In Place for the Implementation of Play as a Learning Strategy in Preschool Classroom

The fourth objective of the study was on the support systems that could be put in place to enable early childhood educators' implement play as a learning strategy in their classroom. The researcher was guided by the question: 'What support systems could be put in place to enable early childhood educators' to implement play as a learning strategy in the Tema Metropolis?' (See Appendices; section E). In order to address this research question, the researcher asked participants support systems that could be put in place to enable early childhood educators' implement play as a learning strategy in their classroom. The following were participants' responses.

Play, as a learning strategy is open to interpretations on how educators would like to plan for their centres and lesson. Two of the participants were of the opinion that,

> '*Collaborative planning is a support system needed to implement play as a learning strategy in my classroom. Because when there is this collaboration planning between me and my school head, there will be no interference of the school head when implementing play as a learning strategy in my classroom*' (Early Childhood Educator, 1)
> '*Play as a learning strategy involves a lot of planning and thinking and it is not just something you show up and say hey today we are going to do this. It does not work that way especially if you expect your learners to learn and grow through everything that is within the curriculum. You must involve someone to plan or structure the play activities effective for it implementation*' (Early Childhood Educator, 2).

Responses from Early Childhood Educator 1 and 2 indicated that collaborative planning as an important aspect to creating their centres and lesson. They viewed played-based and collaborative planning as intertwined with one another and it is up to them to ensure that their lessons support curriculum content or else it would be free play.

Another participant was of the view that safeness during play in or out the classroom is very important. The participant said that,

> *'In my classroom, there are as many as five areas where learners can be playing. If I am reading a book, one on one, my helper is assisting with dress up and we hear some screaming coming from the block area, one of us has to leave the interaction that we have with a learner and put out the fire before it gets out of control. So, there is an effective and safe routine in my classroom. I will be very happy to implement the play based learning'* (Early Childhood Educator, 3).

One participant was very expressive about the extent that she valued the other professionals who occasionally were in her classroom:

> *'The speech pathologist visited my room one day a week to rotate in the centres; I would like to have her at least 3 days a week'* (Early Childhood Educator, 4).

Participants expressed that,
> *'There should be parent or adult support, since I have three learners with developmental delays in the classroom'* (Early Childhood Educator, 5).

Adult support at the beginning of the school year was an idea of one participant. She elaborated that,

> '*as learners come into the classroom, they need more assistance: To have more help at the beginning of the school year would be a dream come true'* (Early Childhood Educator 6).
> *'The additional adults in the classroom could help facilitate communication and interaction between the adults and students as well as student-to-student communication. Once the students have a firm grasp on expectations then the adults could be phased out'* (Early Childhood Educator, 7).

Five of the participants were of the view that smaller class sizes would be helpful with learners bonding with one another and having the opportunity to listen and to learn from their peers' play plans for the day and what they have experienced with their families the previous night before. One of the participant said,

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'With the increase in class size, it becomes more of a challenge to manage all aspects of the classroom. I want the learners to have the opportunity to communicate but it takes a lot of time when the class is large' (Early Childhood Educator, 8).

'Since play skills are easier and more likely to happen in a smaller class. It would be very possible to move along quicker and help to develop the students' skills fully in a small classroom' (Early Childhood Educator, 9).

'Smaller class size would allow for more individually designed play according to the skill level of each learner (Early Childhood Educator, 10).

'You could devote a lot more time and really develop learner's skills fully and I think move them along quicker if you had smaller class sizes' (Early Childhood Educator, 11).

'I think when the number of learners in my class is reduce wisely I can effectively implement the play based learning. Just imagine in a class of 30 learners' (Early Childhood Educator, 12)

Moreover, participants were of the view that for them to effectively implement play-based curriculum which could encourage learners learning in their classroom. There must be adequate financial support from the government to facilitate some of the playing activities and materials in the public schools. They said that,

'There should be enough playing materials that will help learners learn through play (Early Childhood Educator, 13).
'Adequate funding of public basic schools is sine qua non for sustainable development as such the much needed development will be fast-tracked and sustained' (Early Childhood Educator, 14).

One of the participants also commented that,
'There should an establishment of a mentoring partnership to further develop the competence and confidence of teachers working within a play based learning environment' (Early Childhood Educator, 15).

Participants expressed the need for training on play based activities. The trainings should focus on play and be offered to teachers, aides, administrators, speech pathologists, and any other adult who interacts in the preschool classroom. Two

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participant was very explicit that the training would develop a shared understanding of play:

> *'Play should be defined in the training so everyone has a very clear understanding of what play is. Using the same language and terms to describe play would be very helpful. Coaching of what to do in real life play situations should be included'* (Early Childhood Educator, 16 and 17).

One participant said,
> *'Maybe teacher development to help gain understanding of why there is a need for play* (Early Childhood Educator, 18).

Two of the participants stated unequivocally that they would like to have more opportunities to develop and improve their skills. They observed:

> *'I know that I should work on my skills to be certain that my ideas are fresh and novel and I challenge my learners. Reflection is one of the most important tools in my toolbox. It is my goal to reflect every day to see if my techniques are effective and if my learners are making progresses.* (Early Childhood Educator, 19 and 20).

4.2. Discussion of Findings

4.2.1. ECEs Perspectives of Play as a Learning Strategy in Preschool Classrooms

The first research question sought to examine early childhood educators' perspectives on play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms within Tema Metropolis. It is evident from interview findings that the early childhood educators in the context of this particular study expressed several perspectives on play as a learning strategy in the preschool classroom and had positive experience in using play as a learning strategy in the preschool classroom. Although different views came into consideration, from the participants' perspectives, learners are born with the desire for play. In order to boost learner's willingness to learn, participants believed that play is one good strategy to use to teach learners and encourage learners to learn. Play as a learning strategy is therefore being welcomed by most participants in this study, and

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they believed that learners can learn concepts and knowledge in a fun way by adopting a play-based learning approach as Vygotsky (1976) and Piaget (1962) asserted.

Moreover, it was found that play as a learning strategy creates positive excitement of happiness, energy, and laughter. Learners seemed happy during play and felt free, and they were able to take responsibility to make personal decisions. At the same time, it was found that it is difficult to give play as a learning strategy an actual definition, as it not only involves emotions but is also a behaviour. Participants' descriptions about play as a learning strategy matched with what many theorists and researchers found from their research. As Moore (2020) mentioned that, it is difficult to give, play a definition because of its complexity as a behaviour, as a process, and as an approach to task. Yet, in general, people would agree that voluntary participation, enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, and many more other positive emotions are the characteristics attached with play (Howard, 2009; Lillemyr, 2009; Santer, Griffiths, & Goodall, 2007).

Interestingly, play as a learning strategy has a relaxing and fun element, and learners prefer to play as compared to just sit and listen, as in the case of traditional learning (Lynch, 2015). The participants of this study were of the view that they use games to teach learners so that the learners can learn in a fun atmosphere. When it comes to using play as a learning strategy, there will not be any final assessment and strict rules so that learners can play freely and learn within. This finding is consistent with the literature saying that play-based learning is using play as a strategy to teach, and teachers are expected to accomplish lesson objectives in each lesson (Chen, Li, & Wang, 2017; Wood, 2013).

Finally, the study found that play, as a learning strategy is where learners learn through different play centres while including learners' voices and connecting to the curriculum. Also, having hands-on activities within the centres would allow learner inquiry to unfold. This understanding coincides with the one provided by the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME). The OME (2013) highlights the importance of creating a child-centred approach where students are learning through play while engaging with their peers. Most of the participants considered play as a good learning strategy to use in the preschool classroom because play is always fun and attached with positive emotions. Play based learning is a therefore a teaching pedagogy that should be used in kindergarten as it combines play and learning, which will boost children's learning and development (Arirana, 2015; Lynch, 2015).

Based on the findings from the early childhood educators' perspectives on play, as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms within Tema Metropolis. The researcher is of the view that, play as a learning strategy in the preschool classroom makes learning looks fun. When learning is fun, learners are more motivated to engage in learning opportunities. Although, there are many forms of play to consider for the kindergarten classroom. Achieving balance is key. Learners should have opportunities to initiate play, but early childhood educators also need to guide learning by designing purposeful activities that are scaffold. Hence, it is a nice experience to use play as a learning strategy in the preschool classroom.

4.2.2. Implementation of Play as a Learning Strategy in Preschool Classroom

The second research question sought to assess how early childhood educators' implement play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms within Tema Metropolis. It is evident from interview findings that the early childhood educators in

the context of this particular study responses indicated different approaches to how play is being incorporated into class work. The majority of the responses focused on how play is integrated as a vehicle for academic teaching and learning. At the same time, a smaller number of responses revealed that play is not closely attached/linked to the teaching and hence is peripheral to academic work. The kind of play activities referred to by the teachers, as argued by DeVries (2002), are academic exercises that are made superficially attractive but may not be appealing to children. The intention of the activities (like songs featuring letters and numbers, and letter and number recognition games) is to drill the children on the topics taught so they can memorize them, and as DeVries suggests, these activities are used mostly by teachers in attempt to introduce the element of play to make the task more palatable.

In addition, the participants planned instruction centred on play as a developmentally appropriate practice and discussed that their perspectives affect the implementation of play. The study found that participants implement play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms using play scenarios, thematic learning centres, storytelling, and many opportunities for social interaction to improve cognitive skills. These findings align with Lowden's (2000) contention that African traditional play promotes memory as part of cognitive development. In connection to relevant research, Van-Oers and Duijkers (2013) believe that teachers are co-learners, facilitators, and scaffolds of student are learning. With regards to the storytelling, participants were able incorporate into their lesson to build learners confidence level. This finding is inconsistent with Yamin (2010), who described that storytelling not only developed the listening, speaking, and vocabulary of children but also developed expression, which culminated in the courage and confidence of children to appear in public. The

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way a story is narrated is important to ensure that the listeners understand and remember the information that is being communicated (Brits et al, 2016).

Finally, the study participants created play scenarios by using their experience in the classroom, their knowledge base through professional developmental opportunities and professional readings, and their familiarity with their students to teach pretend play in their classrooms. The research completed by Bray and Cooper (2007) and Coolahan et al. (2000) confirmed that pretend play is very beneficial for children with developmental delays as well, especially when paired with children who are developing normally. Mixing children without regard to their abilities helps to build social skills.

Based on the findings of assessing how early childhood educators' implement play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms within Tema Metropolis. The researcher is of the opinion that, early childhood educators can purposefully plan play to incorporate lessons that can easily be observed and assessed during play. Depending on the early childhood educator's focus, there really is no limit to what can be observed during play. Specific standards can easily be incorporated into the play-based learning block allowing for a natural setting for early childhood educator to observe and learn about the whole learner. Early childhood educator should look at the various types of play and incorporate a variety of play activities into their classroom.

4.2.3. Barriers ECEs Encounter in the Use of Play as a Learning Strategy in Preschool Classroom

The third research question sought to identify the barriers early childhood educators' encounter in using play as a learning strategy in the preschool classroom within Tema Metropolis. All participants in this study claimed that they faced different significant barriers in using play as a learning strategy in the preschool classroom. A few participants said that they had insufficient knowledge in creating a playful in their classroom. Although they obtained diploma certificates from accredited institutions, the programs focused more on the theoretical part and lack elements in practical experience. This echo with Cheuk and Hatch (2007) finding that it is essential for kindergarten teachers to put theories into practices; but oftentimes they lack practice time when they obtain their certificates. Teachers were not totally satisfied with the training courses they attended, as they lacked the chance to apply the learned techniques to real classroom settings.

Another barrier was lack of time which prevents participants from performing many other learning activities. It is termed as a structured constraint. Small classroom is always occupied with furniture, which does not facilitate free playing from the participants' perspective. To provide different learning experience for children, kindergarten curriculums are generally packed, and the lack of time is continuing to be one major constraint for many kindergarten teachers (Chen, Li, & Wang, 2017; Howard, 2010; Leung, 2003; Wood, 2013). Also, lack of space was a barrier. According to Heidemann and Hewitt (2010), play can happen, anytime anywhere, and it is the teachers' responsibility to create a playful environment for children to learn, no matter if it is an indoor or outdoor environment. While participants of this study complained about the lack of space for children to play, one reason to explain this

finding is that teachers lacked knowledge on how to create a playful classroom, which reflected the shortcoming of the current play training programs and confirmed the finding regarding teachers' lack of knowledge and skills in adopting play-based learning. Sluss (2015) provided a lot of ideas on how to create a playful classroom. She specifically stated that environmental design is only second to adult interaction in terms of influencing play, and that the size of the classroom should not affect the quality of playtime.

Participants also mentioned the lack of school management and parental support regarding using play as a learning strategy. There was a complaint on the fact that the school head teachers just wanted to ensure the accomplishment of learning objectives, while learners required a fun way to learn. This reconfirmed Chan's (2016) findings on her research, which tried to explore the factors affecting kindergarten teachers' teaching practices. She found that the principals' views affect the school curricula and teachers' implementation of different pedagogies, and that principals should learn to reflect on and internalize their personal beliefs. Another research by Jennifer and Cheung (2015) also supported this saying, and the participants of their study said that they needed to concern about school leaders' advice and adjusted their teaching pedagogies accordingly.

School head teachers had a negative attitude towards messy play. They preferred to have the learners learn in a quiet environment, and making too much noise is sometimes prohibited. Principal's expectations thus hinder teachers from using play strategy to teach, and the teachers have to over-prepare children for the formal way of education (Gonzalez, 2014). In fact, this finding reflected the hidden problem in current teacher and principal training programs. In the previous session, the reason of

teachers' lack of knowledge and skills in adopting play-based learning was discussed. If school head teachers were not being supportive regarding the implementation of play, it could imply that professional trainings for principals were also needed. As Yim (2017) stated, both teachers and principals needed to have continuous trainings in order to stay updated with the current trend in early childhood education. Participants' dissatisfaction with this unclear direction resulted in pressure for themselves, and thus, affected their implementation of play in their class.

Focusing on the lack of parental support, some participants felt the pressure from parents. Parents believed that learners could play at home, and therefore school was a place for learner to learn academic content. This notion aligned with many research findings stating parents' expectations on kindergartens and teachers. In general, they expected teachers to help equip children for primary schooling, and schools are expected to be academically oriented (Chan, 2012; Ho et al, 2017; Rao et al, 2010). These parental expectations affected how kindergarten teachers implemented play in their classroom. Rather than expecting parents to conform to teachers' teaching strategies used in class, the schools and teachers should collaborate with families in order to seek consensus about what helps children grow and learn effectively (Chen et al, 2017; Ho et al, 2017).

Based on the findings of identifying the barriers early childhood educators' encounter in using play as a learning strategy in the preschool classroom within Tema Metropolis. The researcher is of the opinion that, although it is difficult to create new interesting play that, may grasp learners' attention and help their learning. But early childhood educator can modify and twist play activities by entering into the world of learners. Educators can engage learners in their class activities by including elements

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in play from their daily life experiences and interests to make a concept close to learners' real-life experiences. Learners' curiosity and discussion can help an early childhood educator to understand their knowledge and understanding of the concept.

4.2.4. Support System That Could Be In Place for the Implementation of Play as a Learning Strategy in Preschool Classroom

The fourth research question sought to find out the support systems that could be put in place to enable early childhood educators' implement play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms within Tema Metropolis. Collaborative planning, more space, more adults who are skilled, more play materials, more time, and less children in each classroom. One simply needs to change their perspective to the positive. The study participants shared that an increased number of skilled adults in the classroom would make the largest impact on play. The learners would benefit, in that the adult would be available for interactive play, facilitate pretend play, and help to develop problem-solving skills. Pathologists and occupational therapists could provide a high level of support, while professionals trained in play could fill the role of an additional pair of hands in the preschool classroom. It would be beneficial to the preschool educators to have another professional in the classroom with a different skill set and, therefore, a different perspective on play. According to Hammond and Sykes (2003), in order to retain successful teachers, supports need to begin during the pre-service years, and then follow the novice teacher into the induction years in comprehensive and cohesive ways.

Support that is more adult was identified which could render more generalized assistance, as well as professionals such as speech pathologists and occupational therapists who could provide more individualized, specialized supports. Participant

described that she learns from other professionals who support the classroom. Smaller class size and more time for play also were named as barriers; in a positive light, they also could be considered supports. The participants desired more time in the structured school day schedule for play. They agreed that a routine or schedule is best. The teachers also agreed that a smaller size class gives the teacher an opportunity for more attention to working on each student's developmental skills that will ensure success in the higher grades. Each participant exuded a high level of confidence in their personal ability to engage children in developmentally appropriate play; however, they welcomed more opportunities to hone their skills and to have a deeper understanding of play. This desire confirms that which the research studies by McMullen and Alat (2002), McMullen et al. (2006), and Trawick and Dziurgot (2010) discovered: teachers are open and desire more training in the area of play.
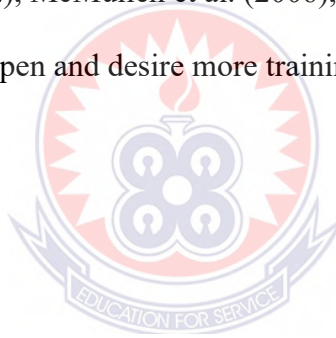
CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0. Overview

This chapter deals with the summary of findings, conclusion, limitations, and the recommendation of the study.

5.1. Summary

The purpose of the study was to explore early childhood educators' use and perspectives of play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms at Tema Metropolis within the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. To understand early childhood educators' experiences with play as a learning strategy, the study sought to examine early childhood educators' perspectives on play as a learning strategy, assess how early childhood educators' implement play as a learning strategy, identify the barriers early childhood educators' encounter in using play as a learning strategy and find out the support systems that could be put in place to enable early childhood educators' implement play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms within Tema Metropolis.

As stated in Chapter Two, play and preschool are both considered as essential in children's learning and development, and play-based learning is drawing increasing attention in the field. Therefore, evaluation of experiences of early childhood educators with play-based learning will be helpful to finding out the obstacles and challenges in practicing play-based learning (Stellakis, 2011). Vygotsky's and Piaget play theories was used to guide this study because it described children's all-round development including language use, social awareness, and cognitive development through social interaction with others (Tok, 2018).

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The study employed qualitative research approach with case study as a research design. The sample size for this study was twenty (20) early childhood educators. Early childhood educators were purposely selected. Semi-structured interview guide was the main instrument used collect data for the study. Four semi-structured interviews were conducted to find out early childhood educators use and perspectives on play-based learning. The trustworthiness of this study was based on credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability. Owing to the nature of qualitative research, the inductive analysing approach was considered and all data were manually coded. The study followed ethical guidelines which were in consistent with all ethical standards required to conduct a research.

5.1. Summary of Key Findings

The findings of the study reveal that:

1. Play as a learning strategy is therefore being welcomed by most participants in this study, and they believed that learners can learn concepts and knowledge in a fun way by adopting a play-based learning approach. Participants' perspectives of play as a learning strategy included but were not limited to the following: enjoyable, fun, interactive, engaging, creative, and imaginative; it provides opportunities for interaction and socialization with peers.

2. Participants implement play as a learning strategy in the preschool classrooms using play scenarios, thematic learning centres, storytelling, and many opportunities for social interaction to improve cognitive skills. Each participant was very clear in expressing a desire for more playtime during the school day.

3. Participants face different significant barriers in using play as a learning strategy in the preschool classroom which includes insufficient knowledge in creating a

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playful in their classroom, lack of time and space, lack of school management and parental support, large class size and inadequate of playing materials.

4. Participant were of the view that collaborative planning, more space, more adults who are skilled, more play materials, more time, smaller classes, and professional development opportunities would be great support system to have in place in their classroom to enable them implement play as a learning strategy.

5.2. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn.

From the participants' perspectives, learners are born with the desire for play. In order to boost learners' willingness to learn, participants believed that play is one good strategy to use to teach learners and encourage learners to learn. Participants described how they saw play as a learning strategy as a way for learners to construct their knowledge, while also supporting learners inquiries through centres and hands-on materials. Also, participants valued and recognized the functions and benefits of adopting play as a learning strategy in their classroom. They witnessed and were able to provide examples to show how play promotes children's physical, language, socio-emotional, and cognitive development. However, participants still found that their training could not cater for their actual needs when it comes to adopting play as a learning strategy in their classroom. They found it difficult to create a playful classroom and to blend in play elements in several learning time slots. They also noted that the lack of time and space were affect the quality of playtime and school leaders and parents were not supportive, as they emphasized more on academic achievement rather than playtime. In order to successfully promote a play-based learning environment, teachers need the proper support in order to do so.

5.4. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations were made.

1. The study recommends that, early childhood educators needs more than minimal professional trainings in order to gain more knowledge on play-based learning and on how to create a playful classroom. For that reason, designers of teachers' training programs should review the current programs and make relevant adjustments, so that these programs would not just focus on the teaching of knowledge and basic skills with play-based learning but also on the link between teachers' belief and practice.

2. The study also recommends that, policy makers of Ghana Education Service under the Ministry of Education should make appropriate and relevant policy for early childhood educators to implement play in their classrooms. Thus, they need to clarify the expectations of early childhood educator and provide guidance in implementing play based learning in their schools.

3. Furthermore, the study recommends that school head teachers should reflect on their management skills; at the same time, they need to review current school curriculum and discuss with early childhood about ways to implement play elements in learner's daily routine. Also, there is a need for school head teachers to provide in-service trainings for early childhood educator, so that early childhood educator could learn more about how to set up a play-based lesson.

4. Finally, the study recommends that early childhood educators should help to enhance parents' understanding of what constitutes a quality learning environment

for learners play, thus eventually minimizing the discrepancy between teachers'
and parents' beliefs and practices about play-based learning.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

Introduction

I am Sabina Ferguson-Haizel an MPhil student of department of Early Childhood Education from the University of Education, Winneba (North Campus) researching into the topic: use and perspectives of play as a learning strategy for early childhood educators in preschool classrooms in the Tema Metropolis within the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. I am collecting data for the study above. You have been selected as one of the favourable participants as a student and teachers. Your cooperation and objective responses will provide the needed data for the study. All information will be treated with the strictest confidentiality and will be used solely for the purpose of this study.

Thank you very much for giving me the audience and allowing me to solicit your view on the topic.

Time of interview [Begins]..

[Ended]...

Date...

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SECTION A

BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF TEACHERS

As a way of starting our conversation, I want to know certain basic things about you by seeking your responses to the following questions.

1. Your sex: _____

   (Prompt: Male/Female)

2. Your age range: _____

   (Prompt: 21 – 30; 31 – 40; 41 – 50; 51 and above)

3. Your qualification level: _____

   (Prompt: Diploma in Education, Bachelor Degree, and Masters' Degree)

4. How long have you been teaching in kindergarten: _____

   (Prompt: 1 – 3 years, 4 – 6 years, 7 years and above)

5. Have you attended or received any training on play-based learning: _____
   (prompt: Yes/No)

SECTION B

ECEs PERSPECTIVES OF PLAY AS A LEARNING STRATEGY IN PRESCHOOL CLASSROOMS

1. In your own words, how would you describe your understanding of what play as a learning strategy is?

2. Can you tell me your experiences on play as learning strategy in your classroom?

a. What are some of the positive aspects of these experiences?

b. What are some of the negative aspects of these experiences?

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SECTION C

IMPLEMENTATION OF PLAY A LEARNING STRATEGY IN PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM

1. How do you incorporate "play" into the learning process in your classroom;

a. Describe what exactly happened.

b. Describe what you did to prepare the lesson.

c. Describe what you were doing.

SECTION D

BARRIERS ECEs ENCOUNTER IN THE USE OF PLAY AS A LEARNING STRATEGY IN PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM

1. Do you encounter any problem in using play as a learning strategy in your classroom? Yes/No

2. What are some of these problems you encounter?

3. Any reasons for these problems?

4. What are the implications of these problems in your classroom?

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<u>SECTION E</u>

SUPPORT SYSTEM THAT COULD BE IN PLACE FOR THE

IMPLEMENTATION OF PLAY AS A LEARNING STRATEGY IN

PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM

</div>

1. Are there any support systems in the school that enhance the use of play as a learning strategy in your classroom? Yes /No

2. What are some of these support systems?

3. In your opinion, what support system could be put in place to enhance you to use play as a learning strategy in your classroom?

4. Why do you think these support systems are needed in your classroom?

APPENDIX B

INTRODUCTORY LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA
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FES/DECE/S.6

12th November, 2021

The Metro Director of Education
P. O. Box 436
Tema

Dear Sir/Madam

INTRODUCTORY LETTER

We write to introduce to you **Ms. Sabina Ferguson-Haizel** with index number **200049415** who is an M. Ed student in the above department. She was admitted in 2019/2020 academic year and has successfully completed her course work and is to embark on her thesis on the topic: *"The use and persperctives of play as learning strategy forskills development for early childhood educators of Padmore street preschool in the Tema metropolis in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana.*

Ms. Ferguson-Haizel is to collect data for her thesis, and we would be most grateful if she could be given

the needed assistance.

Thank you.

Yours faithfully,

Samuel Oppong Frimpong, Ph. D
Ag. Head of Department

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