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Exploring play as learning: Beliefs and practices in South African Early Childhood Contexts

Pavithra Kanchana Viranna

Supervisor: Dr. Colwyn D. Martin

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Abstract

This research study explored ECCE teachers' beliefs about play and learning, and the ways in which this influenced practice in South African ECCE settings. Since play is a fundamental activity that presents several opportunities to explore the world concerning the learning and development of every child, the successful implementation of play activities in ECCE settings is largely dependent on the beliefs held by ECCE teachers. Currently, practice indicates a shift in the ECCE curricula regarding the incorporation and implementation of advanced academic skills from an early age; hence, moving away from play activities is unwarranted, considering the invaluable benefits. Play is often misunderstood as two separate concepts, rather than two interrelated concepts, thus presenting a challenge when ECCE teachers attempt to implement play as a practice. The issue of a disconnect between teachers' beliefs and their practices emanates from the current ECCE climate that emphasises the acquisition of academic skills to the detriment of gaining knowledge and skills via play activities. An illustrative case study approach was adopted to gain an incisive understanding of participants' beliefs and the practices they chose to implement in their ECCE context. Data was collected through online modes, in keeping with COVID-19 pandemic protocols. Participants of this research study, however, revealed no sign of a disconnect, as they found themselves enduring the challenges that were present in order to ensure that children received the necessary benefits from play. Hence, children were provided with daily opportunities to develop a firm foundation on which all abstract concepts will be built in preparation for formal schooling. Consequently, this research study attempted to fill the gap that existed within the field of study, and within the South African ECCE context. It is recommended that ECE policies make standard provisions for play, suited to the young child, where appropriate suggestions are offered to ECCE teachers, on the planning, implementation, and support of play practices within the ECCE setting. Future studies should be conducted, to increase the awareness of play, as a beneficial tool, implemented to aid children's learning and development during their early childhood.

Keywords: curriculum, early childhood education, play, play as learning, teachers' beliefs

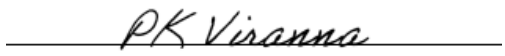
Declaration

I, Pavithra Kanchana Viranna, student number 2410193, declare that this dissertation is my own and original work.

I declare that all the sources that I have consulted or quoted from have been indicated and acknowledged by means of in-text referencing, and in the list of references.

I further declare that I submitted the dissertation to originality checking software and that it falls within the accepted requirements.

Lastly, I declare that I have not previously submitted this work or any part of it, for examination at any other higher education institution.



Pavithra Kanchana Viranna

30th June 2022.

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Acronyms

COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease of 2019
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DoSD	Department of Social Development
ECCE	Early Childhood Care & Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education & Care
Grade R	Reception Year. Children aged 5-6 years.
Grade RR	Grade 00 – Children aged 4-5 years. This is the year before Grade R.
NCF	National Curriculum Framework
NELDS	National Early Learning and Development Standards
NIECDP	National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
Stats SA	Statistics South Africa
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
UNCHR	United Nations Commission on Human Rights
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

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Chapter One – Introduction to the Study

1.1 Introduction

The *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child* (1990) was designed to promote and protect the rights of every child. It stipulated that children should be provided with quality services, appropriate resources, and guidance to support their holistic development, especially during their early years which are the most critical periods of their development. Therefore, it is necessary for children to receive this support during their early childhood years of learning and development in order to avoid having to 'catch up' in later years. However, the current situation in South Africa, as a result of the legacy of apartheid, reveals that there is still an alarming number of children under the age of 6 years who do not have access to basic early childhood education (ECE) services, in addition to clean drinking water, basic food for sustenance, and safe facilities in which to learn (Stats SA, 2018). While Harrison (2020) believe that learning through play is an effective way to stimulate children's learning and development within the early childhood curriculum, it is also important to note that such forms of quality education and care were not always available to every child living in South Africa.

Prior to 1994, South Africa was racially divided for many years by the apartheid system, enforced upon by government legislation (Atmore, 2013). These racist practices not only brutalised and separated the majority of citizens of South Africa, but also played a major part in creating a country filled with several socio-economic inequalities which affected the majority of Black children (Nel, 2007; Murris, 2019). The history of the current Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programmes and services can be traced to the 20th century, where high infant mortality rates encouraged parents and community members to come together to establish specific childhood education and care initiatives outside of the home. The apartheid regime at the time believed that there was no need to educate the 'Bantu' – they were only allowed to perform unskilled lowly-paid jobs for their European bosses. Since apartheid favoured whites, they could utilise their various advantages to comfortably afford to pay school fees, if any – ultimately securing trained teachers, advanced high-quality resources, and modern infrastructure, while most Blacks struggled to survive, let alone affording school fees – the effects of which will be felt for many years to come (Nel, 2007). Hence, quality education was provided for white children while severely limiting ECCE programmes for Black children. This resulted in many Black children underperforming in their first year of primary school, and later dropping out (Atmore, 2013). Although emphasis was placed on the importance of the ECCE programme for all children in South Africa, those from disadvantaged communities were deprived of access to such programmes that were meant to enhance their learning and development.

In 1994, South Africa saw its first democratic elections when Nelson Mandela was elected as the first Black President (Steyn, Hartell, & Harris, 2016) who firmly believed that children's needs should be made a priority by enhancing education and care processes and facilities, while providing work opportunities for women to uplift their lives. Hence, new goals for ECE emerged out of the struggle for freedom which intended to "sort out the lack of nurturing, educative and supportive environment for formerly severely disadvantaged children" and to ensure that current practices would be more holistic and culturally-appropriate for South African children, rather than adopting existing Western models (Nel, 2007, p.6). In addition, Mandela and his wife, Graça Machel (UNICEF, 2001), promised all young children in South Africa the best quality education to develop their full potential, and become meaningful participants within their communities and in the wider global society. While the people of South Africa strived to work together to redress the inequalities of the past, children's wellbeing and future learning and development, was very much dependent on their parents' support (Nel, 2007; Steyn et al., 2016; Murris, 2019). Researchers believe that South Africa has made significant progress since apartheid; however, there is still a long way to go until all children's needs are met effectively to produce high-performance outcomes (Atmore, 2013). At present, about 28 years later, many South African children are still affected by the various socio-economic inequalities – the ripple effect of the legacy of apartheid – which continues to act as barriers to children's access to ECCE thus impeding their learning and holistic development. Nevertheless, South African ECD policies such as the *NELDS* (DBE, 2009) have identified the institution of ECCE as a key elixir in the socio-economic transformation and development of the country – thereby, serving as a means to address past inequalities, and to ensure that all children's rights are met adequately.

In addition to recognising children's right to equal education and the striving for an adequate standard of living that contributes to their holistic development, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights of 1990 (UNCHR) has recognised the role of play as a fundamental right of every child – stating that children should freely engage in play activities at an age-appropriate level, which is essential for their optimal learning and development. Similarly, the *National Curriculum Framework* (NCF) recognises that every child is born with the right to experience "daily opportunities to play with a variety of objects" (DBE, 2015, p.13). Moreover, these opportunities to play also facilitate the development of knowledge and skills, including that of sensory experiences, the development of new languages, motor skills, cognition, as well as hands-on exploration opportunities to learn through action. Several researchers agree that play is a universal phenomenon through which children of all ages, cultures, and genders, are provided with the opportunity to enhance their learning experiences, while participating in enjoyable voluntary play activity (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Leaupepe, 2010; Dako-Gyeke, 2011; Singer, 2015).

Furthermore, play leads to the development of essential skills within the various domains which is necessary to enrich one's life via the acquisition of knowledge, skills and values constructed within play

opportunities (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015; Irvin, 2017). In addition, Vygotsky (1978) maintains that "play contains all the developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play it is as though the child were trying to jump above the level of his normal behaviour" (in Bodrova & Leong, 2015, p.371). Likewise, South African early childhood policy states that ECCE practitioners "should provide opportunities to foster children's emotional, social, intellectual, physical, spiritual and moral development and to use play as the primary vehicle for achieving this" (DBE, 2001, p.39). The role of the teacher as a designer of play activities is reiterated in the *National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy* (NIECDP), as ECCE teachers are expected to understand the importance of play in the young child's learning and development before imposing and implementing their beliefs about play into practice (DoSD, 2015). Since research reveals that there is a strong link between teachers' beliefs about play and its links to learning, which affects their teaching practices in ECCE settings, we need to understand the ways in which these beliefs shape such play practices, and how they contribute to (or impedes) children's learning and development. Vygotsky (1978) adds that the social spaces in which children play are structured by teachers' beliefs which ultimately serve as predictors of success (or hindrances) of ECCE programmes. Hence, it is necessary to dissect the role of ECCE teachers' beliefs when planning play-based learning activities.

While teachers are responsible for planning and facilitating play activities within ECCE contexts, Nilsen (2021) claims that planning children's play activities is mainly influenced by teachers' beliefs that influence their decisions regarding the structure and layout of the play environment, resources to be used, and the duration of time allocated for children to play and explore. In support, Aronstam and Braund (2015) confirm that many ECCE teachers share similar beliefs regarding children's play as a basis for learning, and understanding how the role of play contributes to children's holistic development. However, merely being aware of the importance and value attached to children's play and its impact on children's learning and development is not sufficient – one is required to implement play as best practice within the South African ECCE context. While teachers attempt to understand play in relation to improving learning, they are not only confronted with the challenge of conceptualising play, but also issues regarding the implementation of play practices into the existing ECCE curriculum, in addition to meeting the expectations of both parents and ECCE centre managers (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland, & Wollschied, 2019). As a result, contradictions emerge, showing signs of a disconnect between teachers' beliefs and the practices implemented in the ECCE curriculum (Dako-Gyeke, 2011; Vu, Han, & Buell, 2015; Irvin, 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to explore the beliefs held by ECCE teachers, which is said to drive their practice, in the South African context and worldwide, in order to gain a deeper understanding of how ECCE teachers' beliefs are connected to their practices, if at all.

1.2. Research Problem

Several researchers and theorists have confirmed that children's play activities are considered as beneficial learning opportunities to promote children's holistic development (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Leaupepe, 2010; Singer, 2015; Irvin, 2017). Not only do they believe that play is a valuable activity for the young child to engage in to improve skills that foster learning and development, but they also understand that play provides the young child with a foundation to build on learning experiences to acquire knowledge in terms of developing academic and non-academic skills that will assist them to prepare for the future. However, while Stats SA (2018, 2019) confirmed that young children spend a considerable amount of time playing and developing their early learning skills, there are still 63% of children who are not exposed to any form of early learning programme at an ECCE centre. Regardless, appropriate policies have been put in place to address the educational needs of all children, thus ensuring the right to basic education for all South Africans which allows the country to expand and develop its knowledge and skills base in order to benefit the individual, and present and future generations.

Pursuant to the discourse surrounding play, there are many countries who have attempted to incorporate play into their existing ECCE curriculum. Countries such as China, Denmark, Norway, Italy, USA, England, South Africa, Ukraine and Scotland have all embraced play in their curricular frameworks or incorporated play into their national policies (Mardell, Solis, & Bray, 2019). In the South African ECCE context, policy stipulates that ECCE teachers must promote children's engagement in play activities on a daily basis to develop them holistically to reach their full potential (DoSD & UNICEF, 2007; DBE, 2015).

However, there are some teachers who struggle to grasp the concepts of *play* and *play as learning* which influences their beliefs regarding play and learning respectively. When play is misunderstood or perceived as two separate concepts, rather than two interrelated concepts, this presents a challenge when attempting to implement play as a practice in the ECCE setting. In addition to a lack of understanding surrounding the implementation of play-based practices, this challenge arises from a lack of interest (and knowledge) on the importance of play as a valuable teaching strategy; this leads to a lack of play opportunities made available to young children (DoSD, 2015). As a result, these foundational learning opportunities that are proven to be necessary for young children, are slowly disappearing, thus compromising the quality and quantity of play that has retrogressed over the years (Fleer & Hedegaard, 2010). Therefore, a disconnect exists between ECCE teachers' beliefs surrounding children's play and learning, and the practices they have implemented within the ECCE curriculum (Chakravarthi, 2009; Vu et al., 2015; Shaik, 2016).

This raises the question as to why such a disconnect exists between teachers' beliefs and their practices, and how this impacts the young child's learning and development. While the *National Early Learning and Development Standards* (NELDS) states that adults within the ECCE setting are required to ensure

children reach their full potential by providing multi-opportunities for active play (DBE, 2009), no specific guidelines have been provided for teachers on how to implement these play-based practices. Instead, this policy document explicitly states that these guidelines should not be prescriptive, but rather they should serve as examples of what ECCE teachers should observe and expect from the young child in order to reach their full potential. Therefore, guidelines provided by the Department of Social Development and UNICEF (2007) only provide ECCE practitioners with an outline of what they are expected to do, rather than a detailed explanation ensuring that they plan and facilitate such activities correctly. It is assumed that teachers already know what 'playing' is, and what children are expected to do during play; this is based on the notion that each teacher has received equal training of a high standard at tertiary level. However, the lack of detail evident in these policies and guidelines, leave ECCE teachers facing another challenge; they are confused and unsure of how to effectively implement play as a practice to facilitate quality learning in the ECCE setting.

In the South African context, most ECCE teachers have disregarded the various policies that deem *play as learning* as an important practice necessary for the young child to engage in; hence, confirming the findings from Jensen et al. (2020, p.2) and Aronstam and Braund (2015) who reveal that South African ECCE teachers prefer more "structured, predictable play and view child-led play in more recreational terms." Consequently, teachers' beliefs surrounding the value and importance of play, are unable to drive their practice in the ECCE curriculum due to increasing academic pressures that have taken precedence over the time set aside for children's play (Dako-Gyeke, 2011; Vu et al., 2015; Irvin, 2017). Therefore, researchers state that play is no longer the focus of the ECCE curriculum; it is replaced by more organised and structured activities to accommodate the shift towards academic activities and the introduction of formal learning (Martlew, Stephen, & Ellis, 2011; Phelps, 2016; Irvin, 2017). In order to investigate why such a disconnect exists, one has to understand teachers' beliefs and the various challenges that have emerged in practice, as well as how these beliefs impact on practice within the ECCE setting. Furthermore, a paucity of research exists within the field of study, and within the South African ECCE context. Therefore, investigating teachers' beliefs and the ways in which these beliefs influenced their practice in the South African ECCE setting, was a gap that I intended to fill.

1.3. Aim & Objectives

1.3.1. Aim

The aim of this research study was to explore ECCE teachers' beliefs about play and learning, and how such beliefs influence their practice in the South African ECCE setting.

1.3.2. Objectives

This research study has the following objectives:

- To establish ECCE teachers' beliefs about play and learning;
- To determine how teachers' beliefs about play support children's learning;
- To assess the integration of play-based learning in early childhood contexts; and
- To analyse factors that support or constrain the implementation of play-based learning in ECCE contexts.

1.4. Research Questions

The main question of this research study was:

- In what way do ECCE teachers' beliefs about play and learning, influence their practice?

Sub-questions emerging from the central research question, included the following:

- What are teachers' beliefs about play?
- What are teachers' beliefs about learning?
- Where do these beliefs about play and learning emanate from?
- How do teachers' beliefs about play support children's learning?
- How do teachers integrate play-based learning in early childhood contexts?
- What are the factors that support or constrain the implementation of play-based learning in ECCE contexts?

1.5. Rationale for the study

Several researchers and theorists assert that play is learning which develops critical skills necessary for children's current and future learning and development (Smith, 1995; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Hujala, Helenius, & Hyvönen, 2010; Leaupepe, 2010; White, 2012; Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Singer, 2015; Smit, 2015). However, there are many parents, teachers, and management staff who believe that play is purely for pleasure purposes; this emanated from them not adequately involving young children in play activities (Stegelin, 2005; White, 2012). These stakeholders are unaware of the academic and non-academic benefits that children attain as a result of engaging in play (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). Whether children are playing independently, playing with others, or using various resources and materials in their play, they are ultimately developing sensory-motor abilities and academic skills necessary for formal schooling, in addition to gaining social and interpersonal skills, self-confidence, resilience, and independence. Therefore, researchers' perspectives regarding the value and benefits of *play as learning* for young children's learning and holistic development serve as the foundation upon which this study is based.

During my final undergraduate year I attended a student exchange programme in Norway where I was able to observe young children learning through play and developing both academic and non-academic skills. This provided me with insight into Norwegian play practices regarding Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), which enabled me to recognise the great developmental value and contribution of play in children's learning and development (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017). These experiences encouraged me to compare the play practices in Norway to that of South Africa within a mini-research study conducted while pursuing my Bachelor of Education degree. My aim was to ascertain whether a possible balance could be established within the ECEC setting that would allow children to benefit from risky play (as observed in Norway) within a safe-play environment (as promoted in South Africa).

Pursuant to these experiences, I continued investigating variables within the ECCE area of play during my Bachelor of Education (Honours) degree. Specifically, I focused on aspects that related to theories of play, the development of play, play and learning, and understanding that play is learning. These aspects ignited my interest and motivated me to thoroughly investigate the concept of *play as learning* in terms of its contribution to children's learning, instead of focusing on isolated aspects within the ECCE setting. On one hand, this conceptual research study assisted me in identifying the positive attitudes towards play which encouraged researchers, theorists, parents and teachers, to support the notion of *play as learning* which provided children with a variety of experiences to play alone or with others, within an exciting and stimulating play environment. On the other hand, some researchers, theorists, parents, and teachers expressed their concerns by displaying negative attitudes towards *play as learning* by creating an

erroneous dichotomy between 'play' and 'learning'. However, it was important to note that the benefits of learning through play, by far, surpassed its perceived 'disadvantages'.

Based on my understanding via investigating aspects of children's play in ECCE spaces, I was motivated to further my studies into children's play as learning, with the focus being on teachers' beliefs regarding play and learning, and how these beliefs influenced their practice. Exploring ECCE teachers' beliefs and perspectives on *play as learning* provided researchers, theorists, teachers, and policymakers with an incisive understanding of play, how teachers' beliefs and perspectives influence how play is implemented as a practice, and the challenges that teachers are confronted with concerning its implementation in the South African ECCE context. Moreover, it was beneficial to conduct this study in order to expand my own understanding of children's *play as learning* – not only from the perspective of teachers within the field, but also from a local perspective, rather than mainly relying on international literature within the ECCE setting.

As a researcher, I was intent on building on my current knowledge and contributing to the field of early childhood education – more specifically, the subject of *play and teachers' beliefs*. Therefore, this research study will benefit teachers, parents, children, professionals, as well as curriculum developers in that it will precipitate, among other advantages, open-ended and enquiry-based platforms to deliberate on the aspect of play such that it will be embedded as the central focus in the South African ECCE curriculum. Currently, there is a dearth of research focusing on *play and teachers' beliefs* within the South African ECCE setting, therefore this research study envisaged filling in this gap.

1.6. Theoretical Framework

1.6.1. Research Paradigm

When embarking on a research study, it is important to consider the researcher's epistemological and ontological positions which are critical in informing the theoretical framework of the study (Crotty, 1998). For this research study, I embraced the epistemological stance of subjectivism, as well as the processes situated within the interpretivist paradigm, which is common in qualitative research. Crotty (1998, p.9) argues that "[i]n subjectivism, meaning does not come out of an interplay between subject and object but is imposed on the object by the subject" – essentially importing the meaning from elsewhere. From the subjectivist perspective, the meaning that we assign to an object, action, or situation is influenced by our dreams, beliefs, values, and religious or cultural backgrounds. Therefore, this study's epistemological stance considered the beliefs held by ECCE teachers, and the meaning they assigned to 'learning through play' on the basis of these beliefs. Additionally, I adopted a relativist ontological position for this research study, as "the purpose… from a relativist ontology is to understand the subjective experience of reality

and multiple truths" (Levers, 2013, p.2) by understanding teachers' perspectives concerning children's *play as learning*, and how their firmly held beliefs had an influence on their practices.

1.6.2. Theoretical Framework

Ultimately, the theoretical framework underpins the philosophical foundation that provides the context for one's chosen methodology. For this research study, I identified Vygotsky's (1987) contribution to contemporary theories of play, and how his views have played a significant role in understanding play and its effects on a young child's development. An understanding of Vygotsky's (1929) theory of the Cultural-Historical Development of Higher Mental Functions, and how play fits into this theory, was necessary in recognising how theory can shape ECCE teachers' beliefs, and the ways in which these beliefs influence their practice (Renick, 2009; Phelps, 2016). While Vygotsky (1987) acknowledged the critical role of teachers during play, the process where teachers encourage and support children to reach higher levels of performance motivated children to imitate others, and hence develop higher mental functions within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In an attempt to create a diverse classroom community on which teacher-child relationships and interactions are built, teachers' beliefs and values become shared with the next generation (Chakravarthi, 2009; Renick, 2009; Clevenger, 2016).

Additionally, it was necessary to discuss a theory on beliefs as this would provide insight into how ECCE teachers' beliefs are constructed, where such beliefs emanate from, and the ways in which these beliefs influence the practices that teachers implement within the ECCE setting (Mo, 2020). Researchers suggest that, while teachers are not necessarily aware of their beliefs, such beliefs guide teachers' behaviour, and have the potential to affect teachers' planning, interactions, and their ability to make astute decisions (Nilsen, 2021). Since teachers' beliefs were considered to be subjective (reflecting one's personal judgement), it was expected that play practices implemented in ECCE settings reflect signs of these beliefs in terms of importance and value of play. However, this was not always the case, due to several challenges that emerged during the implementation of teachers' practices which were connected to their beliefs. In order to understand teachers' beliefs in context, and to make-sense of the disconnect between their beliefs and practices, it was important to understand how and where these beliefs originated. Hence, Mo (2020, p.56) presents a theoretical model used to analyse teachers' beliefs by highlighting four key components: "theoretical beliefs, action beliefs, context beliefs, and beliefs about teachers' roles". Essentially, this theoretical framework allowed me to understand the basis of teachers' beliefs, before focusing on how teachers' beliefs influence their practice in the face of the challenges that may be present within the South African ECCE setting.

1.7. Research Methodology

This research study which is situated within an interpretivist paradigm was empirical in nature as it aimed to understand teachers' beliefs about the concept *play as learning* within the South African ECCE setting. This paradigm proved to be ideal for this study as it emphasised participants' views in order to understand what influenced their beliefs and practices within the ECCE setting (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2020). Additionally, a qualitative research method was considered most suitable for this research study (Creswell, 2014) as it explored the beliefs and perspectives held by ECCE teachers regarding children's play as learning. Also, an illustrative case study approach was chosen which is often associated with qualitative research – especially within the education context (Merriam, 1998). By adopting this approach, I aimed to gain a deeper and rich understanding of a group of participants (i.e. ECCE teachers) within their respective contexts; namely, the ECCE setting in order to understand how their beliefs about play influenced the practices they chose to implement, if implemented at all (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Rashid, Y., Rashid, A., Warraich, Sabir & Waseem, 2019; Tomaszewski, Zarestky, & Gonzales, 2020).

In order to understand how ECCE teachers derive meaning regarding children's play as learning, it is best to explore their beliefs in context (Walton, 2021). The research context included both advantaged and disadvantaged ECCE settings within the Gauteng Province (South Africa) which were chosen for a more nuanced understanding of teachers' beliefs concerning the role of play. Participants' ECCE settings were identified as 'advantaged' or 'disadvantaged' on the basis of their available resources, support, programmes, and services, or a lack thereof (Britto, Yoshikawa, & Boller, 2011). There were eleven (11) ECCE centres in total, including five (5) advantaged ECCE settings, and six (6) disadvantaged ECCE settings. Given the current circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, it was suggested that this study should migrate towards online modes of data collection. On one hand, it would have been ideal to observe ECCE teachers in their respective physical settings, and to see how they plan for play; however, online modes proved to be useful and efficient – especially for participants who are unable to meet face-to-face, and for those who feel uncomfortable when someone is observing them (Roller, 2021). Therefore, data was elicited through an online survey via Google forms, together with one-on-one online semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom; thus, allowing for the data production process to occur in two stages. Participants from disadvantaged ECCE settings who did not have email addresses or access to the internet, completed their surveys and interviews over the phone – which still proved effective.

Twenty (20) participants were selected via convenience sampling for the first stage to gain a broad understanding of their beliefs about play and learning, and to understand the ways in which these beliefs influenced their practice within the South African ECCE setting. Thirteen (13) participants were from advantaged ECCE settings, while seven (7) were from disadvantaged ECCE settings. These participants were selected from ECCE centres within the Gauteng Province on the basis that they were qualified

teachers of children between the ages of 3 and 4. Children between the ages of 3 and 4 are categorised as 'young children' as per stipulation in the *NELDS* policy document (DBE, 2009). Young children in this age group are seen to progress at a faster pace regarding the development of their cognitive skills, senses, and abilities, before moving towards Grade RR, and formal schooling in the years to follow (Goldstein & Naglieri, 2011). The data obtained in stage one was analysed, and used to inform the interview questions used in stage two. Thereafter, eight (8) participants were purposively selected from the initial sample to participate in the semi-structured interviews that followed as it was believed to make a greater contribution towards the research study (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Data triangulation was achieved through the utilising two different data production methods – surveys and interviews. Lastly, the collected data was analysed and categorised meaningfully through the thematic analysis approach, after which coding and the grouping of themes were allocated to collective parts of the data in relation to the research questions and the research study as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012; Struwig & Stead, 2017).

1.8. Chapter Outline

This dissertation comprised of five (5) chapters. Each one is outlined below:

Chapter 1: This chapter presented the background of the study, the problem statement, aim, research questions, and the rationale for attempting this study.

Chapter 2: This chapter provided a review of the empirical literature on the history of play, ECCE and teachers' beliefs about play and learning, and the challenges faced by ECCE teachers when implementing play as a practice in the ECCE setting. The review of the existing literature also focused on the study's aim, objectives, research questions, local and international perspectives of ECCE, and included an exposition of the relevant theories which underpin this study.

Chapter 3: This chapter explained the research methodology in order to answer the research questions of this study. Further, descriptions of how the data was collected, analysed, interpreted and recorded were provided. Lastly, aspects of trustworthiness and ethics were outlined.

Chapter 4: This chapter highlighted the results and findings of this research study. Also, a discussion on the extent to which the reviewed literature was able to address the research problem in relation to the data collected, was presented.

Chapter 5*:* This final chapter presented the concluding remarks and observations on what this research study was able to achieve, including the limitations, recommendations, and suggestions for policy and practice, as well as future studies.

Chapter Two – Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

2.1. Literature Review: An introduction

Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson (2006) maintain that there are several views on play as a strategy in ECE spaces which have impacted on practices and the development of the ECCE curriculum. Research reveals several benefits regarding the value of play for young children's learning and holistic development as it is considered "the most developmentally appropriate way for children to learn" (Dako-Gyeke, 2011; Vu et al., 2015, p.447; Irvin, 2017). However, the extent and quality of play practices are measured according to teachers' beliefs which guide their actions (Chakravarthi, 2009). These beliefs, held either consciously or unconsciously (Chakravarthi, 2009), appear to be capable of shaping the ECCE curriculum (Shaik, 2016), in addition to teachers' commitment to planning and enacting creative and interesting play practices. However, studies have shown that teachers are faced with several challenges (e.g. academic concerns, parental attitudes and beliefs, teacher education and qualifications, structural challenges, and children's behaviour) (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019) when implementing play according to the ECCE curriculum guidelines and classroom practice, regardless of whether they believe play to be beneficial and essential to the young child's learning and development. Hence, one needs to consider the beliefs held by ECCE teachers in order to understand whether their views influence their practice that may impact on children's learning. This literature review will first discuss the history of play, which forms the foundation for the interrelated concept of *play as learning*, followed by the beliefs held by ECCE teachers regarding play and learning; as well as the challenges faced by ECCE teachers when implementing play as a practice in ECCE settings.

2.1.1. History of Play

The historical and theoretical roots of play date back many years; yet it is not specifically tied to a time period. However, "philosophers, historians, biologists, psychologists, and educators have studied this ubiquitous behaviour to understand how and why we play" (Meran, 2019, p.1). As a result, several assumptions have been made by researchers and theorists regarding the concept of play, and early childhood education – however, many have experienced difficulties in attempt to conceptualise play. Over the years, while researchers and theorists struggle to formulate one consistent definition of play, they had no trouble identifying the list of benefits that play has to offer for the young child's current and future learning and development. Furthermore, researchers were able to recognise several types of play where each of these benefits are evidenced. In order to understand the history of play in connection with reconceptualising it in contemporary times, it is necessary to unpack the concept of play and how it is interpreted in terms of its benefits and types that are commonly observed to date.

2.1.1.1. History of early childhood education

By viewing current practices through the lens of history, ECCE teachers gain an in-depth understanding of past practices that shaped present early childhood education policies and curricula. Additionally, ECCE teachers and curriculum developers, are able to make informed decisions as to what should be included and implemented in the daily ECE programme, how to enhance these practices, and how to avoid repeating the mistakes of previous generations. Throughout history, researchers and theorists have noted a shift in the main aim of early childhood education – moving away from the idea of 'nurturing childhood', and focusing on raising the quality of children's educational performance (Nutbrown & Clough, 2014). That is, the act of play and playful learning – once the focus of ECE – has since been replaced with formal schooling which focus on success in academic activities. Not only is play an essential part of our evolutionary heritage, it is also fundamental to children's health, and provides them with several opportunities to practise and develop new skills needed to function successfully in a complex world (Bruner et al., in Yogman, Garner, Hutchinson, Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2018). Therefore, it is necessary to understand the history of early childhood education in relation to play and learning in order to make informed decisions for the future.

It should be noted that there are a few 'experts' in history who have contributed significantly towards the development of the early childhood education curriculum (Nutbrown & Clough, 2014). Early educators such as Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, and Loris Malaguzzi – are examples of ECE pioneers (among others) who believed in the importance of play and active learning for the young child (Saracho & Spodek, 1995; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008). Therefore, the Froebelian pedagogy will be discussed, followed by the Montessori method, and the Reggio Emilia approach respectively.

First and foremost, Froebel used play as a means through which children learnt new concepts and skills, in line with the educational approach he developed for the original kindergarten in 1840 (Saracho & Spodek, 1995; Sauerbrey, 2016). He analysed his observations of children's play, and used these as the foundation upon which he built the Froebelian pedagogy which was implemented in kindergarten settings in Germany, and later worldwide. Additionally, Froebel's religious beliefs underpinned the kindergarten's aims and values since he believed the kindergarten should serve as a means to support the young child's inner drive, while constantly promoting learning from their own actions during play (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Sauerbrey, 2016). While many believed that play was a meaningless act which children indulge in, Froebel specifically pointed out the importance and advantages of incorporating play practices within the early childhood setting – which many educators and theorists soon acknowledged and followed. However, Froebelian pedagogy is not a universal approach; ECE also requires teachers to observe the development of each individual child – thus, placing the child at the centre of this pedagogy.

Essentially, Froebelian pedagogy aims to support children as they learn through play, in addition to building their inner drive, while the teacher gently guides the child. Therefore, early childhood teachers should avoid implementing rigid control systems to manage children's behaviour, but should rather facilitate children's activities in a gentle manner, while offering astute guidance and support (Sauerbrey, 2016). In this supportive role, teachers were advised not to interrupt children while they were engaged in playful activity. They were required to plan and prepare relevant materials that children would play with in a manner that was unobtrusive. Hence, Froebel eliminated any form of 'free play', and introduced specific play materials or 'gifts' (such as a ball, bowl, cylinder, cube, and boxes) to influence children's play which included games, craft activities, and songs. Children were allowed to interact and engage with the materials and explore its properties, while also viewing certain shapes as representatives of practical life, beauty, and mathematical insights (Saracho & Spodek, 1995; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Sauerbrey, 2016). Despite all the historical underpinnings that influenced migration to the new ECE approaches, Froebel's ideas of the child as an individual, and a creator of his own knowledge and actions, are still relevant among modern theories and pedagogies. However, this widely recognised approach is very rarely used today (Sauerbrey, 2016).

Sauerbrey (2016), along with other researchers, claim that Froebelian pedagogy shares some similarities with Montessori's ideas (Saracho & Spodek, 1995; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008). For example, Montessori also derived her plan and method for early childhood education through observations of children's play experiences, especially when they engaged with concrete play materials. Hence, both pedagogies focus on the child's inner drive to participate in playful activity, while interacting and exploring the materials carefully selected by each pedagogue (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008). However, any form of free play (to ensure that children developed an understanding of the materials, its properties, and its use in relation to their daily lives) was discouraged by both pedagogies (Saracho & Spodek, 1995; Sauerbrey, 2016; Taggart, Fukuda, & Lillard, 2016). Nevertheless, there are certain aspects of the Montessori method that differ slightly from those of Froebel.

Montessori is considered to be one of the greatest contributors to the philosophy and practice of early childhood education (Elkind, 1983). The Montessori method considers several elements: child-sized furniture, blocks and bars, and miniature models that represent real-life objects. These have now been incorporated into ECE in the South African context and globally. After observing how children play and interact with pretend-play materials, Montessori concluded that children were more interested in materials that represent the real-life activities performed by adults in their community, rather than pretend-play materials that have little to no importance to authentic situations (Taggart et al., 2016). Therefore, Montessori selected a specific set of materials for children to explore – those suited to their intellectual needs, during their 'sensitive periods' in order to expand their knowledge and improve their sensory

awareness at certain stages of their childhood (Elkind, 1983; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008). While the typical pretend-play materials were not present in Montessori schools, the Montessori method still encouraged children to embrace their playful nature through more structured playful activities (Taggart et al., 2016). The Montessori method relied on the notion that teachers should demonstrate to children how to use materials in a structured manner to avoid 'loose' forms of play. If children do not adequately understand the properties of the material, and the manner in which these materials should be manipulated, then the value of the material is lost. From this Montessori perspective, stakeholders become aware that play has "an adaptive, preparatory function" that goes far beyond the classroom setting which contributes to future learning; hence, play is considered to be the "child's work" (Elkind, 1983, p.5). Consequently, all forms of imaginative and fantasy play were excluded in Montessori schools on the basis that such fantasy stories, materials, and games, provided children with a false view of reality by presenting ideas that did not exist in reality (Elkind, 1983). Instead, Montessori ensured that children were provided with opportunities for more practical activities, such as preparing real food, and making use of real knives and dishes, thus enabling them to develop their independence and better adapt to the real environment (Taggart et al., 2016).

The Montessori method, and the theories and perspectives proposed by several other educational psychologists, influenced Malaguzzi's views, and gave rise to the Reggio Emilia approach (Fraser, 2007; Foerch & Iuspa, 2016). For example, Malaguzzi considered Montessori's views surrounding the teacher as a facilitator where children were encouraged to be independent in the school setting, and to engage with the materials and tools to explore and further their learning. Moreover, Montessori's use of appropriate, child-sized furniture in classrooms showed respect and concern for the child, which is a value that Malaguzzi recognised and intended to incorporate into his pedagogical approach (Foerch & Iuspa, 2016).

Also drawing on Froebel's pedagogy, John Dewey (1952) recognised the value of 'learning through play', and believed that play could be used to help children gain a better understanding of the world around them such that both children and teachers develop a respectful relationship within the learning process (Fraser, 2007; Foerch & Iuspa, 2016). Throughout the progressive era, Dewey (1952) advocated for play to be accepted as a 'vehicle for learning' for children to engage in to reach higher levels of consciousness and action. However, he also believed that children should not receive complete freedom during play; instead teachers should structure the play environment in a manner to support children's optimal and development (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). Dewey's philosophy on play as learning were later endorsed by both Jean Piaget (1951) and Lev Vygotsky (1929). Piaget believed that children were able to further their intellectual learning development via symbolic behaviour and abstract thinking if they were provided with the opportunity to explore and actively engage in the environment; such as during play (Fraser, 2007). Malaguzzi acknowledged Piaget's work, agreeing that children were able to build on their previously

learnt knowledge from 'yesterday', or they could start creating a new set of knowledge 'today' (Foerch & Isupa, 2016). In addition, Vygotsky showed support of Piaget's views; however, he believed that it was more important to emphasise the role of the adult in mediating children's experiences within the environment (Fraser, 2007). While both the child and the teacher work together to guide the child's learning within the ZPD, children were also able to develop their learning through social relationships among peers. Taking inspiration from each of the psychologists discussed above, Malaguzzi described how children should be respected and listened to by adults, and how relationships between children, teachers, parents, and the community, should be nurtured in order to benefit children within the education setting (Foerch & Iuspa, 2016).

Therefore, the Reggio Emilia approach, named after the Italian city it originated in, places children at the centre of their pedagogy by providing children with the opportunity to co-construct their understanding of knowledge and topics, especially during social engagement and experiences with others (New, 2007; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Foerch & Iuspa, 2016). This was reinforced in Malaguzzi's observations where he noticed that children's learning develops through their own engagement in activities and resources, such as in play which is significant in the development of the child, as well as in the development of social relationships in environments where the child interacts and engages. While many children enter the early childhood setting without a shared language between them, play becomes one of the many languages in which children communicate, develop shared understandings, build relationships, and express feelings and ideas (Fraser, 2007). In contrast to the Froebelian pedagogy and the Montessori method, Reggio Emilia is the only approach that does not restrict itself to specific developmental stages (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008). In addition, the following 'fundamental values' are considered to be essential components of this approach (Foerch & Iuspa, 2016): the importance for children's rights to be respected by adults such that their voices are heard; and children too, learn how to respect others as well as those within their community. Hence, listening not only shows that adults understand children's views, but that children are accepted members of society, and what they have to say is considered powerful, valuable, and meaningful. As a result, the Reggio Emilia approach is often referred to as the 'Pedagogy of Listening' where children are given several opportunities to express themselves through the 'hundred languages' (Fraser, 2007; Foerch & Iuspa, 2016). Malaguzzi (in Foerch & Iuspa, 2016, p.336) believed that "children have hundreds and hundreds of languages" which they use to communicate, express themselves, and further their learning. However, these forms of creative expression – specifically highlighted in the Reggio Emilia approach – are not only limited to words, but also to symbolic representations such as their artwork, engaging in play, singing and dancing, facial expressions, and body movements (New, 2007; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008). Therefore, teachers provide children with a variety of different materials and resources to encourage self-

expression, and to improve their daily learning; while adults take the time to recognise, interpret, and appreciate their opinions. Not only does this build up a strong image of the child in the minds of adults, but it also forms the foundation for reciprocal relationships that develop through such adult-child interactions (Fraser, 2007; Foerch & Iuspa, 2016).

Relationships between children, teachers, parents, and the community are fostered in the Reggio Emilia approach to support the development of learning (Fraser, 2007). Partnerships that exist between the child and teacher encourage them to work together in the process of learning, where the teacher determines the interests of the child in order to ensure that the child understands what is presented to him/her (New, 2007). Hence, the Reggio Emilia curriculum is not one that is pre-determined by policies or curriculum developers, but rather one that teachers structure after interacting with the children after gauging their interests surrounding a particular topic (Fraser, 2007; Foerch & Iuspa, 2016). During the learning process, parents are also valued as important role-players in the young child's education as they work closely with teachers to promote the quality of their children's learning experiences since it is believed that children's education is not only limited to their school experiences, but also extends to what they learn at home and within the community. Once the topic has been decided, the teachers set up the environment using a variety of interesting and unique materials to stimulate children's curiosity and to enhance their learning. The environment is referred to as the 'third teacher' in the Reggio Emilia approach where teachers structure activities to encourage dialogue amongst children to build harmonious relationships (Fraser, 2007; New, 2007; Foerch & Iuspa, 2016). In addition, to the environment's layout and physical structure, teachers consider aspects of lighting, space, furniture, and materials that range in size, shape, colour and texture. It is also necessary for different spaces to be allocated within the classroom setting, such as a dramatic play area or arts and crafts station, that includes all the materials that children can use to express themselves (Fraser, 2007; New, 2007). Essentially, it is believed that if children are required to spend the entire day at school, a variety of materials and spaces should be provided for them to experience and explore to foster their intellectual development (Foerch & Iuspa, 2016). Hence, teachers maximise their early childhood settings to promote children's developmental potential and their acquisition of skills, needed to help them participate as successful and active members in society.

While the Reggio Emilia philosophy is specifically linked to the environment, the focus is also on observation and documentation where teachers constantly reflect on their own planning in order to improve their practice, and document children's thoughts and learning, through videos, pictures, notes, recordings and slides – all are then used to assist teachers to plan with greater insight for future teaching-learning situations (Fraser, 2007; New, 2007; Foerch & Iuspa, 2016). As children, parents and teachers engage with such materials displayed around the classrooms, meaningful dialogue is created, topics are revisited, and misunderstandings are corrected – all of which sustain the teaching and learning processes.

Importantly, the Reggio Emilia approach encourages children to learn through project work. Generally, educational programmes force children to learn specific knowledge or skill sets to complete planned activities structured by teachers, using only specific materials as decided by the teacher. In contrast, projects in the Reggio Emilia approach allow for children to "learn to understand and internalise that knowledge," as they engage in discussions with their teachers and peers, work together in groups, share ideas and take turns, as well as assist each other in making connections with previous topics and experiences (Foerch & Iuspa, 2016, p.336). Moreover, project topics depend on children's interests, and are considered flexible in its approach as it is designed by children and facilitated by teachers. Therefore, by situating children at the centre of the Reggio Emilia curriculum, they are made to feel important, develop a strong sense of belonging as their opinions are valued, feel comfortable forming relationships with others, and are able to engage in meaningful dialogue in preparation for future success (Foerch & Iuspa, 2016).

In the South African context, the route of ECCE approaches has followed a similar path, since acknowledging and implementing aspects from both the Montessori method and the Reggio Emilia approach. While there is a lack of implementation of the Froebelian pedagogy, there are still some common aspects derived from both the Froebelian pedagogy and Montessori method that have been implemented effectively in the ECCE setting. For example, teachers are encouraged to observe children's play practices, and consider how to improve the play setting to ensure children are learning to achieve their full potential (DoSD & UNICEF, 2007; DBE, 2015). UNICEF (2018) suggests that teachers should be more involved in children's play by actively facilitating play activities, prompting them as they explore and discover, and providing them with a variety of resources and materials; rather than passively observing. Although Froebel and Montessori avoided free play opportunities, they still allowed children to play with concrete, age-appropriate materials in a specific manner, which is also practised in South African early childhood contexts. In addition, the Montessori approach adheres strictly to using child-sized furniture and materials that are commonly seen throughout most South African ECCE settings as they are best suited to the young child's needs. Aspects from the Reggio Emilia approach appear to be more common in private South African ECCE settings where the teacher is more involved in understanding and listening to the child which leads to a partnership of learning that develops between the teacher and the child as they discover and learn new aspects of play together. As the teacher takes the time to get to know the child, he/she develops an understanding of children's interests, upon which they base each of the projects that children are expected to complete. Further, the Reggio philosophy encourages teachers to organise the play environment in a specific way to facilitate and allow for children to express themselves through one of the hundreds of languages (Foerch & Iuspa, 2016). As stated in the *NELDS* policy document, the daily programme should be play-based to stimulate children's growth and allow them to develop through

different types of play by using a range of play equipment (DBE, 2009). Also, the Department of Social Development and UNICEF (2007, p.55) have recommended that children be provided with opportunities to "discover things for themselves" as they engage in free play activity. However, while the advantaged South African ECCE settings have the resources and space to organise areas such as a fantasy play area or an arts and crafts station to encourage free play; the disadvantaged South African ECCE settings share a general space in which all types of play and structured activities occur since it is easier to organise and control (Smit, 2015; UNICEF, 2018). Therefore, in consideration of the various methods in facilitating ECE, it is important to note the influence that these three pedagogies had on early childhood education as a whole.

Ultimately, the Froebelian pedagogy, Montessori method, and the Reggio Emilia approach, are considered to be among some of the more successful approaches in early childhood education. Hence, internationally, early childhood curricula have followed and incorporated the guidelines set out by Froebel, Montessori and Malaguzzi respectively (Saracho & Spodek, 1995; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Bergen, 2015). The South African context has also seen the incorporation of these pedagogical approaches (Harrison, 2020). While the Froebelian pedagogy is rarely utilised in South African ECCE centres, various Montessori and Reggio Emilia practices have been implemented, particularly in more privately-owned advantaged ECCE settings which include aspects such as play – both free and structured, observation, and documentation, all of which encourages collaboration, communication, and self-expression through a variety of media and materials, and by valuing the young child. These are a few examples of how the early childhood programme has been greatly influenced by these pioneers of childhood education, and what curriculum developers and ECCE practitioners have incorporated into practice. Hence, it is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the history of early childhood education in order to understand the roots of play, and how these historical moments have contributed to today's practices.

2.1.1.2. Classical and contemporary theories of play

Various theories of play have been introduced over the past few decades to promote the understanding of the nature of children's play behaviour which led to the establishing of 'classical' and 'contemporary' theories of play (Mellou, in Saracho & Spodek, 1998). Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to understand the history of play in terms of its theoretical roots, as they form the foundation for the practices that ECCE teachers choose to implement in the ECCE setting, which influences children's learning and development (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). "Classical theories were initiated in the nineteenth century while modern [contemporary] theories were generated after 1920" (Mellou in Saracho & Spodek, 1998, p.5; Ryu, 2003; Stagnitti, 2004; Hughes, 2009). These theories of play differed in the sense that classical theories focused mainly on reasons for play existing, while contemporary theories focused on the content of play in relation

to children's learning and development. While these approaches to understanding play varied, Dako-Gyeke (2011, p.10) reveals that "both classical and contemporary play researchers suggest that when children are supported appropriately in play, the play enhances their learning and development." Therefore, these theories of play not only inform teachers' beliefs, they also influence the ways in which teachers implement play as practice in the ECCE setting.

The earlier notions of play were classified into four categories: surplus energy theory, deficit theory, pre-exercise theory, and recapitulation theory – which together, form the classical theories of play (Ryu, 2003). The surplus energy theory was developed on the basis of children constantly having excess energy, after all their primary needs were met (Saracho & Spodek, 1998; Ryu, 2003; Hughes, 2009). After working in the classroom for a period of time, researchers believed play was a necessary activity for children to expend their energy (Stagnitti, 2004). In contrast, the relaxation theory was developed after researchers identified that children need to restore their energy, after working for long periods of time (Saracho & Spodek, 1998). As a result, play was introduced as a means for children to relax – given its "restorative function", before they were required to work again (Ryu, 2003; p.11; Stagnitti, 2004). The pre-exercise theory viewed play as an instinctive process that children participated in which prepared them for experiences they were expected to face as adults (Saracho & Spodek, 1998; Ryu, 2003). Hence, "[p]lay serves an adaptive purpose because through play the child constructs adaptive skills they will require throughout life" (Stagnitti, 2004, p.4). Lastly, the recapitulation theory was developed after researchers found an evolutionary connection between individuals' developmental stages, and their stages of human experiences. Therefore, play was used as a way for individuals to manage these primitive instincts in preparation for a more complex, modern life (Spodek & Saracho, 1998; Ryu, 2003; Stagnitti, 2004; Hughes, 2009).

While these views on play were criticised for their flaws, classical theories were still considered to be important as they set the foundation for the contemporary theories of play (Saracho & Spodek, 1998; Ryu, 2003; Hughes, 2009). Educators such as Friedrich Froebel and Maria Montessori disagreed with the classical theories of play as they believed "children learn best from self-directed activity that is linked to intrinsic motivation and adult guidance is believed to be essential to learning" (Ryu, 2003, p.13). However, Froebel favoured an informal approach to learning, and found spontaneous play to be significant; whereas Montessori followed a formal structured approach which emphasised learning, rather than imagination and pretend play.

Following from this, psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud articulated his views on play, claiming that play was a form of therapy for children to deal with their negative experiences – ultimately, serving as an "avenue for wish fulfilment and mastery of traumatic events" (Ryu, 2003, p.13). In other words, play had therapeutic and remedial values as children were able to reduce their fears, anxieties and difficulties by using play as a coping mechanism to understand and manage their problems (Saracho & Spodek, 1998; Elkind, 2008; Hughes, 2009). Although Freud believed play was important for children's learning, specifically children's emotional development (Stagnitti, 2004; Hughes, 2009), he did not consider play to be critical to healthy growth and development, as other researchers and theorists did (Elkind, 2008).

Jean Piaget's theory of play followed shortly after; he recognised play as strongly influencing children's cognitive development, thereby stimulating children's learning and assisting them in the socialisation process (Saracho & Spodek, 1998). However, researchers argue that play is not synonymous with cognitive development within Piaget's theory (Hughes, 2009). Rather, Piaget (1951, p.87) describes play as "pure assimilation" and he considers play as an adaptation of children's reality in the form of a symbolic imitation present in their imagination. In addition, he views play as 'behaviours' which children continue to repeat in order to assimilate for the purpose of pleasure (Ryu, 2003). Furthermore, Piaget has analysed play in terms of the stages of development. He determined that as children move through the stages, they develop reflex actions and adaptive behaviours, before moving on to the assimilation and accommodation of new schemas during various play situations (Saracho & Spodek, 1998; Hughes, 2009). This has resulted in the formation of a network of schemas and the development of new skills through imitation and the understanding of symbolic representation (Piaget, 1951). Thus, children are able to internalise their experiences in order to expand their network of existing schemas, and learn through play.

Similarly, Lev Vygotsky also identified play as a significant contributor towards children's learning and development in the early childhood setting (Ryu, 2003; Hughes, 2009). Vygotsky recognised that children were actively learning while they participated in practical activities that occurred within a supportive social context – in contrast to when opportunities for them to develop their skills were limited during passive memorisation and direct instruction. Hence, playful activities within the early childhood setting, were considered fundamentally social, and served a key role in developing children's thought and language, creativity, problem-solving, and social-emotional skills (Yogman et al., 2018). Vygotsky's theory and his views on play will be elaborated on in the theoretical framework.

2.1.1.3. What is play?

Throughout history, play was identified as a free and spontaneous activity in which children engaged in the fields, streams, parks, backyards, and indoor areas that served as their playgrounds (Frost, 2010). Over the years, play research has expanded significantly throughout the world, and throughout various disciplines; it highlighted children's play and its numerous benefits (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Bergen, 2015). Traditionally, researchers viewed play as an expression of children's actions, and an opportunity to create meaning of their world. It was therefore considered to be an important aspect of the ECCE curriculum (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006). At present, these views are still emphasised both nationally and internationally, within early childhood education frameworks and their respective policies. Additionally, communities in the local context have witnessed children playing everywhere and with anything of interest (Darian-Smith & Sleight, 2016) as play is believed to be both simple and complex enough for any child to engage in (Henricks, 2020). Accordingly, several definitions of play have emerged as a result of the increase in play research. However, this led to much confusion among researchers, theorists, and teachers, especially when attempting to conceptualise play, understand its role in the young child's learning and development, and implement play as a practice within the ECCE setting.

Researchers argue that play is universally recognised and is believed to "transcend history as an activity older than culture" (Dako-Gyeke, 2011; Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Darian-Smith & Sleight, 2016, p.227). However, many agree that the act of defining play and its history, proves to be a difficult task such that scholars are unable to reach a consensus (Clevenger, 2016; Darian-Smith & Sleight, 2016). Other researchers claim that the "definition of play is … in a muddle" as play appears simple but is actually viewed as complex behaviour (Smith et al., in Stagnitti, 2004, p.5). Therefore, Harker (2015, p.52) believes that "we need to stop looking so hard at play", and rather focus on investigating play, and the process of transformation that is deeply rooted in play. Alternatively, a broad working definition of play should be developed in order to provide teachers with further guidance on how to implement play in the ECCE setting (Meran, 2019). Curriculum developers should also be provided with specific recommendations on how to integrate play into the ECCE curriculum, rather than shifting the focus towards achieving academic skills (Ogunyemi & Ragpot, 2015).

While the absence of a proper definition of play exists, common features can be identified among the various definitions (Stagnitti, 2004). The majority of researchers define play in a similar way, often describing play as an intrinsically-motivated and pleasurable experience for the young child, due to the freedom and spontaneity that comes with playing (Singer, 2015; Guirguis, 2018; Yogman et al., 2018). According to Kinchin and O'Connor (in Yogman et al., 2018, p.2), "[p]lay is to the 21st century what work was to industrialisation. It demonstrates a way of knowing, doing, and creating value." Similarly, many

researchers consider play to be associated with the work of children (Piaget, 1951) which are deemed necessary for children's upbringing by building on their knowledge and skills for the future (Darian-Smith & Sleight, 2016; Irvin, 2017). Therefore, some researchers consider play to be the "cornerstone of learning and development" as knowledge is created when children play; hence, the implementation of play in the early childhood curriculum is critical (Alward et al., in Leaupepe, 2010, p.2). It can also be argued that the root of play is connected with the child's everyday life – a foundation upon which children build and construct their knowledge and understanding (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006). Not only does play come naturally to children, but it also provides them with an opportunity to learn more about themselves, their peers, as well as the world around them (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Leaupepe, 2010).

Meran (2019), among other researchers, agree that play is a naturally driven and enjoyable activity which enhances children's holistic development (Stegelin, 2005; Ginsburg, 2007; White, 2012; Whitebread, 2012; Nolan & Paatsch, 2018; Guirguis, 2018; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Play has a vital role in human development as it provides children with several opportunities to creatively express themselves, while using their imagination and fulfilling their curiosity (Elkind, 2008). In addition, play allows for children to construct their own knowledge by exploring their surroundings and the resources available to them, in order to create conceptual understandings of the world (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013). When participating in playful activities, children are constantly learning something new by exploring and developing their play ideas on their own or amongst peers (Stagnitti, 2004). Therefore, the emphasis is placed on what occurs during the process of play, rather than the end product (Smit, 2015). Hence, Vygotsky (1978) concludes that play is an essential part of early childhood, as it involves creating and enacting imaginary situations, roles, and rules, and contributes to the development of higher mental functions within the young child.

During play, children are consumed by time and space when immersed in their activity of choice such that nothing else is considered important (Yogman et al., 2018). Among their peers, children consider play to be free and equal; others are invited to collaborate and engage with their ideas which encourages them to consider alternatives collectively (Hujala et al., 2010). Researchers noticed children's intense passion to play, which is the constant driving force behind their playful activity (White, 2012), even when they have no toys, or are limited by their choice or availability of resources, or are actively discouraged by some teachers and parents. Chudacoff (in Darian-Smith & Sleight, 2016, p.227) adds that play takes on many forms: "directed and self-initiated, formal and informal, constructive and destructive", which suggests that adults can be involved in play by assuming specific facilitative roles to support the play process and contribute to the quality and meaning of play in the ECCE setting (Martlew et al., 2011; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Meran, 2019; Henricks, 2020). Ultimately, children are able to learn through play once

teachers realise their significant roles in children's play (Brooker & Edwards, 2010; Smit, 2015). Furthermore, children are more receptive towards learning new concepts and skills if teachers encourage and facilitate opportunities for play, rather than focusing on passive rote learning and common drills (Yogman et al., 2018). Therefore, ECCE teachers should understand how play has been interpreted throughout history in order to understand the nature of play, its holistic learning and developmental benefits, and how to implement play appropriately in the ECCE curriculum (Saracho & Spodek, 1995).

2.1.1.4. Benefits of play

Although the definition of play is somewhat elusive (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk & Singer, 2009), Yogman et al. (2018) claim that the benefits of play are well-documented and quite extensive, especially since play improves children's learning and holistic development. The benefits of play begin during infancy, but gradually decrease as children grow in years. However, these benefits never come to an end; instead they continuously change and adapt according to the needs of the child throughout his/her life (White, 2012). Therefore, play sets the foundation for children for lifelong-learning by providing them with the necessary skills to achieve success in the rapidly changing 21st century (Yogman et al., 2018). In addition, children contribute to their social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and moral development that are developed and supported in play (Singer, 2015; Guirguis, 2018). Since a great portion of children's time and energy is spent on play, it is no wonder that philosophers, researchers, teachers, and parents are interested in the role of play in enhancing the young child's life (Barnett, 2018).

While playing together, children are often 'challenged' when interacting with others which leads to the acquisition of new knowledge, new perspectives, and new experiences. Yogman et al. (2018, p.2) believe that "[p]lay is not just about having fun but about taking risks, experimenting, and testing boundaries." Thus, it is the teachers' responsibility to provide children with opportunities to expand their learning and improve their skills within each of the various developmental domains (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006). In preparation for the educational context of the 21st century, and for encountering problems in their daily lives, children develop creative-thinking and divergent-thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and the ability to communicate effectively which assists in self-regulating their emotions and making informed decisions (White, 2012; Whitebread, 2012; Nolan & Paatsch, 2018; Yogman et al., 2018). Therefore, playful activity not only enhances cognitive functioning but it also improves children's academic and non-academic skills such as their language and numeracy skills, social skills via peer relations, sense of autonomy, physical development and health, as well as their ability to focus on understanding a concept rather than just accepting an answer as being final (Yogman et al., 2018).

As children are actively engaged in play, they are also presented with several health benefits, including the development of their gross motor and fine motor skills, increased metabolism, and reduced weight and stress-related problems (Stegelin, 2005; Goldstein & Naglieri, 2011; White, 2012; Irizarry, 2019). While many associate play with pleasure and its so-called frivolous nature, researchers contend that children gain an increased ability of self-control, self-competence, feelings of success, as well as the development of social competence amongst peers (Stegelin, 2005; Guirguis, 2018; Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). However, children who receive fewer opportunities to play with other children may experience difficulties in joining group-play situations or making friends within the ECCE setting (Hujala et al., 2010) which disadvantages them both socially and emotionally. In support, Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson (2006) state that the act of learning through play also stimulates activities such as fantasy, empathy, communication, symbolic thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving.

Furthermore, children develop a variety of skill sets necessary for preparing for the future which are intended to optimise their development, improve their social skills, and manage stressful encounters. These skills – which are key to playful learning – encourage children to follow instructions, focus on tasks without constant supervision, and solve their own problems using negotiation and effective communication skills (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Hostettler Scharer, 2017). While school readiness programmes stress the importance of children focusing and behaving appropriately in the classroom context, the skills that children gain during play are beneficial in terms of whole-child development and in preparation for formal schooling. However, with the recent shift in emphasis towards academic activities and skills, societal pressures have forced ECCE centres to rethink their curricula, decrease the amount of time that is allocated to playful learning, and instead focus more on structured activities that will showcase their centre's academic achievements (Yogman et al., 2018). Consequently, those who are disadvantaged by the lack of play opportunities offered to them are also unable to receive the critical benefits that can foster lifelong learning and development. Therefore, parents and teachers should have a clear understanding of play and its corresponding benefits such that their personal beliefs surrounding play-based learning focuses mainly on the provision of opportunities for children to reach their maximum developmental potential through playful activities (Smith, 1995).

2.1.1.5. Types of play

Throughout the history of play, researchers have noted that children are exposed to many different 'faces' of play, in which they involve themselves, explore, and socialise amongst peers (Miller & Almon, 2009). Therefore, Hughes (in Marsh, Plowman, Yamada-Rice, Bishop & Scott, 2016) developed a taxonomy of play consisting of 16 play types to assist ECCE teachers, curriculum developers, play researchers, and other educational professionals. While such a framework proves to be a necessary tool for early childhood practitioners during their observations of play, it is important for teachers to understand that play is not confined to its specific category as they ultimately overlap during play-rich scenarios. Furthermore, having a thorough understanding of the possible types of play that children could be involved in, enable teachers to better organise the play environment with appropriate materials to stimulate and support all types of play. In addition, teachers are able to implement their beliefs surrounding play-based learning, more effectively (Miller & Almon, 2009).

In considering the benefits of Hughes' (2016) taxonomy, several other researchers have adapted and revised it by identifying the key types of play that they believe to be most common within the early childhood setting. Consequently, these broad types of play are found to differ among various studies considering the many broad definitions of play that have emerged over the years. For instance, Marsh et al. (2016) were more interested in adding digital play to the existing framework, while revising each play type to align with that of digital play, and how similar play types can be found in a virtual space. Also, Whitebread et al. (2017) reduced the list of play types to physical play, play with objects, symbolic play, pretend play, and games with rules; they claimed that these types are commonly observed among children, and are some of the earliest and most researched forms of play to evolve. Similarly, Miller and Almon (2009) identified 12 types of play; but each type overlaps with various play types found within Hughes' taxonomy. Accordingly, Table 2.1 (below) outlines the different types of play as proposed by Hughes (in Marsh et al., 2016) and Almon and Miller (2009) by listing each type of play and providing a brief description and example of each.

Table 2.1. Types of play (adapted: Hughes, in Marsh et al., 2016, and Miller & Almon, 2009).

Type of Play	***Description***
1. Communication play	Children use their whole bodies to communicate during play through words, songs, rhymes, poems, jokes, facial expressions, body movement, and gestures. Example: making up a song with corresponding actions.
2. Creative play	Children use their imagination to discover and develop new ideas, express their emotions, and create new things to play with. They also make use of various materials in which to do so. Example: creating their own puppet show.

3. Deep play	Children challenge themselves to take on new risks during play by testing their own limits, conquering their fears, and developing key survival skills in the process. Example: conquering heights.
4. Dramatic play	Children dramatise events in which they have not directly participated. Example: child takes on the role of a character from a movie.
5. Exploratory play	Children explore and manipulate various objects, spaces, textures, and materials within their play environment through the use of their senses (also known as sensory play). Example: sand or water play.
6. Fantasy play	Children fantasise certain roles that do not occur in real-life. Example: fairy godmother.
7. Imaginative play	Children pretend that certain rules that govern the physical world, do not exist (also known as make-believe or pretend play). Example: child pretends that he/she is a tiger.
8. Locomotor play	Children are constantly moving during play via games such as hide-and-seek or tag – hence, developing their coordination, sense of direction, balance, and gross-motor skills.
9. Mastery play	Children take control by repeating certain actions, until they have mastered it within the play environment. Example: digging holes in the sandpit.
10. Object play	Children interact, analyse, and play with various objects, such as building blocks, through the use of their vision and sense of touch.
11. Recapitulative play	Children explore history, evolutionary rituals, stories, and myths during play by imitating the activities of our ancestors. Example: lighting a fire.
12. Role play	Children take on roles beyond their personal roles which are associated with socio-dramatic play, which are not intense. Example: making a phone call.
13. Rough-and-tumble play	Children are engaged in physical contact, and play roughly amongst peers, but do so without injury, and in a non-violent manner. Example: tickling others during play.
14. Social play	Children decide and negotiate upon rules to be followed during play – enabling cooperation amongst the group, sharing, taking turns, and building friendships.
15. Socio-dramatic play	Children act out situations that are based on their daily lives and own personal experiences. Example: one child is the mom, another child is the dad, and the others play the baby-roles.
16. Symbolic play	Children make use of an object in place of another object, ultimately, transforming the toy or object in their imagination to suit their play needs. Example: three chairs in a row represent a bus.

Some benefits of play are considered to be universal as they develop through several play types, while others are limited to specific play types (White, 2012). For example, there are many health benefits associated with locomotor play and rough-and-tumble play which promote a healthy and balanced lifestyle through exercise and fitness, which decreases stress, fatigue, depression, and injury. Furthermore, as children are more actively involved in play, their range of motion increases, along with their balance, agility, flexibility, coordination, and gross-motor and fine-motor skills, which enables them to be more attentive at school, and to perform better in all domains. Additionally, play types such as dramatic play, imaginative play, fantasy play, socio-dramatic play, role-play, and social play, allow for children to collaborate amongst themselves, and to understand others' perspectives while agreeing to pretend and conform to specific roles within an imaginary environment or scene (Yogman et al., 2018). During this time of planning, negotiation and reasoning take place over role choices which promotes children's literacy skills by actively practising their language, as well as communicating cordially with others. Once misunderstandings arise, children are able to find solutions amongst themselves, hence developing divergent problem-solving skills, creative skills, as well as emotional and self-regulation skills, which will prepare them for future learning and development. Similarly, Vygotsky emphasises the relationship between play and learning as play is key in stimulating children's imagination to enrich their experiences, while also developing their mental abilities (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013). Lastly, object play and exploratory play encourage children to analyse and understand the nature of objects, and essentially 'get a feel' of each object and what it is capable of doing. Through the manipulation of objects, children develop their problem-solving and creative skills which lead to building a foundation for mathematics, science and technology (White, 2012).

While it is difficult for ECCE centres in South Africa to accommodate all types of play (keeping in mind the promotion of safe play, and access to sufficient materials, equipment and space), it is crucial for ECCE centres to understand the benefits that are derived from the different types of play. Pellegrini (in Treasure, 2018, p.14) believes that "[p]lay comes in different types and contexts, and it affects and is affected by each area of development: physical, cognitive, creative, social-emotional and linguistic." As a result, each child is given the opportunity to fulfil his/her developmental needs, and to improve on skills necessary for future learning – all due to the interconnectivity and flexibility experienced during the different play types. Therefore, it is imperative for ECCE teachers to not only implement play in the ECCE setting, but to also encourage children to experience a variety of play types (Treasure, 2018).

In sum, having an understanding of the historical and theoretical roots of play is not only key to understanding the current play practices implemented in ECCE settings across South Africa and worldwide, it is also necessary in conceptualising play, and understanding how to plan the play environment effectively to ensure that children receive the maximum benefits by indulging in a variety of play types. After delving into the historical and theoretical roots, one is able to understand why there is no consensus in reaching a common definition of play; this is so because important characteristics are drawn from each of the theorists' ideas surrounding play as learning, thus making it an eclectic process. Similarly, ECCE centres choose to draw on the ideas from select educators and theorists that speak to their centres' uniqueness on how they wish to stimulate learning. Specifically, in the South African context, it is evident that the Montessori method and Reggio Emilia approach are significantly influential, in addition to the ideas presented by theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky. The complexities surrounding the definition of play, have not prevented all ECCE centres from incorporating play, discovery, and forms of self-expression into their existing curriculum, since implementing various play practices to improve children's skills are necessary for their holistic learning and development. However, there are still many teachers in ECCE settings who struggle to grasp the concept of play, and are therefore unable to effectively incorporate such playful activity and practices in the ECCE setting. This necessitates the consideration of their beliefs and perspectives which influence the quality of play practices when implemented in the early childhood context.

2.1.2. ECCE Teachers' Beliefs

This study centres on ECCE teachers' beliefs about play and learning. In order to understand the full picture, one must first consider what beliefs are, and more specifically, what teachers' beliefs are. Ultimately, "[a]ll curriculum models reflect a set of beliefs and values about what is considered to be educationally and developmentally worthwhile in terms of children's immediate needs, their future needs and the wider needs of society" (Wood & Attfield, in Chitambire, 2009, p.1). Therefore, teachers and other educational practitioners require an incisive self-understanding and self-reflection of their beliefs regarding play and learning, including factors that influence these beliefs which may promote or hinder the development of the whole child (Meran, 2019). Through self-reflection, ECCE teachers will be able to identify whether their beliefs encourage a play-based learning curriculum, or whether they adhere to the specific guidelines that promote the early learning of advanced academic skills. Hence, this section will briefly discuss the general concept of beliefs, followed by a discussion on teachers' beliefs. Lastly, it is important to understand what factors – either intrinsic or extrinsic – have an influence on the beliefs held by teachers, which in turn may have an effect on practice. These factors will be discussed in order to identify where their beliefs emanate from, and how they impact on the practices implemented within the ECCE setting.

2.1.2.1. What are beliefs?

For decades, beliefs have been widely studied across various disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, business, political science, philosophy, psychology, and education (Mo, 2020). As a result, researchers were unable to agree on a suitable definition, as beliefs from different disciplines were defined in different ways. Despite the lack of a common definition, researchers were able to reach a mutual agreement that the concept *beliefs* refers to the views, attitudes, values, judgements, and opinions held by an individual – either consciously or unconsciously (Chakravarthi, 2009; Fives & Gregoire Gill, 2015; Meran, 2019). These beliefs, ultimately, play a key role in guiding and influencing one's thoughts, actions, and behaviours (Nilsen, 2021). Further, researchers postulate that beliefs are mental constructs which depict an individual's understanding of the world around them, and the ways in which they believe it should work (Faour, 2003; Chakravarthi, 2009; Renick, 2009). Therefore, one's personal attitudes, values, and experiences, are often viewed as a form of knowledge which is later revealed through one's actions (Meehan, 2007; Meran, 2019). While beliefs are considered important in understanding why individuals act and behave the way they do, teachers' beliefs – specifically ECCE teachers' beliefs – are considered crucially important when attempting to understand what influences teachers' practices within the early childhood setting.

2.1.2.2. Teachers' beliefs

In order "to understand teaching from teachers' perspectives we have to understand the beliefs with which they define their work" (Nespor, 1987, p.323). Aligned to this statement, the last 20 years has seen a notable increase in research on teachers' beliefs, as well as teachers' beliefs surrounding play and learning (Meehan, 2007; Ashton, 2014; Nilsen, 2021). It is only within the South African ECCE context that a paucity of research exists within this field of exploring early childhood teachers' beliefs. Regardless, several researchers have defined the concept *teacher beliefs* by describing the term as opinions or perspectives held by the teacher, which later forms the foundation of teachers' professional behaviour (Faour, 2003; Meran, 2019). These beliefs serve as 'contextual filters' which assist teachers when making decisions concerning the young child, their role as a teacher, the implementation of practices within the ECCE setting, and the academic content to be taught (Ryu, 2003; Chakravarthi, 2009; Wen, Elicker, & McMullen, 2011; Clevenger, 2016; Phelps, 2016; Shaik, 2016). Not only do these beliefs guide teacher on how to act and teach within the ECCE setting, but they also allow teachers to interpret and reflect on their previous practices by understanding what worked well and what needs to change, before adapting their future practices to suit their need to improve (Meehan, 2007; Meran, 2019; Nilsen, 2021).

Therefore, researchers found a strong connection between teachers' beliefs and the practices they chose to implement within the education setting, hence concluding that beliefs are highly influential in determining what teachers do and how they carry themselves within this particular setting (Fives & Gregoire-Gill, 2015). As a result, several studies have investigated teachers' beliefs in relation to their practices – essentially stating that teacher beliefs are not generalisable, but rather unique to each individual, and influenced by their personal experiences, prior knowledge, reflections of their own practices, and what they believe to be true (Meehan, 2007; Renick, 2009). Siegel and Daumiller (2021, p.1), among other researchers, strongly believe that such "[a]ttitudes and beliefs can guide thoughts and actions and may be systematically associated with different motivations (e.g. learning goals) and academic emotions (e.g. enjoyment), and thus influence learning and teaching processes." This resulted in several studies investigating beliefs as a "strong indicator as to why and how teachers adopt new teaching approaches" within the education setting (Golombek, in Shaik, 2016, p.3). In contrast, other studies revealed that various challenges emerged over the years, inhibiting the implementation of teachers' practices, which indicated that the compatibility between teachers' beliefs and practices is often lacking, and not as consistent as researchers previously recorded (Phelps, 2016). Therefore, while current views about the connection between teachers' beliefs and practices, are mixed, it is important to question what factors influence or constrain teachers' beliefs and the implementation of their practices, and under what conditions will these factors ensure consistency between teachers' beliefs and their practice? (Wen et al., 2011).

2.1.2.3. ECCE teachers' beliefs about play

Within the South African ECCE setting, the implementation of playful practices is prescribed in policies underpinning South African early childhood education. The collaboration between the Department of Social Development and UNICEF (2007), ushered in new teachers into the ECCE setting who were expected to be familiar with appropriate developmental programmes and opportunities to help children reach their full potential, specifically implementing play-based approaches while instituting a range of both teacher-driven and child-centred activities (Jensen et al., 2020). By recognising children's right to play, teachers are one of the select few who are granted the responsibility to provide appropriate materials for children's play to ensure a play-safe environment, and that they explore a range of opportunities for play, on their own or with others (Meran, 2019). Therefore, to gain insight into the play practices that teachers have chosen to implement, it is essential to explore and understand the beliefs held by ECCE teachers (Chakravarthi, 2009; Dako-Gyeke, 2011).

Researchers have maintained that play is controlled by teachers' beliefs, regardless of whether they are fully aware of such beliefs or not (Nilsen, 2021). After reviewing studies exploring ECCE teachers' views on play (Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Smit, 2015; Vu et al., 2015; Clevenger, 2016; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Meran, 2019; Jensen et al., 2020; Nilsen, 2021), it is evident that ECCE teachers' beliefs regarding play are divided.

Firstly, the majority of teachers from these studies believed that play is important for the young child to engage in as it advances children's learning and their holistic development. More specifically, teachers believed that play not only sets the foundation for children's future learning, but also contributes to the development of their gross motor and fine motor skills, their cognitive and communication skills, as well as their social and emotional skills (Renick, 2009; Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Vu et al., 2015; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Meran, 2019). For example, teachers noted that children develop self-confidence and leadership skills, problem-solving and negotiation skills, and traits involving the ability to share with others, and take turns (Smit, 2015). Therefore, these teachers believed play to be a beneficial and joyful activity, during which children were able to express themselves and freely interact with others, while determining what materials to play with, how best to use the space provided, and what rules will be used to govern their play (Meran, 2019; Nilsen, 2021). Within the South African ECCE setting, in a study conducted by Aronstam and Braund (2015), Grade R teachers situated in different socio-economic and cultural locations across the Cape Peninsula, also acknowledged that cultural differences were present in children's play and visible during interactions with each other but did not detract from the ultimate importance of play, and the process of learning through play. Consequently, teachers believed their role during play was to organise the play environment, and ensure that children felt safe and secure. If children were comfortable in their play environment, they were more likely to explore and pretend with others to reach their full potential and gain new learning experiences (Smit, 2015; Nilsen, 2021). While it was important to supervise the children, teachers believed that one should not direct or interfere in children's play; rather teachers felt that they should only provide guidance and support should the children require it, as an intrusive nature would discourage children's independent learning and discovery (Ridgway & Quinones, 2012; Yogman et al., 2018; Meran, 2019). However, it should be noted that teachers' stated beliefs and reported play methods did not correspond in practice due to the various challenges that arose thus indicating a disconnect between teachers' beliefs and their practices (Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Smit, 2015; Vu et al., 2015; Nilsen, 2021).

Secondly, in contrast, there were some early years teachers who expressed their reservations regarding the effectiveness of play, and the idea of learning through play within the ECCE setting, in a study conducted by Walsh and Gardner (2006), in Northern Ireland. These teachers believed that play was purely recreational, and offered minimal benefits to the young child (Aronstam & Braund, 2015). While the

majority of teachers believed that play contributed to children's overall learning and development, other teachers (a minority) felt that play negatively influenced children who sometimes wilted under peer pressure and resorted to bullying and other aggressive behaviours (Meran, 2019). Furthermore, they believed that the play environment was a noisy space which allowed for a 'break' from academic work where children could expend their pent-up energy (Davies, 1997; Renick, 2009). Therefore, these teachers felt that it was important to structure children's play by directing and organising children's play activities, and encouraging the use of specific materials to ensure that children receive specific benefits to further their learning and development (Walsh & Gardner, 2006; Aronstam & Braund, 2015). However, they did not feel it was necessary to plan or evaluate what children will learn during play, or how they interact and engage with others (Meran, 2019). These teachers held specific assumptions and beliefs about their roles during play. According to a number of studies conducted, teachers interpreted their roles to be more functional and rigid, rather than interacting with children during play (Davies, 1997; Chakravarthi, 2009; Renick, 2009; Vu et al., 2015; Nilsen, 2021). Apart from providing children with time, space, and materials for play, teachers were also responsible for cleaning up. This, ultimately, left teachers with "little time to play with the children", as they were required to focus more on their role as supervisors or directors during play (Vu et al., 2015; Nilsen, 2021, p.9).

Essentially, ECCE teachers' beliefs have revealed the extent to which they make play a developmental and learning experience for the young child. On one hand, the majority of ECCE teachers believe that play is important and beneficial to the whole child's learning and development, while on the other hand, the minority of ECCE teachers believe that play is a reward for children after a day of structured activities aimed to build children's formal learning skills. During this time, these teachers prefer not to be involved in children's play – as the majority of ECCE teachers would by offering their support and guidance. Instead, they consider play to be a break from academic activities, where they believe, they are only required to supervise and intervene when unruly behaviour occurs. While the majority of teachers are cognisant of the critical nature of play, and understand the importance of implementing play practices to benefit the young child's holistic learning and development (Renick, 2009; Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Vu et al., 2015; Clevenger, 2016), it is evident that a minority consider play as merely recreation.

2.1.2.4. ECCE teachers' beliefs about learning

Following from ECCE teachers' beliefs on play, teaching and learning practices are also considered as being important in all ECCE settings. After analysing studies exploring ECCE teachers' views on learning (Ryu, 2003; Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Vu et al., 2015; Clevenger, 2016; Phelps, 2016; Irvin, 2017; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Meran, 2019; Jensen et al., 2020; Nilsen, 2021; Walsh & Fallon, 2021), I gathered that some ECCE teachers have mixed beliefs or perceptions regarding the implementation of a

play-based learning curriculum – they believe that children should be introduced to formal schooling experiences from an early age. On one hand, teachers believe that children learn best through play activities that encourage creativity, exploration, and discovery; while on the other hand, some teachers strictly follow early childhood education guidelines which promote skills necessary for school readiness and academic achievement that benefit children's future learning (Irvin, 2017).

Several studies revealed that the majority of ECCE teachers believe in the importance and value that play has to offer the young child (Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Smit, 2015; Vu et al., 2015; Clevenger, 2016; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Meran, 2019; Jensen et al., 2020; Nilsen, 2021). However, many of these teachers also expressed their reservations regarding the implementation of a child-centred play-based approach, as they did not feel that this approach developed all aspects of children's learning, in comparison to a more structured, teacher-directed approach to learning (Nilsen, 2021; Walsh & Fallon, 2021). Especially in the current "academically rigorous" climate, many ECCE centres have prioritised academic performance, shifting from developing the whole child to developing the cognitive child (Clevenger, 2016, p.2; Irvin, 2017). Within the ECCE context, the curriculum is narrowed to focus mostly on developing key literacy, content knowledge, and mathematical skills that children will need for formal assessments in the years to come. Furthermore, emphasis is placed on the reproduction of content, which indicates whether children are listening to and learning the content taught. For example, the ECCE teacher repeats common topics every day such as the alphabet, the days of the week and months of the year, to ensure that children have been drilled with foundational knowledge (Phelps, 2016; Jensen et al., 2020). Many of these teachers believe that "earlier is better" in the sense that it is never too early to start learning and developing academic skills, instead of wasting energy on playful activity (Ryu, 2003, p.26). Such teachers encourage children to engage in structured activities with predicted outcomes related to excelling in academic tasks such as reading and counting (Smit, 2015).

However, the increasing pressure on teachers to begin with formal learning practices and skills development as early as possible has led to less time being allocated to play; or in some cases, the complete disappearance of play from the ECCE curriculum (Ryu, 2003; Phelps, 2016; Irvin, 2017; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). This implies that teachers will be less involved in children's play due to the demand for more structured activities. Dako-Gyeke (2011, p.11) states that an "increasing emphasis on academic skills in early childhood programs comes with both promise and threat." Consequently, children will go into formal school settings, with developed skills for literacy and mathematics. However, these academically rigorous schedules pressure young children leading to the development of anxiety illnesses and stress at an early age (Irvin, 2017). In pressuring children to meet the demands of society to produce academically advanced young individuals, children are essentially prevented from reaching their optimal development (Smit, 2015; Meran, 2019). It is evident in studies such as the PIRLS and TIMSS, that too much focus on

developing children's formal academic skills (such as, reading literacy, mathematics, and science), has led to South African children ranking among some of the weakest performing countries at an international level (Juan, Reddy, & Arends, 2019; Gustafsson, 2020). Therefore, other play-oriented ECCE teachers have claimed that teachers should still follow state guidelines in incorporating play into the existing ECCE curriculum as they firmly believe that play leads to real-learning. Not only do children improve their skills in each of the developmental domains, but teachers are also provided with the opportunity to assess children within an informal, natural play-friendly environment (Clevenger, 2016; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016).

In a study conducted by Jensen et al. (2020), Grade R teachers from the Kwa-Zulu Natal province, reflected on children's play activities centred on playing games that were in line with the prescribed curriculum content where children learnt about 'My family' and the different members that make up a family. They were later seen delegating and acting out various roles as a 'family' members – ultimately demonstrating their learning through play. These teachers view the play environment as an extension of the classroom where children apply their knowledge in practice. Such ECCE teachers suggest that a more balanced and integrated play-based learning approach is necessary to ensure that children's needs are prioritised (Walsh & Fallon, 2021).

It should be noted that teachers' beliefs can either enhance or limit children's play and learning activities, based on their chosen approach to promote children's optimal development (Dako-Gyeke, 2011). The ECCE teachers, however, have mixed beliefs concerning learning, and the implementation of a play-based learning curriculum, due to the academic shift that took place within the ECCE curriculum. Often, play is cast aside, as teachers adjust the day-to-day activities to ensure that children develop the necessary academic skills in preparation for formal schooling (Vu et al., 2015). Therefore, some ECCE teachers have suggested that they need to understand the ways in which children learn best in order to assist them in achieving their full potential. By highlighting play and learning through an integrated curriculum, teachers will be able to support the whole child, and cater to their needs effectively. Thus, teachers should consider combining aspects of play with the academic curriculum content via different modes of instruction, for a more eclectic pedagogical approach in the ECCE setting (Walsh & Fallon, 2021).

2.1.2.5. Factors influencing teachers' beliefs

After identifying and understanding the concept of *beliefs*, and *teachers' beliefs* in particular, it can be concluded that teachers' beliefs are cultivated through their personal experiences and theoretical understandings (Clevenger, 2016; Phelps, 2016). In other words, ECCE teachers' beliefs regarding play and learning are informed by their experiences, feelings and assumptions (Nespor, 1987). Pursuant to several studies that investigated ECCE teachers' beliefs, it was understood that each teacher developed his/her unique notion of play, and how it should be incorporated into the ECCE curriculum – if at all

(Meran, 2019; Nilsen, 2019). These experiences, along with teachers' prejudices, judgements and reflections on play-based learning activities, are developed intrinsically or extrinsically, and become predictors of teachers' beliefs which in turn have an effect on the practices they choose to implement within the ECCE setting. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the factors that influence ECCE teachers' beliefs to understand where such beliefs about play and learning, emanate from.

Research conducted by Meehan (2007), with early childhood teachers from Australia, demonstrates that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors have an impact on one's beliefs which determine their quality of practice. For example, one's knowledge, values, attitudes, experiences, self-esteem, and stress level influence one's beliefs intrinsically which leads to actions one chooses to take thereafter. Extrinsic factors, on the other hand, are considered to be more visible which includes one's experiences as a child, one's experiences during pre-service training, experiences as a current teacher, one's qualifications, years of teaching, child-teacher interactions, and one's understanding with the curriculum, school philosophy and other relevant policies. Studies revealed that teachers' beliefs surrounding play and how they plan to implement play, stems from their own childhood memories of play (Raths, 2001; Faour, 2003; Renick, 2009; Wen et al., 2011; Smit, 2015; Clevenger, 2016; Phelps, 2016; Meran, 2019). Teacher-respondents in Smit's study (2015) stated that their childhood play experiences were so pleasant and memorable that they wanted to do the same for the children they were teaching. Teachers also reflected on their many hours spent playing, the range of materials provided, and open areas that were allocated to play. Lortie (1975) adds that teachers' beliefs were also inculcated during the years when they were students: observing their own teachers, and later selecting and replicating key qualities and practices of the teachers they admired. In other words, teachers' university experiences, pre-service training, and the attitudes of mentor teachers and supervisors, all served as the foundation for teachers' beliefs about play and learning (Raths, 2001; Meehan, 2007; Smit, 2015; Meran, 2019). Therefore, teachers bring to the ECCE setting these experiences, along with ideas discussed in collaboration with colleagues, and their growing expectations of the optimal learning environment (Faour, 2003; Nilsen, 2021). However, these beliefs become ingrained, should lecturers, colleagues, or former teachers not support the implementation of a play-based learning curriculum (Clevenger, 2016). Fesseha and Pyle (2016) caution that the underlying beliefs of ECCE teachers could unintentionally draw children away from a child-centred play-based curriculum. Moreover, it is believed that teachers' beliefs are influenced by their cultural practices which affect their perception of play being essential to children's learning and development – based on the notion that different cultures perceive play differently. Within the South African context, this becomes more relevant, and is often internalised through the process of enculturation due to the diverse cultures that are present in the country, and the different people that teachers constantly interact with on a daily basis (Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Shaik, 2016).

In sum, ECCE teachers' beliefs about play and learning are considered to be complex to conceptualise in its entirety (Jensen et al., 2020). This is mostly due to the differing teachers' perceptions about play and learning, and how playful activity or advanced academic skills should be implemented in practice. Moving beyond their mixed beliefs, some ECCE teachers believe that the way forward, is to highlight both play and learning, in one integrated curriculum (Walsh & Fallon, 2021). However, in many cases, teachers' beliefs and their actual practices appear to be disconnected due to the challenges that have presented themselves within the ECCE setting. It is, therefore important for teachers to be aware of their beliefs in order to gain an understanding of what guides their actions. In doing so, effective practices can be implemented to promote children's optimal level of learning and development, despite any challenges that may occur (Meran, 2019). In order to understand the full picture of the beliefs held by ECCE teachers, it was necessary to explore beliefs in general, followed by the ways in which researchers conceptualise beliefs, and teachers' beliefs, more specifically. Researchers concluded that teachers' beliefs acted as filters for the decisions and actions taken by teachers. Lastly, researchers found various intrinsic and extrinsic factors that have an impact on teachers' beliefs and the practices they choose to implement which ultimately provide insight into where teachers' beliefs and practices emanate from.

2.1.3. Challenges when Implementing Play as Practice

Recent studies have shown that many researchers and teachers believe that learning through play is an effective way to stimulate children's learning and development within the early childhood curriculum (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Teachers have described various factors that support the implementation of play-based learning which offer assistance in ensuring that children receive varied opportunities to develop holistically. However, it is important to remember that not all South African children are provided with the same opportunities due to the various oppressive socio-economic disparities imposed on parents during the apartheid era (Harrison, 2020). Therefore, while ECCE teachers attempt to implement their beliefs into practice, they are faced with several challenges and barriers within the ECCE setting which leads to a disconnect between their beliefs about play, and the practices that are actually implemented (Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Vu et al., 2015; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). In most cases, parents, among other stakeholders, believe that children's academic skills should be strengthened during their early childhood education to ensure that they are sufficiently prepared for future learning. While this is one of the many challenges that restrict teachers from implementing their initial play beliefs, there are also other teachers who feel discouraged to enact their beliefs as a result of such challenges that have presented themselves within the ECCE setting. It is, therefore, necessary to discuss each of these supporting and constraining factors: academic concerns, parental attitudes and beliefs, teacher education and qualifications, structural challenges, and children's behaviour.

2.1.3.1. Academic concerns regarding curricula and policy

The implementation of any practice in the ECCE setting is mostly influenced by "factors like government policy, classroom environment, educational facilities, curriculum, teacher-children ratio, nature of play materials, access to play, and teachers' role in children's play activities" (Chowdary & Rivalland, 2011, p.183). The rising academic pressures faced by ECCE teachers can be regarded as one of the most common factors affecting the implementation of play-based learning practices, as teachers become so absorbed following "instructions from the system" and "teaching to certain standards", that little time is left for playful activities (Nicholson, Shimpi, Kurnik, Carducci & Jevgjovkj, 2014; Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Vu et al., 2015; Lynch, in Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019, p.788). This academic-oriented approach involving ECCE teachers both nationally and internationally, which instils passivity within the classroom setting, is seen to incorporate more direct instructional teaching methods which contradicts initial beliefs concerning the advantages of the play-based learning approach (Excell, 2011; Smit, 2015). Furthermore, teachers are also required to fulfil certain administrative duties, such as completing forms and lesson plans that focus on developing specific skills; despite the fact that many would rather prefer to implement and incorporate their play beliefs into the existing ECCE curriculum. Not only has this led to teachers feeling overwhelmed, due to the increasing focus on structured, academic activities; it has also brought on feelings of anxiety and stress, as teachers are required to plan appropriate content for the young children – keeping in mind that they are expected to learn specific academic skills, before the start of formal schooling (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Yogman et al., 2018; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Moreover, studies have reported an increase in peer pressure experienced by ECCE teachers, as teachers are fearful of potential conflicts, should they go against the approaches prescribed by ECCE centre management and demanded by parents, or be seen prioritising play-based activities, as opposed to predictable, teacher-centred methods (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Thus, it becomes difficult for teachers to identify an appropriate balance between play and learning activities as their own beliefs interfere in understanding the role of play in children's learning (Clevenger, 2016; Yogman et al., 2018).

2.1.3.2. Parental attitudes and beliefs

In addition to academic pressures, parents share concerns regarding the implementation of play such that they challenge teachers' initial beliefs by promoting a shift towards a more academically-focused curriculum (Smit, 2015; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Not only are they set on ensuring that their children achieve success within the academic learning environment, but also go to the extent of intervening in ECCE teachers' play practices based on what they believe to be more appropriate and safe; thus leaning towards the young child's academic development (Ginsburg, 2007; Hujala et al., 2010; Kleppe, 2018; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). In the South African context, some parents are more conservative with regards to supervising children and taking safety precautions (Aronstam & Braund 2015); hence, their

focus is on more direct instruction that takes place in a classroom setting due to their belief that play is a frivolous and risky activity (Kleppe, 2018; UNICEF, 2018; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). In other studies, parents have also demanded an emphasis on worksheets, drills, homework, and after-school enrichment programmes to encourage children to start developing the necessary skills to aid their future learning (Nicholson et al., 2014; Yogman et al., 2018; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). While teachers are forced to cast their beliefs aside to accommodate parents' wishes, children are left to deal with the after-effects of reduced play time, coupled with their academically-rigorous schedules which induce feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression (Smit, 2015; Yogman et al., 2018). Furthermore, teachers have argued that parents have not taken sufficient time to understand the role of play in the young child's learning and development as they, essentially, view teachers as babysitters since they lack knowledge about progressive approaches in ECE (Faour, 2003; Ncube, 2017; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019).

2.1.3.3. Teacher education and qualifications

It is also important to note that ECCE teachers' beliefs are influenced by their qualifications, as well as the ways in which they conduct themselves (Ncube, 2017). Therefore, the Department of Social Development and UNICEF (2007) stressed the importance of specialised training for ECCE teachers by providing a set of guidelines to ensure that they are well-equipped with the appropriate knowledge and insight to manage children and implement the necessary practices effectively. However, teachers' own limited knowledge and lack of qualifications and training, prove to be a significant barrier for some ECCE teachers as they are unable to comprehend the concept of play as learning in order to implement it in practice (Smit, 2015; Vu et al., 2015; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Based on their limited knowledge on the pedagogy of play obtained during their training, teachers believed that their role was more of a supervisor who ensures the safety of children, and only intervenes when a child is hurt (Aronstam & Braund, 2015). Therefore, UNICEF (2018) adds that many teachers are not adequately prepared to integrate play-based learning in their ECCE curricula, as they have not witnessed the act of learning through play for themselves, and do not have a clear understanding of what is expected of them. Within the South African context, tertiary education has prepared pre-service teachers with the appropriate knowledge and skills, to promote active learning through play. However, access to quality teacher education still proves to be problematic due to financial constraints, lack of resources, and the absence of professional development programmes (Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Smit, 2015; Ncube, 2017). Hence, South Africa and other countries are in short supply of well-trained ECE teachers who have an understanding of what they are doing, why they implement such practices, and how to overcome the challenges presented to them (Steyn et al., 2016; Stats SA, 2019; Harrison, 2020). Teachers with different cultural backgrounds and home languages to those of the children, may also struggle when communicating or teaching the young child. Furthermore, teachers who do not have strong foundational knowledge, will

take a longer time to complete the necessary qualifications required for them as an ECCE teacher (Harrison, 2020). Therefore, Atmore, Van Niekerk and Ashley-Cooper (2012, p.134) argue that obtaining an NQF Level 4 qualification as an ECCE teacher, does not guarantee quality care and teaching, due to "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 support after completion of training so as to ensure consistent implementation."

2.1.3.4. Structural challenges within the school setting

Furthermore, several structural changes that occur within the school setting, can affect the way in which play practices are implemented in the ECCE setting. The most common includes time constraints as play time is reduced – based on certain beliefs that *play* interrupts the focus on academic learning (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Researchers suggest that a balanced and integrated curriculum would work effectively to ensure children's optimal learning and development, such as longer periods of play-based learning, and shorter periods of teacher-directed activity (Miller & Almon, 2009). Additionally, a manageable number of children per class contributes to a positive work environment, and allows teachers to provide children with individual attention and support where necessary. However, in the South African ECCE setting, overcrowded classrooms have become the norm, leading to teachers feeling overworked, physically drained, and unable to support each child to implement effective play-based learning practices (Smit, 2015; UNICEF, 2018). Larger class sizes require additional resources to support children during play, as well as increased supervision to ensure their safety. However, most South African ECCE settings do not have the means to appoint additional staff to provide the necessary extra support (Chowdary & Rivalland, 2011; Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Hunter, 2019). Moreover, the play environment is expected to provide children with a large space that is safe and secure to stimulate children's learning during their playful activities and interactions (Cevher-Kalburan & Yurt, 2011; Smit, 2015; De Souza, Kowaltowski, Woolner & de Carvalho Moreira, 2020). While it is vital that children are offered a rich play environment in which to learn and develop their skills, one must also consider whether the ECCE centre is able to provide the necessary resources and accommodate such demands.

2.1.3.5. Children's behavioural concerns

ECCE teachers may plan for play to occur in a particular way; however, they do not anticipate the different behaviours of young children during play which presents several other difficulties to circumvent (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). When implementing practices to foster children's learning through play, it is important for teachers to consider the child's role as they play a big part in how they learn through their various experiences and interactions. While children's passion and creativity are evident during their play time, their conduct can also prove to be both unpredictable and challenging (Nicholson et al., 2014). However, studies have shown that children who engage in play, are often associated with less disruptive behaviours, and are able to negotiate with peers, and problem-solve with ease (McGinn, 2017). In contrast, children who have been subject to reduced play time, have lost their sense of creativity, and have exhibited more aggressive behaviours, including hyperactivity and being easily distracted. This has resulted in lower rates of academic achievement as children have not been given the opportunity to develop holistically through play, or refine their skills (through play) that could enhance their academic achievement (Nicholson et al., 2014). In addition, Smit (2015) contends that gender differences also influence children's play – the games that they choose to play, the materials that they engage with, and the children that they interact with. Therefore, it is expected of the teacher to provide a variety of materials to keep the interest of all children; however, this is not always financially or structurally possible for every ECCE centre within the South African context. Moreover, children who experience learning difficulties may find it challenging to participate and learn through play, which requires the teacher to utilise other innovative and creative methods that would foster their learning and development (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019).

While many researchers and teachers believe in the importance of implementing playful learning practices within the ECCE setting, ECCE teachers must first overcome the various challenges that have presented themselves. After reviewing several studies on teachers' beliefs about play and learning, it is evident that teachers are faced with demands from various stakeholders within the ECCE setting. These include parents and ECCE centre management demanding that the ECCE curriculum should be focused on children's formal learning, and the development of advanced academic skills – such as reading and writing – as early as possible. Therefore, teachers feel pressured to compete with their individual beliefs concerning play-based learning practices, and executing their duties expected of them as professionals. It can also be concluded that ECCE teachers' qualifications do not necessarily guarantee their knowledge of play and the implementation of play-based learning practices, due to the quality of training received. Additionally, several structural challenges have also presented themselves due to the nature of some ECCE settings – either advantaged and disadvantaged settings within the South African context – which differ in terms of their facilities, equipment and resources, space, and support from staff, parents, and community members.

Lastly, it should be noted that children's behaviour sometimes challenge ECCE teachers as children do not always act according to what teachers have planned for, sometimes resulting in disruptive behaviour.

2.1.4. Conclusion

After reviewing the published literature, one has developed a better understanding surrounding children's play and learning, as well as the beliefs held by ECCE teachers. First, the historical and theoretical foundations of play were discussed, followed by a closer look at how researchers define the concept of play, as well as the benefits and various types of play. Not only did this section provide insight into the concept of play, but it also set the foundation for the interrelated concept of *play as learning*, and play-based learning practices that many teachers wish to implement. Next, the concepts of *beliefs* and *teachers' beliefs* were discussed, before focusing on the beliefs held by ECCE teachers on both play and learning respectively. It was also important to consider the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence teachers' beliefs, and essentially, the practices they chose to implement, in order to fully understand where such beliefs emanate from. Accordingly, this literature review aimed to explain ECCE teachers' beliefs in relation to their practices, and concluded that teachers' beliefs have an influence on children's learning and teachers' practice. However, teachers' beliefs are considered complex to conceptualise due to the mixed views held by them concerning playful activity and advanced academic skills. As a result, several challenges have emerged due to a disconnect between teachers' beliefs and their actual practices implemented within the ECCE setting. The most common challenges emanated from stakeholders pushing for more academic skills to be facilitated in the ECCE setting. While South African ECCE policies encourage daily play activities, it is important to remember that the ideal play environment, filled with stimulating play materials, is not always available at every ECCE centre within the South African context, due to their financial situation, location within the country, and support received from various stakeholders and community members. Understanding each of these aspects, however, is key to understanding teachers' beliefs, which in turn, influence their practices implemented within the ECCE setting.

2.2. Theoretical Framework: An introduction

The history of play dates back to several centuries ago, but the views of various theorists, researchers, and teachers have been influenced significantly by experts from the past (Hughes, 2009; Meran, 2019). For instance, Lev Vygotsky's contribution to the contemporary theories of play has significantly influenced our understanding of play, and its effects on the young child's learning and development. Vygotsky was known as a developmental psychologist, interested in understanding how learning and development were related, which led to the development of his own theory of play (Wertsch & Sohmer, 1995). To understand his views on play, it is necessary to discuss Vygotsky's theory, and show how play fits into his overall explanation of learning and development. In addition, it is also important to include a theory on beliefs, as this informs the construction of ECCE teachers' beliefs which contributes to one's understanding of play as a practice within the ECCE setting from the teacher's perspective (Levin, 2015; Nilsen, 2021). Therefore, this research study adopted the theoretical model proposed by Mo (2020) which I used to analyse teachers' beliefs in conjunction with Vygotsky's (1929) theory. Not only does this theoretical model focus on classroom practices and social practices that teachers are known to engage in and implement, but it also considers where these practices emanate from and how they are shaped.

2.2.1. Vygotsky's Theory (1929)

Vu et al. (2015, p.444) claim that theorists such as Vygotsky "have long held that play is an important mechanism for healthy development across the lifespan. Yet the role of play as THE mechanism of learning is found most prominently in early childhood." Much of the contemporary research on play was built on Vygotsky's theory (Whitebread, 2012) which recognised the critical role of teachers in enhancing children's learning and development through play activities (Phelps, 2016). Not only does play respond to the child's holistic learning and developmental needs, but also, according to Vygotsky, children's imagination during play, which also serves as a means to cope and possibly solve real-world problems that children may be facing (Henricks, 2020). It is, therefore, the role of the teacher, to provide appropriate play-based learning experiences to stimulate the development of children's higher mental functions, and to facilitate learning that pushes them beyond their capabilities (Anderson Nugent, 2017). Consequently, it is necessary to explain Vygotsky's theory and to show how his philosophy of play fits into the study under investigation. Moreover, researchers state that one is able to understand how Vygotsky's theory shapes ECCE teachers' beliefs, and as a result, influence their practice within the ECCE setting (Renick, 2009; Phelps, 2016).

2.2.1.1. Vygotsky's theory of Cultural-Historical Development of Higher Mental Functions

Vygotsky's (1929) theory of the Cultural-Historical Development of Higher Mental Functions states that human beings' biologically-given elementary mental functions are transformed into higher mental functions through the mediation of psychological tools, such as speech, signs, mnemonics, and language. Vygotsky found that some of these functions develop quicker than others, thus indicating a time lag between developing (maturing) and developed (matured) mental functions. Hence, Vygotsky characterised the 'distance' between these functions as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). He further argued that instruction should take cognisance of this zone and consequently be directed at the maturing functions, rather than the matured functions – ultimately, claiming that instruction can 'push' the development of maturing functions (Chaiklin, 2003). From this perspective, Vygotsky believed that a 'didactic relationship' is developed between the individual and the societal context as a result of their social interactions, and engagements with various tools and materials (Phelps, 2016). Therefore, emphasis is placed on the role of teachers and their involvement in children's social interactions to ensure that children acquire the necessary skills and master activities that will contribute to society's advancement (Chakravarthi, 2009; Smit, 2015; Clevenger, 2016; Phelps, 2016).

It is during this reciprocity between teachers and children, that the ZPD is created – allowing both teachers and children to learn from each other, and for teachers to advance children's learning and development (Phelps, 2016). Essentially, children begin to imitate others and develop their higher mental functions. As a result, they do more in the intellectual sphere than what they are capable of doing independently (Vygotsky, 1987). Therefore, Vygotsky's theory "establishes reciprocal, co-construction of knowledge with others" as both teachers and children bring their experiences, interests, and abilities towards creating a diverse classroom community upon which their relationships and interactions are built (Phelps, 2016, p.7; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). This collaboration between teacher and child is identified by Vygotsky (1987) as a transmission of culture where teachers' beliefs, traditions, and values, are transferred to the next generation, ultimately providing a unique outlook on their teaching and learning practices (Chakravarthi, 2009; Renick, 2009; Bergen, 2015; Clevenger, 2016; Phelps, 2016; Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Vygotsky's perspective becomes significant in a culturally-diverse context such as South Africa, as individuals' understanding of particular phenomena may differ in terms of where the curriculum's focus should lie, based on their own cultural backgrounds (Aronstam & Braund, 2015). In the context of this study, teachers' beliefs regarding play-based learning, and the implementation of play-based practices within the ECCE setting, are only considered important and valuable for the young child's learning based on teachers' own cultural practices. Thus, Vygotsky (1978) confirms that teachers' cultural context has the potential to influence children's interests and their play practices by shifting the focus of the ECCE curriculum to suit a more academically rigorous approach. Researchers argue that "[t]eachers' practices

and interactions with children are not universal, but in fact, a product of their classroom communities, and personally and pedagogically developed perceptions and beliefs" (Phelps, 2016, p.8). Therefore, it is important for all teachers to have a clear understanding of the phenomena they wish to implement in practice. Once these beliefs are shared through collaborative engagement, children can reproduce this knowledge in various formal and informal contexts, including their school, homes, and community (Aronstam & Braund, 2015).

2.2.1.2. Vygotsky's views on play

Within the Vygotskian (1978) perspective, the ZPD is also created during play as children "tend to behave above their average age and above their daily behaviours" (Irvin, 2017, p.4). Therefore, Vygotsky considers children to be active participants during play, specifically emphasising the social interactions that occur during play (Clevenger, 2016; Henricks, 2020). While practising what they know in play, children attempt to solve their own problems, and in the process construct new knowledge by receiving assistance from an adult or peer, which occurs within the ZPD (Aronstam & Braund, 2015). Ultimately, "[t]hese experiences provide an avenue for the development of mental processes and skills which are predecessors for learning to read and write" (Roskos & Christie, in Anderson Nugent, 2017, p.28). Therefore, Vygotsky (1978) observes the growth of children's holistic skills, as well as the development of their abstract thoughts when using their imagination creatively in play (Walther, 2019; Taylor & Boyer, 2020).

The characteristics of play as identified by Vygotsky (1978) include children creating imaginary situations, then acting out roles within that situation which are governed by specific rules – all of which contributes to the development of higher mental functions in children (Ryu, 2003; Martlew et al., 2011; Clevenger, 2016; Hostettler Scharer, 2017; Irvin, 2017). Importantly, children base their imaginary situations on their real-life experiences as play offers opportunities for self-reflection (Saracho & Spodek, 1998; Anderson Nugent, 2017). In some ways, children use play as an escape from reality in order to solve problems that they could not previously understand. Therefore, Vygotsky (1978) views play as a 'transitional stage' where children are encouraged to further their thinking abilities by moving from sensory motor and visual representation to more complex symbolic thought (Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Hostettler Scharer, 2017). In this sense, Vygotsky argues that "play is the leading source of development in preschool years" as children are encouraged to advance their learning and developmental abilities while participating in spontaneous, yet enjoyable activity (Vygotsky, 1978; Ryu, 2003; Bodrova & Leong, 2015, p.376; Taylor & Boyer, 2020). However, it should also be noted that Vygotsky limited his view on play to dramatic and make-believe play as he believed children were able to develop their cognitive, social, and emotional domains respectively, within these types of play (Clevenger, 2016).

As teachers engage with children within the ZPD, they attempt to understand the young child's current capacity, and assist them in moving beyond this point (Hughes, 2009; Anderson Nugent, 2017). Therefore, it is important for the teacher to select developmentally-appropriate activities for the child, and take the time to explain, inform, and guide the child's understanding when a problem is encountered (Vygotsky, 1978). Additionally, the teacher should encourage children to explain their understanding of the problem themselves as this will aid them in solving the problem independently (Excell, 2011). In this process, it is not just the child who learns from the teacher – teachers also learn about children's interests through this interaction, and may choose to incorporate ideas learnt into various playful activities to stimulate children's learning and development (Chakravarthi, 2009). Consequently, the teachers' role is considered to be 'multifaceted' as they encourage and support children during play to reach higher levels of learning, and to build on their mental structures "through the use of signs and tools that promote language and thought development" (Saracho & Spodek, 1998, p.8; Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Phelps, 2016). Researchers note that this reciprocal exchange may also bring about a shift in teachers' initial beliefs regarding the practices they choose to implement as they develop a deeper understanding of children which enable them to identify what children currently know, before structuring activities based on what children are expected to know (Chakravarthi, 2009).

In sum, Vygotsky views play as an important contributor to the young child's learning and development. With specific reference to dramatic or make-believe play, he acknowledges the developmental benefits that play has to offer the young child. Through imitation, social interactions, and experiences involving their imagination, children develop their higher mental functions, as well as their higher-order thinking and language skills. Furthermore, it is confirmed that research studies have highlighted the role of play as an essential contributor to children's learning and development (Vu et al., 2015) which emphasises the critical nature of play in ECCE curricula. However, researchers observe that ECCE teachers are currently facing a dilemma as to whether they should focus on academic skills, or promote developmentally appropriate activities for children (Martlew et al., 2011). Based on Vygotsky's (1978) theory, children benefit both academically and holistically when they engage in play-based learning practices when guided by teachers to act within and beyond their ZPD that is appropriate for their own learning and development (Anderson Nugent, 2017).

2.2.2. Theory of Beliefs

After reviewing various studies that investigated beliefs, researchers have concluded that beliefs refer to a person's mental constructions, influenced by their social, cultural, political, and historical contexts formed on the basis of their experiences (Nilsen, 2021). Due to their subjective nature, beliefs reflect on one's individual judgement which influence the practices that one chooses to enact (Levin, 2015). Researchers argue that "if teachers' beliefs influence their teaching, and therefore students' opportunities to learn, then beliefs should be a central concern of teaching and teacher education" (Levin, 2015, p.49). Not only will teachers be well-informed during their own learning experiences, but they will also transfer this knowledge into practice when providing children with developmentally-appropriate opportunities to play and learn simultaneously. This raises the question as to why there is still no theory on beliefs, (specifically teachers' beliefs) to understand these views in context.

Considering the above question, Mo (2020) developed a theoretical model in the form of an analytical framework aimed to understand language teachers' beliefs; specifically, where these beliefs emanate from, and how they influence practice. Teacher beliefs are considered to be complex concepts that researchers attempted to compartmentalise within a larger belief system. Hence, Mo (2020) introduced his theoretical model which encompasses a range of beliefs held by teachers which are known to guide their daily practices within the education setting. This same model can be applied to the current study which focuses on the beliefs held by ECCE teachers involving the concepts of play and learning within South African early childhood contexts. Firstly, Mo (2020) adopted three basic functions of beliefs as identified in the functional model proposed by Fives and Buehl (2012): theoretical beliefs, action beliefs, and context beliefs – but chose to conceptualise these beliefs from a slightly different perspective. Hence, he identified another important component – beliefs about teachers' roles – as he believed that, together, all four components were key in conceptualising teachers' beliefs (Mo, 2020). While these components were known to overlap, he explained that each component was still responsible for its own function. Further, he believed that teachers' beliefs are mostly "inferred through stated practices, classroom practices and social practices respectively" (Mo, 2020, p.59).

While the first component – theoretical beliefs – is considered to be implicit, it should be noted that teachers hold such beliefs that shape their teaching strategies and methods that are used in practice – either within the classroom setting, or when facilitating play-based learning practices (Mo, 2020). Moreover, researchers claim that "teachers' beliefs about people, objects and events affect their planning, interactions, and how they make educational decisions" – ultimately, guiding their behaviours within the educational setting (Levin, 2015; Nilsen, 2021, p.5). Mo (2020) elaborates by describing *beliefs* as theories which are adopted by teachers in order to assist them interpret and implement the curriculum, various policy documents, and their past experiences. In other words, he describes these theoretical beliefs as

mental constructs that focus on interpreting the objectives stipulated within the curriculum – often referred to as "stated practices" (Mo, 2020, p.57). Within the South African context, ECCE teachers often consult the *NELDS* policy document (DBE, 2009), and the *Guidelines for Early Childhood Development Services* (DoSD & UNICEF, 2007), among others, to guide their thinking, as well as the practices that they are expected to implement in the early childhood setting to ensure that children are well-prepared for formal schooling.

The second component – action beliefs – is also considered to be implicit in the sense that they are only reflected through the practices that teachers implement within the classroom setting, or within the play environment (Mo, 2020). Kagan identifies teachers' beliefs as "tacit, often unconsciously held assumptions about students, classrooms, and their content" (in Nilsen, 2021, p.5). Therefore, teachers' practices can be seen as particular actions or behaviours that emerge from one's personal beliefs, often resulting from an internal process of negotiation, brought about to ease instructional tensions in certain situations (Mo, 2020). While several studies have shown that teachers' beliefs about play are associated with creativity, exploring freely, and discovery; in practice, some teachers' practices show otherwise because they prohibit play by avoiding implementing play activities due to a lack of awareness regarding the optimal play environment for young children (Nilsen, 2021). Therefore, these beliefs are viewed as a set of principles that guide teachers' actions, and aid them in dealing with psychological tasks or problems at hand (Mo, 2020). However, inconsistencies can be identified between teachers' theoretical beliefs and action beliefs which is due to various intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence teachers' beliefs imbibed through current teaching experiences, early childhood play experiences, teacher-training and qualifications, feelings of stress and anxiety, extent of familiarity with the school environment, and level of understanding of policy documents and the ECCE curriculum (Meehan, 2007; Mo, 2020).

The third component identified – context beliefs – is associated with teachers' understanding of their social practices in relation to their beliefs about the teaching environment and ECCE implementation. Some common factors may include the structural setting, and parental and academic matters that either support or challenge the implementation of teachers' beliefs about play in practice within the ECCE setting (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). In addition, Van der Meulen (in Mo, 2020, p.58) claims that "context beliefs reflect teachers' understanding of contextual influences on their teaching." This depends on teachers' contexts within the South African ECCE system; for example, teachers may experience time-constraints, a lack of space and resources, and lack of support from colleagues, management, and parents (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). These will influence teachers' perspectives on how play practices should be facilitated, and how the ideal play environment should be organised; often leading to a disconnect between their initial beliefs and present understanding of ECCE concerning play and learning (Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Vu et al., 2015; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Therefore, these context beliefs

are able to assist teachers by making-sense of the contextual problems that they are faced with. As such, it can be concluded that teachers' classroom practices and social practices are closely related, and play a key role in teachers' professional lives (Mo, 2020).

The fourth component identified by Mo (2020) – beliefs about teachers' roles – refers to teachers' understanding of their professional roles. Some ECCE teachers believe their role is to provide children with the necessary materials, time, and a large enough space in which to play, in addition to supervising children during play, and leaving them to play on their own or with others (Vu et al., 2015; Nilsen, 2021). During play, these teachers feel that it is best to observe from a distance, and only intervene when a problem arises (Davies, 1997; Chakravarthi, 2009; Renick, 2009; Vu et al., 2015; Nilsen, 2021). Similarly, other ECCE teachers felt that they should organise the play environment with appropriate and stimulating materials; however, they believed that it is important to interact with children during play, while providing encouragement, support, and guidance in order to build on their current knowledge (Ridgway & Quinones, 2012; Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Smit, 2015; Meran, 2019; Nilsen, 2021). These perceptions are considered to be the core of teachers' beliefs "which reflect their fundamental understandings on the key elements in teaching, the idea of what constitutes a good teacher and education, a view of knowledge, as well as their positions about others in the school community" (Wang & Du, in Mo, 2020, p.58). Not only does this core component bring together each of the above-mentioned components within Mo's (2020) theoretical model; it is also responsible for regulating the relationships between the different groups of beliefs to ensure that the entire belief system functions optimally as a whole. This is depicted by Mo (2020, p.60) in Figure 2.1 (below). Also, when teachers' beliefs about their roles are coupled with their other beliefs, an interconnected system is formed, allowing teachers to develop specific ideas about themselves, the children, the curriculum, their school setting, and most importantly, their teaching and learning practices that are implemented within the education setting (Zembylas & Chubbuck, in Mo, 2020).

Ultimately, Mo (2020) presented a theoretical model comprising of four key components which can be applied as an analytical framework to explore a deeper side to teaching. It also allows both researchers and teachers to uncover the meaning that teachers assign to their daily lives and practices within the education setting. In the context of this study, it was necessary to discuss a theoretical model of beliefs to aid one's understanding of *teachers' beliefs*. Drawing on various examples from previous studies, one becomes more comfortable with the concept of *beliefs*, and in particular, understanding how certain groups of beliefs are expressed in the different practices implemented by teachers. These are either reflected through stated practices from the curriculum, classroom practices, and social practices that promote the practice of play (Mo, 2020).

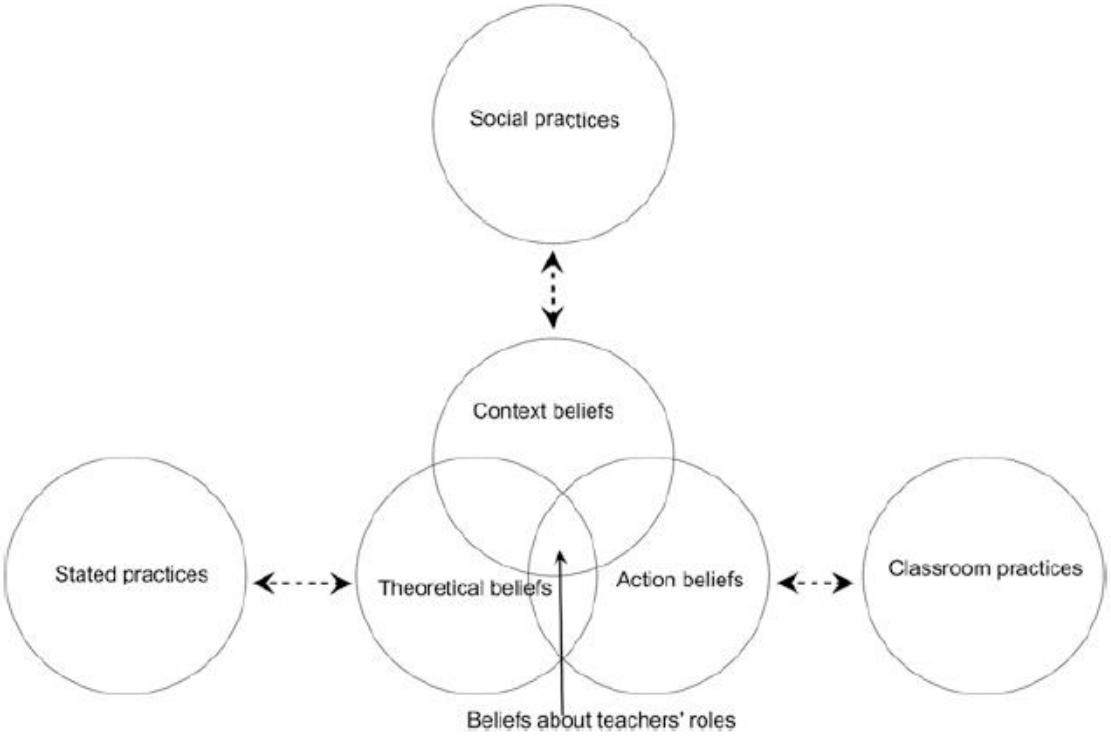


Figure 2. 1. A theoretical model of teacher beliefs (Mo, 2020, p.60).

2.2.3. Conclusion

Among the various theorists who contributed to the historical and theoretical foundations of play; Vygotsky's (1929) theory of the Cultural-Historical Development of Higher Mental Functions proves to be most significant in the context of this study. Not only did Vygotsky's theory play a key role in understanding the concept of play; it also considered the lasting effects that play has on the young child's learning and development. Vygotsky further highlighted the role of early childhood teachers, who are expected to stimulate children's higher mental functions through appropriate play-based learning activities, that focus on advancing children's skills beyond their current level of development. However, one needs to have a thorough understanding of Vygotsky's theory, before considering how his theory can shape ECCE teachers' beliefs, and in turn, the practices that they choose to implement within the ECCE setting. Following from this, it was necessary to understand the different components of beliefs that form a theoretical model of beliefs; ultimately, guiding teachers' ideas and practices in context (Mo, 2020). The four components work together to form an interconnected system, used to conceptualise teacher beliefs.

Chapter Three – Research Methodology

3.1. Introduction

Regardless of previous research studies, qualitative researchers decide to employ methodology that is dependent on the aim of the study, the research problem, research questions, and the social phenomenon under investigation (Noor, 2008). In context, this study aimed to explore ECCE teachers' beliefs about play and learning, and the ways in which these beliefs influence their practice in the South African ECCE setting. However, previous studies have shown various emerging challenges when teachers attempt to implement play in line with the existing ECCE curriculum which leads to a disconnect between teachers' beliefs and the practices they choose to implement within the ECCE setting. This chapter presented the research paradigm, research method, and research design, in addition to providing insight into the research participants of the study, the data production, and data analysis processes. Lastly, aspects of trustworthiness and ethical considerations were described.

3.1. Research Paradigm

This research study was situated within an interpretivist paradigm as it focused on understanding teachers' beliefs about children's play as learning, and the ways in which these beliefs influence their practice. Research studies which have adopted an interpretivist paradigm "emphasise the importance of understanding people's perspectives in the context of the conditions and circumstances of their lives" (Ormston, Spencer, Barnard & Snape, 2014, p.22) which contributes to the meaning-making of their experiences in order to understand what influences participants' beliefs and practices. The interpretivist paradigm also encourages the use of qualitative methods to facilitate one's understanding of participants' views, within a specific context. Those who conduct qualitative research emphasise eliciting participants' views in order to understand the social, cultural, economic, and physical aspects of their experiences (Hennink et al., 2020). This was evident after eliciting ECCE teachers' views on children's play as a way in which children enhance their learning and improve their development. Therefore, the interpretive paradigm enables researchers to become more sensitive towards the contributions and insights gathered from each participant, as different individuals interpret social phenomena in different ways, based on their personal backgrounds, contexts, and values (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

3.2. Research Method

Within this empirical study, I aimed to explore the beliefs held by ECCE teachers regarding children's play as learning, and the ways in which these beliefs influence the practices they chose to implement. Therefore, I believed a qualitative research method aligned to the interpretivist paradigm, was appropriate to understand and make-sense of participants' experiences and beliefs (Gill, 2020). Based on the characteristics of qualitative research, we not only examine participants' experiences in detail, but also identify issues from the 'insider perspective' in order to understand the contextual meanings behind participants' views, beliefs, and behaviours that are implemented in practice (Creswell, 2014; Hennink et al., 2020). For example, this research study dissected the meaning that teachers or individuals attached to a particular phenomenon, such as children's play as learning. Therefore, researchers concluded that qualitative research is necessary when exploring the 'starting point' of teachers' beliefs and their corresponding practices as they emerge, before finding connections to more general themes (Creswell, 2014; Ormston et al., 2014; Hennink et al., 2020).

3.3. Research Design

Within qualitative research, a case study approach is considered appropriate in exploring social phenomena, in detail, within a particular context (Rashid et al., 2019; Tomaszewski et al., 2020), such as exploring teachers' beliefs regarding play and learning within the context of the South African ECCE setting. Case studies have often been associated with qualitative research methods which are widely used within the education context (Merriam, 1998; Gerring, 2006). Yin (in Merriam, 1998, p.27) describes a case study as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident." Specifically, this research study adopted an illustrative case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of a group of participants within their respective contexts, and how they act in certain situations (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Hayes, Kyer, & Weber, 2015). Essentially, this research design method was considered to be a valuable tool (Merriam, 1998; Tetnowski, 2015), that was used on a group of teachers in order to understand their views on children's play as learning, and how they implement these practices within the existing ECCE curriculum, if at all.

3.4. Research Context and Sample

3.4.1. Research Context

The research context included eleven (11) ECCE settings within the Gauteng Province in South Africa. Of these, five (5) were considered to be advantaged, while six (6) were considered to be disadvantaged ECCE settings. This selection of participants from both advantaged and disadvantaged ECCE settings, engendered a more nuanced understanding of teachers' beliefs about play and learning. Britto et al. (2011) differentiated between advantaged and disadvantaged settings on the basis of quality programmes and services, and the adequate provision of human and material resources and support which influence teachers' beliefs concerning play, and how best to promote it with the resources and support made available to them. Therefore, the ECCE centres in this study were differentiated based on their play environment and resources, ECCE programme and services provided, and the support available to both teachers and children – often found to be more stimulating in the advantaged ECCE settings, and rather limited, if not lacking, in the disadvantaged ECCE settings.

Within this research study, where a qualitative research method was adopted, it was necessary to explore ECCE teachers' beliefs about play and learning and how they implement such beliefs in practice on a daily basis (Rashid et al., 2019). Therefore, I would have preferred to observe each ECCE teacher within his/her respective setting, to gain an incisive understanding on how they implement such play practices, and facilitate play as learning by observing non-verbal cues expressed by the participant, such as body language, and facial expression, among others (McMillan & Schumacher, in Ncube, 2017). However, the current global COVID-19 pandemic protocols, did not permit me to observe each teacher within their respective ECCE setting. Furthermore, teachers were not always available at their place of work due to the migration to online learning platforms within the existing curriculum. Also, I did not want to put the participants or myself at risk during the period of data collection. Consequently, I had to decide on an alternative way to understand teachers' beliefs about play and learning, and the ways in which their beliefs influence their practice.

Therefore, this study was adapted towards online modes of data collection via an online survey involving Google forms, as well as semi-structured interviews that were conducted via Zoom. Google forms was chosen due to its efficiency and accessibility for participants from any location and device (Sandhya et al., 2020). Similarly, Zoom was selected as an appropriate online platform for data collection, keeping in mind its ease of access and affordability for participants in various ECCE settings across the province, the respective COVID-19 restrictions, and the safety of participants throughout the research study – in comparison to other online platforms (Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey & Lawless, 2019; Singh & Awasthi, 2020). Participants from disadvantaged ECCE settings, who did not have email addresses or

access to the internet completed their surveys and interviews telephonically which still proved to be effective despite the COVID-19 restrictions.

3.4.2. Research Sample

In qualitative research studies, it is critical for the researcher to identify participants who have "direct and personal knowledge" of the research topic, and those who are willing to share their views, beliefs, and experiences as this provides the researcher with the necessary information to answer the research questions of the study (Sandelowski, in Gill, 2020, p.579). Therefore, by utilising convenience sampling, twenty (20) ECCE teachers were selected to share their beliefs and experiences through the online survey via Google forms. According to Etikan et al. (2016), convenience sampling refers to samples that are easily accessible to the researcher, and chosen on the basis of geographical proximity and availability, among others. Hence, participants had to be qualified teachers of children between the ages of 3-4, with a minimum NQF Level 4 qualification, and situated in ECCE settings within the Gauteng Province. Of these 20 participants, thirteen (13) participants were from advantaged ECCE settings, while seven (7) were from disadvantaged ECCE settings (Table 3.1 below). The rationale for choosing teachers of children aged 3-4 were that these young children are seen to develop faster in terms of their skills, senses, and abilities within the South African context, before moving towards Grade RR and formal schooling in the years to follow (DBE, 2009). However, it was still important for a sufficient number of participants to constitute the sample size to ensure that rich, in-depth and quality data was collected (Gill, 2020).

Thereafter, eight (8) participants were purposively selected from the initial sample to participate in the individual online semi-structured interviews – of which, four (4) participants were selected from advantaged ECCE settings, and four (4) participants were selected from disadvantaged ECCE settings. Purposive sampling was used to allow for a specific group of teachers to be chosen, as their responses were believed to make a greater contribution towards the research study (Etikan et al., 2016). These 8 participants were identified on the basis of their detailed responses to the open-ended questions asked in the online survey via Google Forms; they were asked for further clarification and elaboration on their beliefs surrounding play and learning, including the practices that they choose to implement within the ECCE setting. Following the data collection process, these 8 participants from both advantaged and disadvantaged ECCE settings provided insight into their beliefs surrounding play and learning respectively, as well as their views on the 'strong' relationship between play and learning according to play practices that they implement on a daily basis in their ECCE centres. Emanating out of this process, participants indicated that they shared a broad understanding of the concepts *play*, *learning* and *play as learning*, which clearly showed their interactive role during children's play – specifically when implementing a variety of play-based learning practices in line with the ECCE curriculum.

Table 3.1. Participants' details.

No.	*Participant Code**	*ECCE Centre*	*Consent Form submitted*	*Online Survey submitted via Google Forms*	*Participant selected for Online Interview*
1	Teacher A	Advantaged	✓	✓	✓
2	Teacher B	Advantaged	✓	✓	
3	Teacher C	Advantaged	✓	✓	✓
4	Teacher D	Advantaged	✓	✓	
5	Teacher E	Advantaged	✓	✓	
6	Teacher F	Advantaged	✓	✓	
7	Teacher G	Advantaged	✓	✓	
8	Teacher H	Advantaged	✓	✓	✓
9	Teacher I	Advantaged	✓	✓	
10	Teacher J	Advantaged	✓	✓	
11	Teacher K	Advantaged	✓	✓	✓
12	Teacher L	Advantaged	✓	✓	
13	Teacher M	Advantaged	✓	✓	
14	Teacher N	Disadvantaged	✓	✓	✓
15	Teacher O	Disadvantaged	✓	✓	✓
16	Teacher P	Disadvantaged	✓	✓	
17	Teacher Q	Disadvantaged	✓	✓	
18	Teacher R	Disadvantaged	✓	✓	✓
19	Teacher S	Disadvantaged	✓	✓	
20	Teacher T	Disadvantaged	✓	✓	✓

*Pseudonyms/codes, such as Teacher A and Teacher B, were used as part of ethical procedures to protect the identity of participants throughout the research study, as stipulated and agreed upon in their Participant Information Sheet and respective Consent Forms (Appendix E).

3.5. Data Production Methods

The data production process proceeded in two stages (explained in the sections below). I utilised online modes such as a Google forms and Zoom. Due to the COVID-19 protocols, many qualitative researchers were forced to migrate from face-to-face data production methods to online platforms, including telephonic and internet-based methods (Lobe, Morgan, & Hoffman, 2020). These modes also allowed qualitative researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs (Roller, 2018) especially when video-calling or reviewing participants' online survey responses. Fortunately, participants possessed digital skills which made it easier for them to participate in the online data collection process (Lobe et al., 2020).

3.5.1. Stage 1

In this stage, participants were provided with an online survey to complete via Google forms. The purpose was to gain a broad understanding of their beliefs about play and learning, and to understand the ways in which these beliefs influence their practice in the South African ECCE setting. According to Sandhya et al. (2020), the Google forms application is key for online data collection as it is effective, and easily accessible to participants from any device by using a link sent to their email addresses. In addition, researchers are able to create forms or surveys with ease, by simply adding and editing a range of questions to suit their needs. However, a challenge arose when some participants from disadvantaged settings did not have access to the internet. Thus, these participants answered the survey questions telephonically which was simultaneously audio-recorded, and their verbatim responses were submitted to Google forms.

The survey comprised of closed questions centred around participants' personal backgrounds (eg. age, qualification, years of teaching in the ECCE context, and the socio-economic status of their ECCE centre), questions based on a Likert scale, and open-ended questions surrounding play and learning (Appendix A). The survey was of approximately 10-15 minutes' duration, and once completed, Google forms auto-generated a summary showing participants' overall and individual responses (Appendix B). After reviewing participants' survey responses, I then planned and designed questions for the semi-structured interviews. Despite receiving twenty-two (22) consent forms, only twenty (20) survey responses were submitted, as two (2) participants decided to withdraw during the early stages of the research study due to their busy schedules.

3.5.2. Stage 2

Eight (8) participants from the initial sample were invited to participate semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. Of the 8 participants, four (4) participants were selected from advantaged ECCE settings, and four (4) participants were selected from disadvantaged ECCE settings – this ensured a nuanced understanding of teachers' beliefs by including all South African early childhood contexts. Lobe et al. (2020) noted that the video-conferencing platform known as Zoom, reached its popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, and since then it has been widely used for research and educational purposes. As a qualitative researcher conducting interviews with participants throughout the Gauteng Province, Zoom facilitated a smooth transition to online modes of data collection – from any location and any device, including a computer, mobile phone or tablet (Archibald et al., 2019).

The interview for this research study comprised of open-ended questions to generate wider and deeper information necessary for qualitative research (Appendix C). Each interview was of 45 minutes to an hour duration which was recorded on Zoom, and later transcribed. This allowed the researcher, for clarity purposes, to refer back to collected data during the process of data analysis (Lobe et al., 2020). Access to such recordings were limited to the researcher only via ensuring that all data was safely stored in a password-protected electronic file on the researcher's computer to protect identities and confidentiality of information. Lastly, I considered participants' obligations, and ensured that the data production process did not interfere with their daily programme or school duties. Participants were free to choose a time that suited their schedule. Prior to the commencement of the research, issues of data costs, connectivity and online accessibility were communicated to participants in the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (Appendix E), as they were responsible for their own data costs. This proved to be a challenge once again as participants from disadvantaged ECCE settings did not have access to the internet which resulted in the interviews being conducted telephonically. This was still an effective interview method as participants responded to all the questions in detail as they were given ample opportunity to share their experiences of implementing play-based learning practices within the early childhood setting. In addition to this challenge, participants also faced electricity power-cuts and load-shedding in their areas which created logistical problems such as confirmation of the exact dates and times of their interviews. As a researcher, it was necessary to be flexible to ensure that all participants were afforded the opportunity to respond to the interview questions.

3.6. Data Analysis

Data analysis is considered to be the most challenging process within qualitative research (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017) as it requires operations such as "identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting themes" (Braun & Clarke, in Malik et al., 2019, p.1126). Within this research study, the collected data was analysed according to the process of data coding; namely, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012). Researchers define coding as a process of analysing and meaningfully dissecting the data, which is followed by allocating codes to parts of the data where connections have been identified (Miles & Huberman, 1994; O'Donoghue, 2007). Thereafter, the data should be grouped into themes and analysed in context when common ideas are found amongst participants' responses (Ncube, 2017; Struwig & Stead, 2017). By following the six phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012), as summarised in Appendix F, the researcher becomes aware of meaningful patterns that are evident within the data that relate to the research questions, and the research study as a whole. This is illustrated in Table 3.2 below. However, it is important to note that this process of analysis is non-linear, and requires the researcher to constantly move back and forth between phases in order to refine themes, and to ensure that each theme is coherent, in relation to the other themes and the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In context of this research study, each phase of thematic analysis will be identified in the sections that follow, using data extracts from Teacher C as an example.

Table 3.2. Applying the six phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006; 2012).

Phase		***What occurred during this phase of analysis?***
1	***Familiarising yourself with the data***	During stage one of the data collection process, I familiarised myself with participants' survey responses by critically reading the collected data. I highlighted extracts and added annotations after I perused the data several times. Similar processes occurred during stage two of the data collection process where I transcribed each interview in order to familiarise myself with participants' views and beliefs. Again, key extracts were highlighted, and annotations were added in the margins.
2	***Generating initial codes***	Initial codes were determined, based on the written notes and highlighted extracts from Phase 1. Once Phase 2 was completed in stage one of the data collection process, certain participants were selected to participate in stage two of the data collection process where the same processes were followed. Long lists of codes were identified in each data set, and represented in tables as seen in Appendices G and H.
3	***Searching for themes***	Once initial codes were collated, I revisited them. Six preliminary themes and subthemes emanated by identifying the shared collective meanings present in participants' survey and interview responses. These preliminary themes were represented thematically, as shown in Figure 3.3.

4	***Reviewing potential themes***	The six preliminary themes were first reviewed by analysing the relevance and meaning of each theme and subtheme in relation to the research questions, and research study as a whole. These themes were later refined into five (5) specific themes (Figure 3.4) that were best suited to the research study as a whole.
5	***Defining & naming themes***	The process of refining themes and subthemes continued during this phase, where the five refined themes were reduced to four (4) main themes and subthemes (Figure 3.5). The four themes were then succinctly defined, and appropriate labels were attached to each, in relation to the research study as a whole.
6	***Producing the report***	Once each theme was clearly identified and represented appropriately, the final phase of thematic analysis was instituted. A brief overview of the findings was provided in relation to each of the four identified themes. Thereafter, each theme and the relevant data collected were discussed such that meaningful connections were made to the research questions, the literature reviewed, and the theoretical framework.

3.6.1. Online Surveys via Google Forms

In this research study, stage one of the data collection process saw participants complete the online survey via Google forms. While the auto-generated summary provided an overall view of participants' personal backgrounds, their views surrounding the importance of play within the ECCE setting, and their roles during play; it was necessary to analyse and code participants' open-ended responses individually. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2012) process of thematic analysis, Phase 1 prompted me to become thoroughly familiar with participants' individual responses to the open-ended questions of the online survey by critically reading the collected data several times. In addition, I annotated, highlighted and underlined key words and extracts (Figure 3.1) which I believed to be important and meaningful for data analysis.

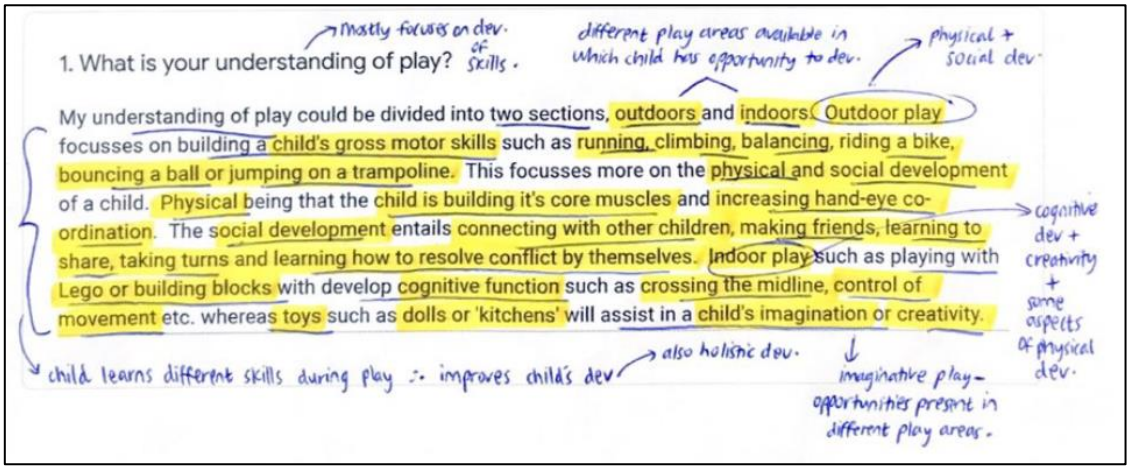


Figure 3. 1. Extract with annotations from Phase 1: Online Surveys via Google forms (Teacher C).

After perusing this data thrice, I felt immersed into participants' views and responses which I considered when identifying and determining the initial codes necessary for Phase 2. I started identifying these initial codes in a systematic manner by meaningfully organising and collating various data sets, assisted by written notes and highlighted extracts from Phase 1. Despite having only five (5) questions to code, in each data set, a range of initial codes were identified (Appendix G). However, only a few major codes have been selected (Table 3.3 below). The complete table of initial codes was revisited in Phase 3 of the thematic analysis process which were clustered into preliminary themes, and later into final themes and subthemes.

Table 3.3. Initial codes identified in Phase 2: Online Surveys via Google Forms (Teacher C).

Initial Codes	***Data Extracts***
Play	**Teacher C:** My understanding of play could be divided into two sections: outdoors and indoors. Outdoor play focuses on building a child's gross motor skills such as running, climbing, balancing, riding a bike, bouncing a ball or jumping on a trampoline.
Learning	**Teacher C:** I believe learning can be in the form of play so long as there is a variety of different skills that are being developed. I think that a child should first experience concrete learning, and once this has been mastered, then match the concrete and abstract concepts together, and then towards the end only move on to the abstract.
Learning through play	**Teacher C:** I believe learning can be in the form of play so long as there is a variety of different skills that are being developed. They [play and learning] are integrated; however, they assist with certain aspects of learning – play focuses more on the physical, social and emotional development whereas learning (in a more structured/formal way) focuses on the cognitive/intellectual development such as fine motor skills (e.g. a threading activity). It also depends on whether or not the toys are educational or not. I displayed a variety of general toys and educational toys so that the child has much choice to be adequately stimulated (but not too difficult or too easy to use).
Development of different areas during play (ie. holistic development of the child)/ Benefits of Play.	**Teacher C:** Outdoor play focuses on building a child's gross motor skills such as running, climbing, balancing, riding a bike, bouncing a ball or jumping on a trampoline. This focuses more on the physical and social development of a child. Physical refers to the child building core muscles and increasing hand-eye coordination. The social development entails connecting with other children, making friends, learning to share, taking turns, and learning how to resolve conflict by themselves. Indoor play such as playing with Lego or building blocks will develop cognitive functions such as crossing the midline, and control of movement, among others; whereas toys such as dolls or 'kitchens' will assist in a child's imagination or creativity. Play focuses more on the physical, social and emotional development whereas learning (in a more structured/formal way) focuses more on the cognitive/intellectual development such as fine motor skills (e.g. a threading activity). It also depends on whether or not the toys are of educational value or not.

Based on participants' detailed and insightful responses in this section, 8 participants were invited to participate in the online individual semi-structured interview via Zoom. I purposively selected these teachers from the research sample as I believed that they would contribute more towards stage 2 of the data collection process. Drawing on the initial codes that were identified after Phases 1 and 2, I wanted more clarification on those participants' views and beliefs surrounding play and learning, as they indicated that play and learning were intertwined or went hand-in-hand in terms of the child engaging in playful activity. Again, for more width in research, Teachers A, C, H, and K were specifically selected from advantaged ECCE settings, while Teachers N, O, R, and T were selected from disadvantaged ECCE settings. However, while Teachers D and E were initially selected for the online interviews; they were unable to find a suitable time and date in which to respond to the questions – due to their busy schedules at the start of the academic year, in addition to the disruptions in their personal lives, as a result of COVID-19. In addition, Teacher L was selected to expand further on her views surrounding play and learning, and why she believed that the focus should rather be placed on "working" – however, no further response was received from this participant. Regardless, the remaining participants were happy to participate in stage two of the data collection process, and were eager to share more examples of how they implement play practices within the ECCE setting.

3.6.2. Individual Online Interviews via Zoom

In stage two of the data collection process, participants were invited to engage in the online individual semi-structured interview via Zoom. Since the interviews were either conducted online via Zoom, or telephonically, each interview had to be transcribed before conducting thematic analysis. I chose to transcribe each interview myself, rather than using a transcription application, as this allowed me to fully understand participants' views and beliefs. Throughout this process, I gained a deeper understanding of their position surrounding the implementation of play-based learning practices, in relation to the development of advanced academic skills, factors that influenced their present beliefs, their role in children's play, and the challenges experienced when implementing play in their daily programme. This knowledge attained from each data set, assisted me in Phase 1 of the thematic analysis process, as I had already become familiar with the collected data. In addition, I read the collected information multiple times, made annotations, and highlighted salient extracts (Figure 3.2) – this would be useful later on, especially during the phase of coding (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

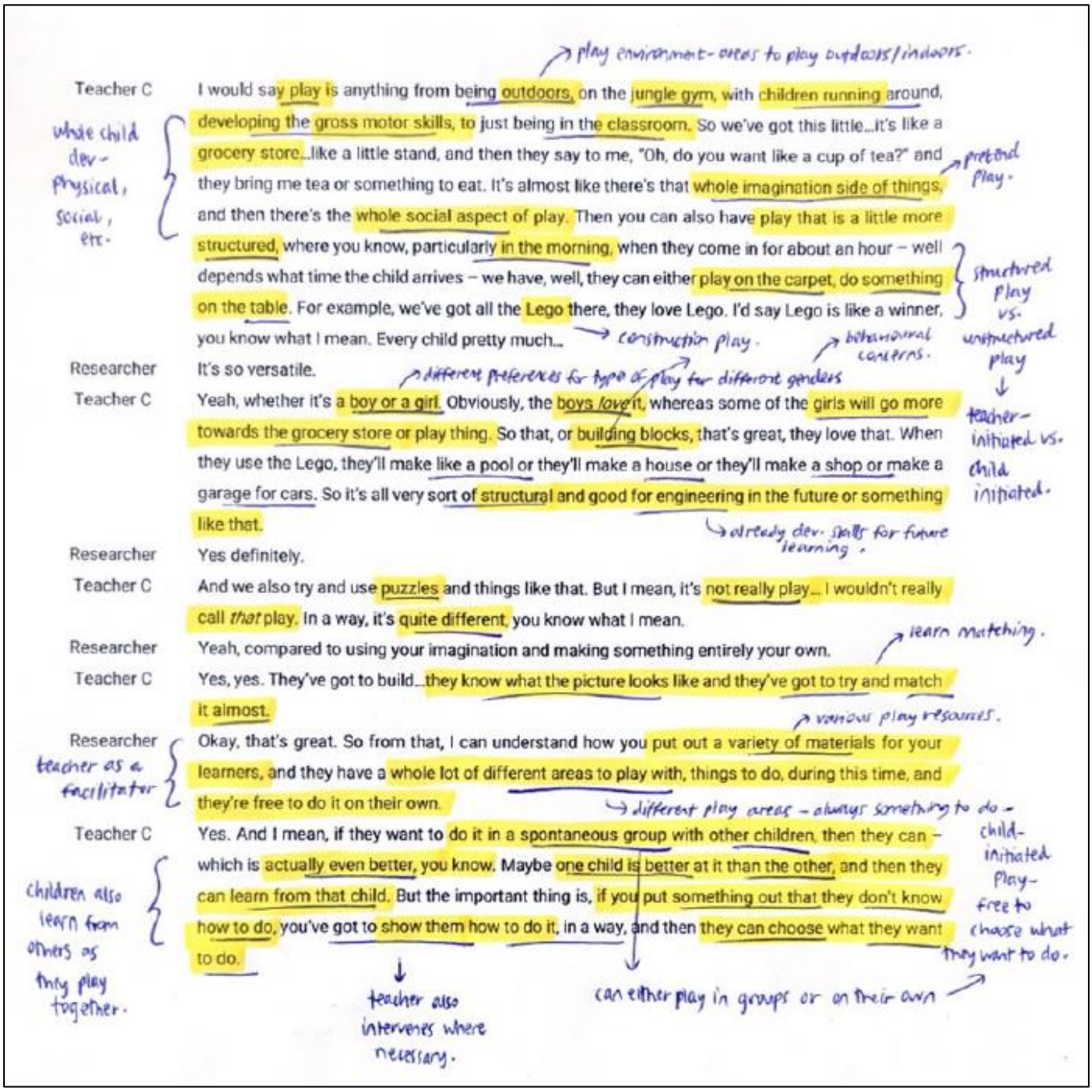


Figure 3. 2. Extract with annotations from Phase 1: Online Interviews via Zoom (Teacher C).

Next, I progressed to Phase 2 of the thematic analysis process. During this phase, I coded the highlighted data extracts and annotations from each relevant transcription. Revisiting each transcription with a more incisive analytical lens was time-consuming, but it promoted the organisation of data in a systematic manner. All initial codes were tabulated (Appendix H), similar to Table 3.4, which only includes a few extracts from Teacher C's transcription. All codes were later grouped into themes and subthemes for analysis (discussed in the sections that follow).

Table 3.4. Initial codes identified in Phase 2: Individual Online Interviews via Zoom (Teacher C).

Initial Codes	*Data Extracts*
Play	**Teacher C:** I would say play is outdoor activity, on the jungle gym, with children running around, developing gross motor skills, and classroom games. So we've got this little…it's like a grocery store…like a little stand, and then they say to me, "Oh, do you want like a cup of tea?" and they bring me tea or something to eat. It's almost like there's that whole imagination side of things, and then there's the whole social aspect of play. Then you can also have play that is a little more structured, where you know, particularly in the morning, when they come in for about an hour – well depends what time the child arrives – we have, well, they can either play on the carpet, do something on the table. For example, we've got all the Lego there, they love Lego. So that, or building blocks, that's great, they love that. When they use the Lego, they'll make like a pool or they'll make a house or they'll make a shop or make a garage for cars. So it's all very sort of structural and good for engineering in the future or something like that.
Learning	**Teacher C:** It is interlinked with play, it does overlap. But I would say learning is just a bit more structured. For example, when we do an art activity or a craft activity, you know, they're learning how to hold the paintbrush, they're learning how to dip the paintbrush into paint and dry it on the sides, you know, like wipe it on the sides, so it doesn't blob everywhere. There's more structure to it. [Drilling or rote learning] is in your memory, BUT, it doesn't really tell you, if you take one pen and you times it by two, that you're going to get two pens. The deep concept of it – they're not going to get. Then I feel like it's not real learning, it's just using your memory.
Learning through play	**Teacher C:** And I mean, if they want to do it [play] in a spontaneous group with other children, then they can – which is actually even better, you know. Maybe one child is better at it than the other, and then they can learn from that child. So even categorising is so important too. These blocks go there, these toys go in that box, the Legos and the puzzles go in the cupboard. … but that's like a skill in itself – because you are classifying, categorising where things need to go – and you can't rush them, because they are still learning.
Development of different areas during play (ie. holistic development of the child)/ Benefits of Play.	**Teacher C:** I would say play is anything from being outdoors, on the jungle gym, with children running around, developing the gross motor skills, to just being in the classroom. It's almost like there's that whole imagination side of things, and then there's the whole social aspect of play. I suppose it would influence the gross-motor skills, the fine-motor skills, hand-eye coordination, using both hands equally…like dexterity, increasing or strengthening the hand muscles, finger muscles, wrist muscles, arm…well you could say the whole body, but particularly for when you use tongs – like when they do tonging exercises. And also, the social aspects of sharing, who goes first, and taking turns, tidying up the classroom, learning how to be orderly, putting things back in their place. So even categorising is so important too.

3.6.3. Preliminary Themes

While researchers claim that these early phases of analysis are the most frustrating, it is not considered to be time wasted, as one develops a thorough understanding of the data, before progressing on to the next phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, once Phases 1 and 2 were complete, initial codes had been identified and organised into tables by using the data collected from both the surveys and interviews respectively. During Phase 3 of the thematic analysis process, I revisited these long lists of codes in order to collate them into six (6) relevant and meaningful themes, and respective subthemes. Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012) suggest that it is best to represent these possible themes and subthemes visually, in the form of a thematic map, as illustrated in Figure 3.3 – in order to better review and refine the themes in the phases of analysis.

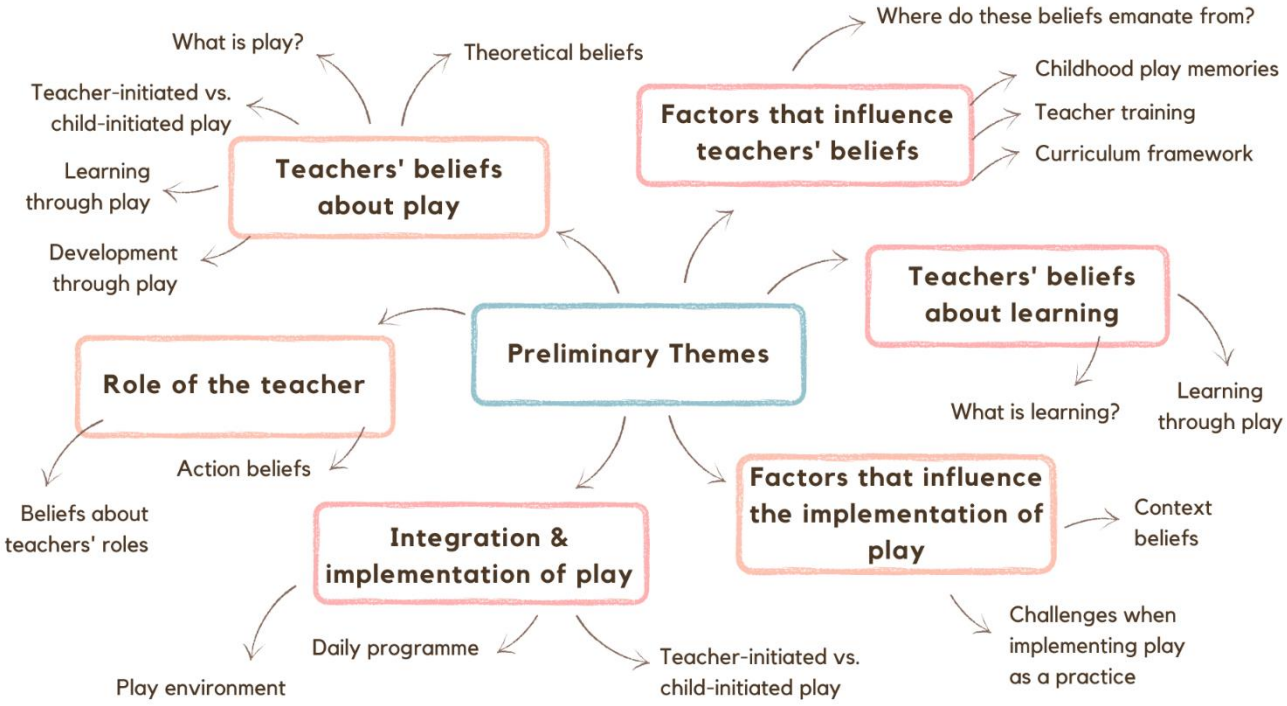


Figure 3. 3. Thematic map, showing six preliminary themes.

Next followed Phase 4 which comprised two steps – reviewing and refining. Using the preliminary thematic map from Phase 3, I first focused on reviewing the six preliminary themes and subthemes. It was necessary to question whether these potential themes were meaningful, in relation to its subthemes, and research questions and research study as a whole. Once these themes were reviewed, they were later refined into five (5) specific themes by analysing the meaning behind each one. These refined themes were also represented visually in the form of a thematic map (Figure 3.4). However, it is important to note that these themes and subthemes differ from the preliminary thematic map, in the sense that they are now more refined to suit the overall research study.

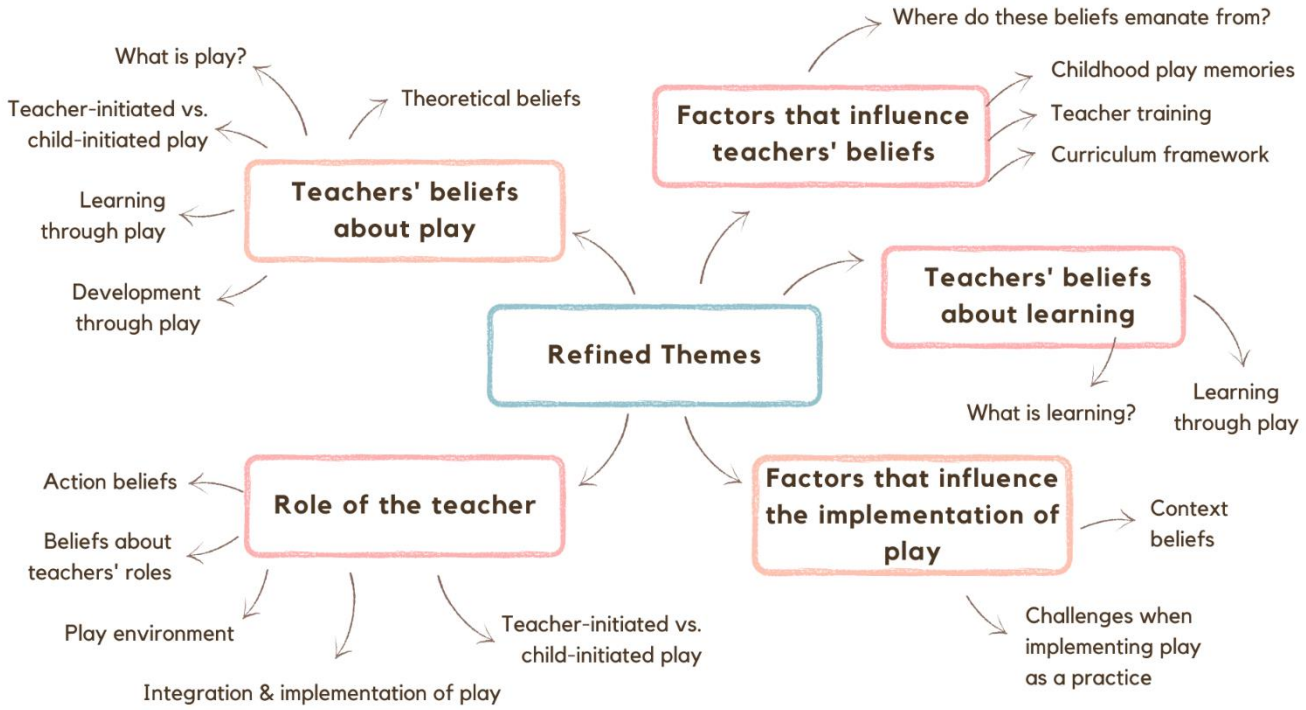


Figure 3. 4. Refined thematic map, showing five main themes.

While the process of refining themes was a key step in Phase 4, it was necessary to continue refining themes and their respective subthemes in Phase 5 in order to provide a meaningful and coherent analysis of the collected data. The five refined themes were further narrowed down to four (4) main themes and its respective subthemes, as depicted in the final thematic map (Figure 3.5). Once I was satisfied with the final thematic map, I then defined each theme succinctly, in relation to the research questions and the other themes that were selected. It was also important to understand how these particular themes contribute to the research study as a whole, before deciding on labels for each theme that would capture its underlying meaning.

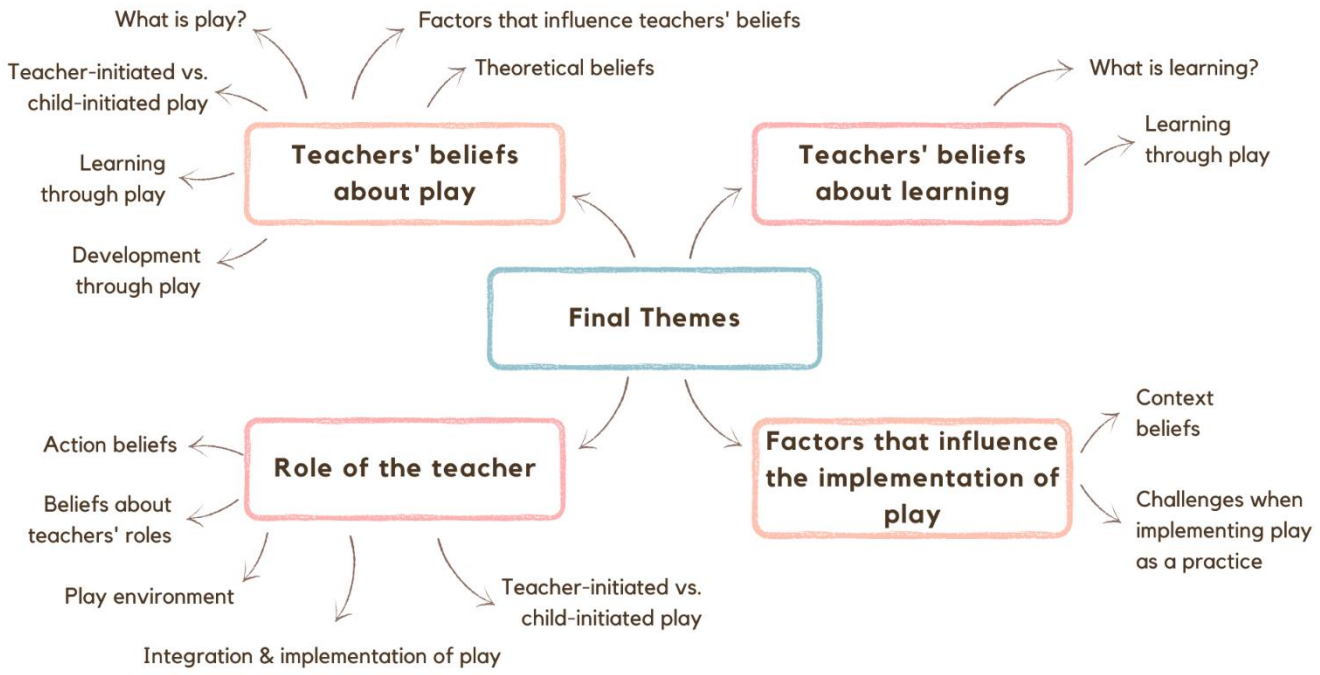


Figure 3. 5. Final thematic map, showing four main themes.

3.6.4. Definitions and Labels for Final Themes

Theme 1 – *Teachers' beliefs about play:* Outlines participants' understandings of play, and where these beliefs about play emanate from. Participants from both advantaged and disadvantaged ECCE settings were able to define play with ease, while considering the play opportunities that were offered to young children within their respective ECCE settings. Participants went on to identify the value of play, in relation to the child's learning and development. When asked to reflect on their own childhood play memories, most participants were able to discover where their initial play beliefs emanated from, and how these experiences have informed their current play practices. However, some participants were not aware of the value of play, until they were asked to consider the benefits of play for the whole child, during their teacher training – ultimately, refining their initial views of play at the time. While it was expected of participants to follow the curriculum framework with regards to the implementation of play practices, many found that a combination of their own beliefs about how play should be implemented, coupled with the learning outcomes from their respective curriculum frameworks, proved to be most effective.

Theme 2 – *Teachers' beliefs about learning:* Identifies participants' views of learning, and specifically focuses on the connection that participants have made, with regards to play and learning. Most participants viewed play and learning as interrelated aspects – working hand-in-hand to develop the necessary skills and abilities that children need for future learning. Following from this, all participants attempted to implement a play-based approach to learning, despite the challenges that were present.

Theme 3 – *Role of the teacher:* Focuses on the planning and implementation of play as a practice – either through teacher-initiated or child-initiated play activities. Participants described the extent to which they plan and manage the indoor and outdoor play environments. They provided children with a variety of resources and equipment to stimulate play. In addition, participants have identified that this informal approach to learning also fosters a love for learning in children – before the commencement of 'more serious' and 'structured' formal schooling. While some participants allowed children to engage in a 50:50 involvement of teacher-initiated and child-initiated play activities throughout the day, others were adamant that the role of the teacher was key in guiding children's learning in play.

Theme 4 – *Factors that influence the implementation of play:* Considers the factors – both positive and negative – that have impacted the manner in which participants implement their beliefs in practice. On one hand, supporting factors were identified within each ECCE setting that allowed participants to implement effective play-based learning practices. On the other hand, participants experienced several challenges that limited the ways in which they implemented play – either as a result of management directives, parental beliefs, or structural challenges within the ECCE setting. Despite the challenges specific to their ECCE setting within the South African context, participants worked with the available resources in an attempt to provide children with an appropriate and rich play-based learning experience.

Once each theme was determined after getting a clear understanding of what the themes represented, in terms of the data collected and the research study as a whole; I was able to complete the final analysis, which took place in Phase 6 of the thematic analysis process. A coherent account of each theme was analysed and discussed at length (see Chapter 4) while drawing on extracts across the various data sets. It was also important to constantly consider the research questions, literature review, and theoretical framework to ensure that each research question was answered against sufficient available relevant evidence.

3.7. Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

Qualitative researchers use the four criteria of trustworthiness – as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) – to address issues parallel to those of reliability and validity, to ensure the study's findings are trustworthy. These criteria include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To be accepted as trustworthy, it is important for the data analysis process to be conducted in a precise and consistent manner when recording, analysing, and interpreting the data (Nowell et al., 2017). In this study, credibility was accomplished through data triangulation where two different data production methods were used: surveys and interviews. The data collected from both surveys and interviews were compared with each other to determine whether participants' responses correlated in terms of the views and beliefs that were initially shared. Additionally, participants were asked to expand, authenticate, and confirm their answers, before responses were recorded and coded thematically (Clevenger, 2016). Moreover, this research study intended to fill the gap that existed within the field regarding teachers' beliefs within the ECCE setting in order to ensure transferability towards similar studies surrounding teacher beliefs. Therefore, the reader was provided with sufficient contextual information and detailed descriptions to make the transfer, should they come across other relatable studies (Nowell et al., 2017). In addition, the use of purposive sampling during stage two of the data collection process addressed the issue of transferability. Further, data collected from this research study was analysed and reported in detail, to enhance dependability for future researchers, since the entire process should be logical and well-documented throughout (Clevenger, 2016). Following from this, clear descriptions detailing the entire research process were established to ensure confirmability by demonstrating how certain conclusions were reached when interpreting and analysing the data. Shenton (2004) believes that researcher bias is inevitable, but I ensured neutrality by presenting survey questions about participants' beliefs and experiences on play and learning and the ways in which these influence their practices, that informed the questions to be used for the individual interviews, as opposed to those of my own (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Clevenger, 2016; Nowell et al., 2017).

3.8. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations form an essential part of the research process, especially within qualitative studies, as researchers are expected to apply specific ethical measures throughout the study, which aim to respect people's human rights while being aware of the ethical standards and moral procedures involved (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Smit, 2015; Ncube, 2017). Therefore, the ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Wits Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), and all protocols were observed (Ethics protocol number: H21/08/39 – Appendix I).

There were several ethical procedures that I believed were necessary to follow and implement, to ensure the protection of identity and confidentiality of information concerning all participants throughout this research study. Firstly, it was important for all ECCE centre managers to grant me permission to conduct research with the teachers at their ECCE centre, and to be assured that the data collection process would not interfere with teachers' daily programme or respective school duties. Therefore, a Permission Letter was sent to each ECCE centre manager via email, requesting for a signed formal consent letter to conduct research with qualified teachers who teach children aged 3-4 years only (Appendix D). Following from this, each ECCE centre manager assisted me in identifying relevant teachers who would be best suited to the requirements of this research study.

Secondly, it was important for participants to voluntarily consent to participate in this research study, and not feel pressured to do so (Ncube, 2017). As a researcher, I was committed to conducting research that respected the privacy and integrity of my research participants. Therefore, in order to execute such ethical processes, participants of this research study were required to read the Participant Information Sheet and sign a Consent Form, in order to ensure that they understood what was expected of them, and that their human rights were not violated throughout the study (Appendix E). Upon the return of the Consent Forms, participants were then provided with the link to the online survey via Google forms. Participants' consent was further assumed once they submitted their responses to the online survey, and informal verbal consent was attained during the individual online interviews via Zoom, during which participants actively responded to the questions that followed. Furthermore, it was important to make the ECCE centre manager and respective participants aware that their participation was voluntary, and that they were free to decline or withdraw at any point during the process without being disadvantaged in any way (Struwig & Stead, 2017). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the consent process was facilitated through online means, and an electronic signature was considered sufficient, should the participant not be able to scan and send in their consent forms. The ECCE centre managers and participants from disadvantaged contexts who did not have access to the internet were allowed to append electronic signatures. Thereafter, participants' survey and interview questions were asked telephonically, and their responses were recorded and submitted simultaneously – this ensured that they were given the same opportunity to share their experiences and beliefs surrounding play and learning.

Other ethical considerations included participants being well-informed of potential risks, such as discomfort or embarrassment, and ensuring that participants' right to privacy was protected via strict confidentiality. Audio-recordings and transcriptions from the interviews were kept in locked drawers and password-protected electronic files that only my supervisor and I had access to. Participants were also not asked to mention their legal names or names of ECCE centres on the broad survey via Google forms, or the interviews conducted via Zoom, in order to protect their privacy. Hence, Hitchcock and Hughes (1995)

suggest the use of pseudonyms/codes (such as Teacher A and Teacher B) throughout the study. Thus, participants felt they could trust me as I believed that transparency and honesty should be valued throughout this research study. Additionally, participants were informed of the nature of the research study and were provided with the option to continue participation or decline (Struwig & Stead, 2017). Lastly, participants could request to see the final research study report, and they were asked for permission to allow other researchers to use the collected data from this research study for academic purposes.

3.9. Conclusion

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic protocols, researchers were required to collect data using traditional face-to-face approaches. However, given the current circumstances, the research methodology for this study was adapted accordingly, to ensure the safety of both myself and the participants. While the study was qualitative in nature with an illustrative case study approach, it was still important to understand participants' beliefs about play and learning, and to get detailed accounts of their experiences when implementing play as a practice – from a socially appropriate distance, either through Google forms, or Zoom. This was considered to be one major change to the research study process, while other research methodology remained the same, as it would have been under normal circumstances. In addition, this chapter outlined the interpretivist paradigm in which this research study was situated, as well as the qualitative research method, and case study approach respectively. Following from this, the research context and sample were discussed, as well as the key stages of the data production process. Next, the phases of thematic analysis used to analyse the collected data, was explained. Finally, aspects of trustworthiness were described in relation to the research study, followed by the ethical considerations that were adhered to throughout the data collection process, and research study as a whole.

Chapter Four – Findings & Discussion

4.1. Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to explore ECCE teachers' beliefs about play and learning, and the ways in which these beliefs influence their practice in the South African ECCE setting. Following the current debates surrounding ECCE teachers' beliefs about play and learning, it was necessary to consider the beliefs held by ECCE teachers from both advantaged and disadvantaged ECCE settings. Furthermore, it was important to ascertain whether participants experienced challenges as they attempted to implement play as a practice. Therefore, this chapter presented the findings emanating from the surveys and interviews, together with a discussion on these findings in relation to each identified theme, the literature review, the theoretical framework, as well as the research study as a whole.

4.2. Findings

4.2.1. Theme 1 – Teachers' beliefs about play.

"I mean, well, without play, what is early childhood development?" questions Teacher A. Participants throughout the study expressed similar views surrounding play, emphasising it's integral role in forming the basis for children's early learning and development. Most participants described play to be an activity that took place, either indoors or outdoors, and considered it suitable for individuals or groups of children together – during which children are given the opportunity to freely learn, explore, and construct their own understanding of the world (Teachers C; D; H; I; T). In some cases, play took on a more teacher-directed approach, while others ensured that there was a balance between teacher-initiated and child-initiated activities (Teacher A; Teacher E). Participants elaborated by describing the different spaces set up in their classrooms, or in their outdoor environments, which encouraged children to engage in different types of play. Types of play that were common to most participants included fantasy and imaginative play, role play during games of 'mommy-baby' or 'teacher-teacher' (Teachers A; H; N; T), object play often provided in the form of Legos and other blocks or toys, exploratory play used to stimulate children's senses, and locomotor play that occurred outdoors (Teacher C; Miller & Almon, 2009; Hughes, in Marsh et al., 2016).

Participants agreed that play was a valuable contributor to children's holistic learning and development (Teachers C; D; E; K). From the outset, all participants, but Teacher L, identified the role of play as a form of children's learning. Teacher L viewed play as "free time to refresh minds so that they can concentrate for an appropriate time while working." However, other participants felt that, as children explored and discovered their surrounding world through play, they received feedback that not only enhanced their skills, but also allowed them to develop a better understanding of themselves, and their capabilities

(Teacher I; Teacher T). Therefore, some participants made it clear that young children did not learn through a serious, formal approach that specifically requested children to "learn this" (Teacher K). Rather, it was considered as a fact that children were learning as they were playing and having fun – "Play is just play… it doesn't force them to learn"; however, "they get to learn a lot of things that they've never known," claimed Teacher O. In this regard, it was difficult for participants to separate the concepts of *play* and *learning* (Teachers A-M; Teachers O-T).

In terms of children's development, most participants focused on the child's physical skills and abilities that were developed through play – specifically, their gross motor and fine motor skills (Teacher F). Children were provided with a variety of opportunities such as kicking a ball, skipping, playing on the jungle gym, running around outside, beading activities, sorting tasks, and free-drawing opportunities, among others. While it was acceptable for children to play on their own, most participants observed children interacting with others during play which promoted the development of their social skills such as "sharing, who goes first, and taking turns, tidying up the classroom, learning how to be orderly, and putting things back in their place" (Teacher C, Teacher D). Also, Teacher C and Teacher O commented on the development of children's cognitive skills that were observed during play such as "classifying and categorising", "problem-solving", and "language skills". Emotional and moral aspects of children's development were fostered; children learnt how to understand their peers better, how they had an impact on others and vice-versa, and how to respect others and the environment around them (Teacher A; Teacher D; Teacher E). Essentially, Teacher K, among other participants, concluded that development in each area of play would "create a well-rounded child". Interestingly, Teacher H believed that children's development was responsible for informing children's play, as it made children aware of what they were able to do, and what types of play they were able to engage in – suitable to their age and level of development. This was considered as significant, especially when applying a child-centred approach which is structured around the child's individual learning and developmental needs.

Upon reflection, participants delved into their earlier play memories in search of the moments and experiences that formed their initial beliefs about play. Some participants shared vivid play memories from their childhood as their understanding of 'learning through play' was fostered from a young age. Teacher A admitted that play was a big part of her childhood which allowed her to learn different skills in a way that was so natural that she did not realise learning was ongoing at the time. Teacher H remembered a variety of games that were played during her childhood – both formal and informal – that also contributed to the acquisition of various skills. Many participants mentioned sensory play experiences with sand, water and playdough that stood out for them in their childhood, as well as how they were given opportunities to experience nature, by climbing trees, playing in the sand, and making mud pies in the 'mud kitchen'. Teacher N added that fantasy play had a big influence in her childhood, where she would dress up in old

clothes, play cooking games, and use old boxes to create houses. All participants claimed that these play experiences in childhood influenced their current beliefs about play, which they have now implemented and encouraged in their own ECCE setting.

Additionally, some participants were guided by more theoretical approaches towards play, such as Montessori and Reggio Emilia, while others were provided with the opportunity to refine their initial understandings of play, if an opinion of play was not formed already (Teachers C; H; I; K; T). Specifically, Teacher R believed that her teacher-training provided her with "a meaning behind everything that is done" which changed her initial beliefs about play into a clearer understanding about what play entails for the young child. Furthermore, Teacher R believed that it was necessary to transfer this knowledge about play into practice in order to serve the needs of the child. Also, participants consulted the curriculum framework to further their knowledge of play, and how it should be implemented. However, all participants opted to use their respective curriculum frameworks as a guideline, in conjunction with their own knowledge of play, their experiences that they accumulated over the years, and their beliefs surrounding the ways in which play should be implemented.

While participants' ECCE settings differed in terms of available resources, support, programmes, and services that were offered (Britto et al., 2011), their attitudes and beliefs towards play were similar. Teacher O stated that "play is beneficial to children because it gives them a chance to explore the world, even in a small space" which adequately summarises the views expressed by other participants regarding the nature of play. Teacher K added, "you don't even need specialised equipment, you could just use whatever you have, and create a game that would then be able to allow children to use the muscles that they require – whichever need to be developed." Based on the evidence, it is apparent that participants ensured that children were afforded a range of opportunities to learn, develop, and engage in various types of play. This was also influenced by participants' changing beliefs and attitudes regarding the subject of *play*.

4.2.2. Theme 2 – Teachers' beliefs about learning.

In considering participants' beliefs about play, some participants from disadvantaged ECCE settings struggled to clearly define learning throughout the study. These participants described learning as a process of when "children learn something", which did not adequately unpack the concept (Teacher N; Teacher Q; Teacher T). On the other hand, developing their skills, "getting new information, and growing their knowledge" (Teacher O) were common responses gathered from the majority of participants, regardless of their ECCE setting. Teacher K explained that once individuals get this knowledge, they will then be able to "use what they have learnt to further themselves." As learning is mostly incidental, Teacher A thus distinguished between formal learning that offered children more structured learning experiences,

and informal learning which took on a more informal approach to learning. Teachers either employed teacher-guided or child-initiated approaches respectively. However, Teacher A added that "with the younger kids [of 3 and 4], they don't learn so much through a very formal approach… their main way of learning is through play."

Hence, participants not only elaborated on their beliefs about learning, but they also made the necessary connections with play, and *play* as a way in which children learn. Most participants briefly identified the interconnectedness between the two concepts, while some participants emphasised that *play* and *learning* worked in conjunction with each other (Teachers A; B; H; O). In fact, Teacher O referred to play as an "educational tool," through which the child learns, explores, and has fun; and Teacher H defined play as "a child's innate need to learn new things" which "basically encompasses everything that a child is learning." Further, Teacher H recalled her childhood memories of play, during which, she claimed she had no memories of learning associated with "sitting at a desk." Rather, her memories included a variety of "formalised games, and completely informal games on the playground." These experiences, ultimately, shaped her learning, and developed skills and abilities, necessary for her formal schooling – where concepts were then taught and learnt while sitting at a desk. Similarly, Teacher A commented on her play experiences, stating that "you don't even realise that you are learning things… it just kind of happens naturally." In recalling this unobtrusiveness, she reflected on the different skills that were learnt during play which set the foundation for other "educational bits" during formal schooling. Following from these experiences, participants were in agreement that play had an integral part in preparing children for formal schooling. Teachers C and D maintained that play introduced children to various concepts in a concrete manner, and allowed children to make connections with abstract concepts in formal schooling.

Therefore, it is important that ECCE teachers "make sure that children's learning is integrated" in play, claimed Teacher R, who stated that learning should not be presented to children in a serious or structured manner; other participants concurred (Teacher A; Teacher K; Teacher O). Furthermore, Teachers A, D, E, H, K and O believed that children learn more effectively in an informal manner because they are not forced to learn something, as is the case in a more formalised classroom setting. While the curriculum is consulted on a daily basis to inform ECCE teachers' decisions and planning, Teacher R reiterated the need to let children be free, and to encourage the act of 'learning through play'.

Although Teacher C acknowledged the overlap between play and learning, she viewed learning as something that was more structured, in comparison to play; this drew the fine line between what she considered to be 'play' and what she considered to be 'learning'. Teachers N and T also described learning as a more structured, teacher-guided activity that occurred in the classroom. Examples that were provided, included children learning colour-recognition, the alphabet, nursery rhymes, and songs. However, Teacher T clearly stated that the learning of advanced academic concepts such as tracing letters, should only start

if and when it is age-appropriate for the young child. While these teachers still acknowledged the importance of play, Teacher L had a contrasting viewpoint that "the focus should be more on working."

4.2.3. Theme 3 – Role of the teacher.

In analysing survey and interview responses, all but one believed that the focus of the ECCE curriculum should be centred around play, rather than the formal learning of academic concepts. Accordingly, beliefs held by the majority of participants indicated that play can either be unstructured, or at certain times "a little more structured" (Teacher C; Teacher D; Teacher E). While participants acknowledged that children learn in an informal manner, most stated that their daily activities involved equally both teacher-initiated play, as well as child-initiated play (Teacher C; Teacher O). For example, Teacher C described a game that she implemented – specifically focusing on developing numeracy and literacy skills – where children roll the dice and answer a question as part of the game. In this way, Teacher C structured the activity to suit a particular outcome, and children were not aware that they were learning through playful activity. Other participants approached their teacher-initiated play activities in a similar manner by specifically incorporating their theme or inquiry of the week into the various play activities that they had planned (Teacher A; Teacher H). In one particular activity, Teacher A encouraged children to pretend to be engineers to design and create their own buildings from recycled boxes. She claimed that her role focused mostly on "guiding them towards what I was expecting of them." However, depending on the activity, the degree of guidance provided by the teacher will differ accordingly – either requiring more involvement from the teacher, or allowing children to play independently (Teacher K). In addition to teacher-initiated activities, participants felt that it was still important to let "them come up with their own ideas, and just let them be free" which promoted child-initiated activities (Teacher A). Therefore, the remainder of play opportunities offered in most ECCE settings represented a child-initiated approach, thus allowing children the freedom to choose who they would like to play with, where their play would take place, and the resources or equipment that would be used in their play.

Of some cases, participants argued that their play activities were not structured in the sense that they were constantly telling children what to do, and how to do it. Instead, participants viewed themselves as facilitators during play who used resources that were available in ways to organise the indoor and outdoor play environments (Teachers A; D; H; K; O). Often, these participants would not only supervise children's play, but also guide children's learning through teachable moments, question their actions, gain a deeper understanding of what children were doing during play, and provide suggestions that inspire children to explore further. Teacher C added, "I try not to interrupt them while they are playing and observe them and notice what they like or dislike and what their strengths or weaknesses are." In the case of Teacher N, her children were guided by the daily message board that outlined the activities for the day. However, Teacher

N considered the current interests of the children, and amended the daily programme accordingly. On the other hand, Teacher R only implemented a child-initiated approach to play as she did not want to restrict children in their play, and thereby restrict their learning. She continuously reinforced the idea that ECCE teachers should not be too rigid when they implement the ECCE curriculum, as children start to lose interest in their learning as they are unable to fully experience the benefits of play.

In order to realise the benefits of the different play opportunities within the ECCE curriculum, participants were required to set up the play environment in such a way that encouraged simultaneous playing and learning (Teacher A). Therefore, participants described their respective play environments, and the resources they were expected to provide. In some cases, these participants were influenced by their familiar theoretical approaches to learning, and often implemented practices that were either Montessori- or Reggio Emilia-inspired. Teacher K ensured that all areas in her classroom were play-based for optimal learning. Teacher C, among others, listed various resources for use in her indoor play environment: Lego, building blocks, puzzles, books, puppets, and a grocery store set up in the fantasy play area. Other participants described a house or kitchen set up in their fantasy play area, and also mentioned the open-ended sensory experiences offered to young children. These opportunities included sand and water play, and working with rice, foam, playdough, clay, mud, and ice (Teachers A; H; K; P). Teacher N commented on the outdoor equipment that children enjoy playing with such as balls and hula hoops, and noted that children also took an interest in gardening when exploring the outdoor play area. However, participants from both advantaged and disadvantaged ECCE settings experienced structural challenges in this regard.

Despite these challenges, participants shared a common understanding of their roles. Safety was the most important aspect that participants considered to ensure that children felt secure in their environment. In this way, children felt more comfortable to express themselves, and to explore and discover their world through play (Teachers C; E; H; I; K; R; T). Therefore, supervision and guidance was considered essential during children's play (Teacher A). Further, participants believed that they should provide children with diverse materials and resources, as well as a variety of play equipment in each play area (Teacher I). As children engaged in playful activities, participants believed that they were facilitators, rather than directors of play (Teacher C). Teachers O, R and T described their role as being more interactive in the sense that they were also involved in children's play, while observing and assessing children at the same time. In this regard, Teacher A outlined the supportive role of the teacher during play as she believed that the teacher should not only provide children with opportunities to develop a variety of skills, but also manage conflicts, foresee potential dangers, and teach children how to resolve challenging issues, should they arise (Teachers B; G; H; P). In contrast, Teacher N believed that her role was to "show them how to play" and to "check if they are able to do what she tells them to do" – hence, adopting a more teacher-directed approach to play. Regardless of their approaches to the implementation of play, it is understood that ECCE

teachers are expected to implement certain measures to ensure children are well-occupied during play activities. However, due to the challenges that were present (e.g. lack of adequate resources), participants were unable to adequately fulfil their role.

4.2.4. Theme 4 – Factors that influence the implementation of play.

After sharing their beliefs on play and learning, and how the young child learns effectively through play, participants proceeded explaining how they implement play within their respective ECCE settings. Whether participants worked at an advantaged ECCE setting or at a disadvantaged ECCE setting, similar challenges were present in both. These challenges included academic concerns, parental issues, teachers' own education and qualifications, structural challenges, and behavioural concerns of children.

Regarding academic concerns surrounding the curricula and policy, participants from advantaged ECCE settings claimed that companies who managed their ECCE centre, also managed their ECCE curriculum – ultimately, dictating what the child should be learning at a particular age. In Teacher A's experience, their company wanted children to learn more formal academic concepts throughout the daily programme which she found to be unnecessary for the young child. She claimed that children were already learning age-appropriate content in an informal play-based manner, and that "they will have lots of opportunities to develop these [academic] skills as they get up and as they get older." In terms of the curriculum used at her ECCE centre specifically, Teacher H believed that "if interpreted the right way, it gives a lot of space for play." But if interpreted incisively with an academic lens, it is implied that she believed that you would implement the curriculum using a more formal approach. Hence, she applies a play-based mindset when consulting the curriculum, while ensuring children are given ample opportunities to learn and develop various concepts through play. Similarly, Teacher C indicated that children are provided with a range of practical opportunities in line with the curriculum, as she believed children need a concrete foundation to understand simple concepts developed through play, before moving on to more abstract concepts. In accordance with Teacher K's implementation of the curriculum, prescribed workbooks are expected to be completed by children in order to learn particular academic concepts throughout the year. However, Teacher K insists on adopting a play-based approach, and would "tweak it [the activities], so that the children are also performing it in a fun-way, as opposed to just sitting at a desk, and colouring in a picture." On the other hand, participants from disadvantaged ECCE settings did not experience any challenges with their respective academic curricula, as it already included ways in which ECCE teachers could incorporate play into their daily programmes, while still ensuring academic concepts are adequately covered.

While the ECCE teachers play an important role in the implementation of their beliefs into practice, it is found that parents are also influential, in the sense that they often share their beliefs about play, and how they believe it should be implemented in the ECCE curriculum, if at all. In terms of parental attitudes and

beliefs, some participants experienced challenges surrounding communication with parents, in terms of explaining to them the value of play; but others experienced healthy and supportive relationships with the parents at their ECCE centre (Teacher O). In some instances, Teacher C described parents as proactive and very involved in their children's lives, while others were "unfortunately, too busy with work, or just not interested." Similarly, Teacher N and Teacher T held weekly and monthly meetings to keep parents informed of their children's progress. However, it was clear to them, which parents were interested in their child's learning experiences, and those who were not. In a different situation, Teacher C also identified some parents who were too involved (or 'interfering') in their children's learning by essentially restricting their learning by 'taking over' children's experiences and doing the tasks for them.

Communication with parents was believed to be quite an important process in the ECCE programme. Teacher H and Teacher K ensured that each moment of learning was well-documented, in keeping with their Reggio Emilia approach to learning. These participants regularly shared photos and videos with parents and other stakeholders on a daily or weekly basis respectively. However, in some cases, parents did not always understand the value of play being a tool for children's learning. Some would question why their children were playing all day instead of developing key writing skills. Teacher H believed that through the sharing of pictures, stories from children's play, and relevant research articles, "you make the learning visible to parents" which results in their increased awareness of the value of play and its underlying benefits. Once parents were updated on their children's learning, participants found that they did not receive many queries regarding the implementation of play-based learning practices in the ECCE setting (Teacher H; Teacher K). In Teacher A's experience, parents believed that play was not safe or always hygienic for their children, and would often limit their children's activities in the sandpit area ("because they get too dirty") or climbing on the jungle gym (because "it's too high"). While Teacher A reassured parents that their children were safe, supervised at all times, and that the play equipment was serviced on a regular basis, she claimed that some parents were too 'cautious', affecting children's play experiences and their foundation for learning various concepts and skills.

Concerning participants' current education experience and qualifications, many were open to furthering their knowledge and understanding, should the opportunity present itself (Teachers H; K; N; O; R; T). Teacher R adds, "I'm okay for now, but I would love to increase it [knowledge]. It's better to equip yourself with more knowledge and skills" to fully understand all aspects of children, how they learn and develop, and how to deal with them. While Teacher K has been teaching for over 30 years, she also felt that she will never know everything that needs to be known. Hence, further research is always needed, to improve and refine her practices. When asked what changes they would make to their current practices, to better support children during play, Teacher N mentioned that she would like to add more to her knowledge, in order to find new and more effective ways to implement play into practice – especially in

the disadvantaged ECCE setting. Although no issues were mentioned about their qualifications, Teacher K expressed her concern with younger teachers who had recently completed their teaching degrees. While these teachers may have gained a lot of knowledge from their teacher training, she claimed that they do not have the years of experience that allow them to effectively implement play into practice.

Further, most participants experienced structural challenges in their ECCE setting, irrespective of whether they were from advantaged or disadvantaged ECCE settings. One of the common challenges included the lack of equipment, and inadequate support for children's learning during play. Specifically, from the advantaged ECCE centre perspective, Teacher C mentioned that modern equipment was needed to stimulate children in developing a concrete understanding of mathematics and language. She explains, "because it's hands-on; it's not a worksheet that you can photocopy." Teacher H stated that her ECCE centre had ample space for play, offered children enough time in which to play, and allowed teachers free access to a variety of resources and materials. However, funding for these resources posed a challenge, as "it gets very costly to just have enough, to just satiate the children's appetite for drawing and folding." While Teacher H attempted to utilise recycled materials, she admitted that there is "a thirst from the teacher for more and more interesting things to put out", but this means a lot of her own money being spent on designing games, purchasing items from second-hand shops, or finding new toys for children to play with. Teacher K shared these concerns stating that as a teacher, "we're not really paid huge amounts, so whenever you want to do something that's different, and it requires other resources, you have to fund it yourself." Over the years, she has managed to build a collection of resources for herself; however, the challenge arises with new teachers who are inexperienced in resource designing. Regarding the daily programme, Teacher K states that her time is definitely limited in terms of what she is expected to cover each day; that is, ensuring that children achieve each of the expected outcomes. In comparison to other ECCE centres, Teacher A believed that her ECCE centre was very blessed with regards to resources, toys and equipment, regular maintenance of equipment, ample space for children to run around, and adequate staff to support and supervise children during play.

In the more disadvantaged ECCE settings, Teachers N, O, R and T mentioned a lack of space in their ECCE centres which limited children's scope to free-play. Due to their small indoor areas, Teachers N, P, R and T often encouraged children to engage in outdoor play. However, the weather determined whether children would play outdoors, or whether they would be stuck indoors all day. In the case of Teacher T, children were limited to her garage that was used as a playroom. In addition, Teacher N and Teacher T discussed the toys that they made with the children from recycled materials – due to a lack of financial support from the ECCE centre, and parents alike. Teacher O stated that it would be beneficial to have bought resources and equipment such as swings, as opposed to ones only made from recycled materials.

However, in most disadvantaged ECCE centres from this data set, parents were only required to pay what they could afford, thus affecting the availability of equipment.

Some participants also experienced challenges with staff support. Teacher C explained that there were not sufficient teacher-assistants at their ECCE centre – in some cases teacher-assistants provided support on a rotational basis. This became problematic when teachers were left without the additional support at a particular time when it was needed. Teacher C believed it was necessary to have this extra support because "if you've got no help, then you're busy going to the art cupboard or you're tidying up or preparing for the next art activity – in which case, you feel burnt out, by the end of the day." This impacts on the quality of implementation of her beliefs in practice. While Teacher R shared the same views on staff support, she admitted that she could not afford to pay them, coming from a disadvantaged ECCE setting. Teacher H also discussed the support received from teacher-assistants, which proved to be beneficial in seeing to the physical needs of the 3-4 year-old child such as toilet time and nappy changing. She adds, "I don't know how people with big classes do it" because she felt that teacher-assistants allow the teacher to be more present in the classroom, and found it difficult to manage the class without such additional support.

The issue of children's behaviour observed in children during play such as arguing, fighting or avoiding play activities, also proved challenging. Teacher A reflected on her children who often fight over toys or taking turns, and express themselves through tantrums and aggression against others (Teacher O). She mentioned that a 'ban' from play for a short period works well in managing behaviour as children are expected to learn the consequences of their negative actions. Teacher K implemented a 'calm down corner' in her classroom to allow children to 'cool off' before they are ready to join the group again to engage in playful activity. Furthermore, she emphasises encouraging sharing and turn-taking during play to ensure every child gets an equal opportunity, in addition to building character. Additionally, Teacher O informs children of their choices, and ensures that they are comfortable in their environment, and not forced into doing a particular activity. Teacher T, on the other hand, observed that children who did not start their early childhood education at an ECCE centre, did not develop the appropriate attitudes and values that are normally nurtured in such environments, often creating behavioural issues once they reached the age of 3-4. In contrast, those who started ECCE from an early age learnt how to respect others and the environment around them, hence no form of bullying was exhibited during play. According to Teacher H, behavioural problems are common for children aged 3-4 as many are experiencing their first time values such as sharing since it's the first time being away from home where they are often 'babied'. Therefore, Teacher H states that it is likely that "a lot of behavioural things do interrupt play… and it does hinder the teacher's ability to just be present." However, it should be noted that the majority of children across the various ECCE centres do not exhibit negative behaviour (Teacher A; Teacher C; Teacher R). Based on

the data collected, it is evident that participants intend to implement play effectively, despite the factors that challenge their beliefs, and impact the ways in which their views are implemented in practice.

4.3. Discussion

4.3.1. Theme 1 – Teachers' beliefs about play

The perusal of current and previous literature, indicated that several researchers investigated teachers' beliefs in relation to their practices, more specifically, their beliefs surrounding play and learning (Meehan, 2007; Renick, 2009; Meran, 2019). Researchers conclude that the majority of teachers across various studies believed that play was important for the young child to engage in, considering its role in furthering children's learning and contributing to their holistic development (Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Smit, 2015; Vu et al., 2015; Clevenger, 2016; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Meran, 2019; Jensen et al., 2020; Nilsen, 2021). From a Vygotskian perspective, play is key to children's learning and development – specifically in uplifting children beyond their current level of development (Hughes, 2009; Vu, Han, & Buell, 2015; Anderson Nugent, 2017). The same conclusion was reached after participants in this study shared their views and beliefs about play. Teacher A emphasised the role of play in shaping children's learning by mentioning: "without play, what is early childhood development?" From the evidence, it was confirmed that the majority of participants expressed similar views surrounding the value and importance of play for young children as they agreed that play was key in building the foundation for children's early learning and development (Teachers C; D; E; K).

From the outset, several definitions of play emerged as a result of the increasing research surrounding play and its implementation of play as practice, within the ECCE setting. However, researchers, theorists and teachers experienced much confusion due to the lack of a common definition for the construct of play (Stagnitti, 2004; Clevenger, 2016; Darian-Smith & Sleight, 2016). Despite this, the majority of researchers had much in common regarding the concept *play*. Accordingly, play was viewed as an opportunity that allowed children freedom to express their actions, to learn more about themselves, and to make-sense of the world around them, in relation to their daily lives (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Leaupepe, 2010). Not only did play focus on children engaging in pleasurable and spontaneous opportunities during which they were free to make choices but they were also intrinsically motivated to build on their current knowledge and skills in an active and meaningful way – in order to support their future learning and development (Singer, 2015; Darian-Smith & Sleight, 2016; Irvin, 2017; Guirguis, 2018; Yogman et al., 2018). When asked of their beliefs about play, the majority of participants were in agreement with researchers' views, stating that children were given the opportunity to freely learn, explore, and construct their own understanding of the world, as they interacted within the different indoor and outdoor play areas, with others, or on their own (Teachers C; D; H; I; T; Stagnitti, 2004).

Regardless of their specific ECCE setting, participants noted that children were often found engaging in various types of play, including fantasy and imaginative play, role play, object play, outdoor locomotor play, and exploratory play, aimed at stimulating children's senses (Teachers A; C; H; N; T; Miller & Almon, 2009; Hughes, in Marsh et al., 2016). Research indicates that children's conceptual understandings of the world were created during the process of play, as children immersed themselves in various playful activities of their choice (Leaupepe, 2010; Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013; Smit, 2015; Yogman et al., 2018). As Vygotsky (1978) espoused, play forms an essential part of early childhood development where children are given the opportunity to 'face' real-world problems through imaginary situations, and to use specific roles and rules to bring their play to life. Additionally, as children engage in play with others, their higher mental functions are constantly developing by forming new connections with the world around them (Saracho & Spodek, 1998; Ryu, 2003; Martlew et al., 2011; Clevenger, 2016; Phelps, 2016; Anderson Nugent, 2017; Hostettler Scharer, 2017; Irvin, 2017; Henricks, 2020). Following these claims, most participants found it difficult to separate *play* and *learning* – which were so interconnected in preparing the child for future learning (Teachers A-M; Teachers O-T).

One participant, however, viewed play as a period of free time, separate from the learning of advanced academic skills, such as reading or counting (Smit, 2015). In this case, Teacher L believed that it was only necessary to implement play as a practice in the ECCE daily programme as it allowed children to refresh their minds before being required to focus on refining their academic skills that would assist them during formal schooling. Only a minority of participants, from other research studies, agreed with Teacher L who stated that the purpose of play was purely recreational (Aronstam & Braund, 2015). Hence, the minority of participants implemented a teacher-directed approach.

On a positive note, the majority of participants focused on the different ways in which play was enacted in their ECCE daily programme. Researchers reported on the many forms of play, including "directed and self-initiated, formal and informal, constructive and destructive" (Chudacoff, in Darian-Smith & Sleight, 2016, p.227). In some cases, participants adopted either a teacher-directed approach, a child-initiated approach, or a combination of both (Teacher A; Teacher E). However, after working with and observing children as they explored and engaged in playful activities, it was decided by participants that young children learn best through an informal and unstructured approach, as opposed to a more formal, structured, and rigid approach to learning (Teacher A; Teacher O; Teacher K). In this informal approach, children are not restricted by teachers during play, hence they were more receptive towards learning new concepts and skills, as opposed to that which focused on passive rote learning and common drills (Smit, 2015; Yogman et al., 2018). As participants were able to identify the practices they implemented and the roles they adopted during children's play, their action beliefs and their beliefs about their roles, were brought to the fore (Mo, 2020).

Within the Vygotskian perspective, play was viewed as a 'transitional stage' where children were encouraged to further their cognitive abilities, as they progressed from sensory motor and visual representations to more complex symbolic thoughts (Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Hostettler Scharer, 2017). However, play not only focused on developing children's cognitive skills, but also catered for children's holistic needs (Stegelin, 2005; Ginsburg, 2007; White, 2012; Whitebread, 2012; Nolan & Paatsch, 2018; Guirguis, 2018; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Henricks, 2020). Through their observations of children playing, participants acknowledged the ways in which play supported children's learning; that is, by enhancing children's knowledge about themselves and the world around them, in addition to developing their skills and abilities within each area of development (Teacher I; Teacher T). Most participants were aware of children's physical skills and abilities that were developed through play (Teacher F). Depending on their particular ECCE setting and the resources they had available, participants provided children with a variety of opportunities to actively develop their gross motor skills such as kicking a ball, playing on the jungle gym, running around outside, as well as opportunities to improve their fine motor skills by engaging in various creative arts activities. When playing alone or with others, participants observed various cognitive skills that children developed during play, including reasoning and negotiation, "classifying and categorising" as well as "problem-solving" and "language skills" (Teachers A; D; E; O; Smit, 2015). In some ways, children were seen using play as an escape from reality in order to solve problems and gain control of situations they previously could not comprehend (Aronstam & Braund, 2015). When playing in groups, children were given opportunities to better understand their peers, how they had an impact on others and vice-versa, and how to respect others and the environment around them – ultimately, contributing to their emotional development (Teacher A; Teacher D; Teacher E). Consequently, children's social skills such as "sharing, who goes first, and taking turns, tidying up the classroom, learning how to be orderly, and putting things back in their place" developed as children interacted with others during play (Teacher C; Teacher D; Smit, 2015). Not only did play allow children to freely express themselves and use their imagination while interacting with others, but children were also encouraged to make choices regarding the play environment, the resources to be used, and the rules that will govern their play (Vygotsky, 1978; Elkind, 2008; Meran, 2019; Nilsen, 2021).

Therefore, the majority of participants in this study were in agreement that play contributed to the development of a "well-rounded child", and implemented practices that were aligned with their beliefs (Teacher K; Renick, 2009; Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Vu et al., 2015; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Meran, 2019). To this end, play was believed to be both beneficial and joyful to the young child, and provided children with opportunities to explore and realise their fundamental rights (United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 1990). While Teacher H shared similar sentiments regarding the benefits of play being a contributor to children's holistic learning and development, she suggested that children's

development, ultimately, informed children's play. As children engaged in exploratory play-based activities, they were made aware of their own abilities and possibilities available to them during play. In addition to the other viewpoints shared, it is necessary to consider Teacher H's views that specifically considers children's individual learning and developmental needs which are so necessary when planning for, and implementing a child-centred and play-based ECCE curriculum.

After sharing their beliefs concerning play and its role in contributing to children's learning and development, participants reflected on various influences that contributed to the development of their current beliefs. Meehan (2007) stated that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors have the ability to impact one's beliefs, and the practices that we choose to implement – often highlighting inconsistencies should teachers' theoretical beliefs not match their action beliefs (Mo, 2020). Therefore, researchers first identified teachers' own childhood play memories and experiences as the point from which their play beliefs emanated which led to their understanding of 'learning through play' (Nespor, 1987; Raths, 2001; Faour, 2003; Renick, 2009; Wen et al., 2011; Smit, 2015; Clevenger, 2016; Phelps, 2016; Meran, 2019). Based on their personal and professional experiences, it is evident that each participant developed a unique understanding of play, and the extent to which they believed, play should be implemented in the ECCE curriculum (Meran, 2019; Nilsen, 2019). Consequently, participants claimed that play contributed greatly to their childhood, and allowed them to develop various skills in a natural and spontaneous way (Teacher A; Teacher H). Without the structure that is generally associated with learning, participants (as children) were unaware that learning was going on at the time. Furthermore, participants recalled the sensory experiences that they were introduced to during play; mostly involving sand, water, and playdough. Participants were often found playing in the sand or making mud pies in the 'mud kitchen' when they were not busy exploring nature or climbing trees (Teacher A; Teacher H; Teacher K). Other participants noted that fantasy play was also quite memorable, as they would often dress up in old clothes, play cooking games, or make use of recycled materials to create little houses (Teacher N). After reviewing participants' reflections, it was interesting to note that they acknowledged the influence of their own childhood play-memories in shaping their current beliefs about play, and essentially the practices they chose to implement within the ECCE setting. It can be said that participants also wanted to provide the same joyful experiences to the children they were teaching (Smit, 2015).

Moreover, researchers recognised the influence of teachers' university experiences, pre-service training experiences, and the attitudes of mentor-teachers and supervisors who contributed to the foundation of their theoretical beliefs and action beliefs regarding play and learning (Raths, 2001; Meehan, 2007; Smit, 2015; Meran, 2019; Mo, 2020). While Lortie (1975) supported the view that teachers' beliefs also developed after years of observing the practices of their teachers whom they admired, participants throughout this study did not reflect on their experiences and observations during their student days. When

asked to share the theoretical approaches they were exposed to during their teacher-training days, some participants identified the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches that played an instrumental role in shaping their beliefs, and the practices they chose to implement within the ECCE setting (Teachers C; H; I; K; T). Teacher C found herself consulting her notes on Montessori's practices to ensure that she was planning appropriate play activities that would extend children's learning, while Teacher H and Teacher T mentioned how Reggio Emilia practices guided their thinking, and the ways in which they introduced children to play within the ECCE setting. While these participants added to their existing knowledge of play, other participants viewed their teacher-training as an opportunity to refine their initial understandings of play; this gave meaning to the practices that they had only heard of, or observed. Teacher R admitted that her experiences during her teacher-training changed her initial beliefs about play, and provided her with a new outlook that focused on play as a beneficial learning experience for the young child. Therefore, Teacher R, along with other participants, believed that it was necessary to implement this knowledge about play, in practice, in order to better understand the child while ensuring that teaching and learning was suited to the child's needs.

In consideration of the curriculum framework as a contributing factor towards teachers' beliefs about play, evidence indicated that it also guided the way in which play could be implemented as practice. In this particular study, however, all participants opted to use their respective curriculum frameworks as a guideline in conjunction with their own knowledge, their experiences that they had accumulated over the years, and their beliefs on how play should be implemented to their group of children. In order to interpret and implement the curriculum, the relevant policy documents combined with their (teachers') past experiences gained from implementing the curriculum, their theoretical beliefs, and action beliefs, were applied to guide their thinking to focus on the practices to be implemented (Mo, 2020). Based on these views, it can be concluded that teachers' beliefs are refined through their personal experiences and theoretical understandings – all of which have an influence on the practices they choose to implement (Clevenger, 2016; Phelps, 2016). However, if participants' theoretical beliefs do not match their action beliefs, a possible disconnect would be evident between their initial beliefs, and the practices they implement (Mo, 2020).

Researchers also identified cultural practices as factors that influenced teachers' beliefs regarding play. This was dependent on how different cultures perceived play – either as a meaningless act in which children spend their free time, or as an essential contributor to children's learning and development (Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Shaik, 2016). Vygotsky (1978) believed that it was necessary to consider teachers' cultural context upon which their beliefs and teaching practices were founded, as these views had the potential to guide children towards specific academic goals through the transmission of cultural knowledge in terms of teacher-child interactions (Chakravarthi, 2009; Renick, 2009; Bergen, 2015;

Clevenger, 2016; Phelps, 2016; Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Within the South African context, the culture factor was necessary to consider due to the diversity in the country. While participants from this research study belonged to diverse cultural groups, this was not specifically discussed.

Although participants were situated in different ECCE settings, their attitudes and beliefs towards play were quite similar to each other, and those shared by other researchers and ECCE teachers. From the data collected, it was evident that the majority of participants have 'educated' themselves on *play*, the benefits of play, and a variety of play-based practices to ensure that children receive a variety of opportunities to learn, develop, and experience the world around them. Regardless of their current situation, participants indicated their collective beliefs on the value of play as a contributor to the young child's learning and development, such that they implemented these beliefs about play in practice. This is seen through the implementation of their action beliefs, often influenced by various intrinsic and extrinsic factors that form part of their theoretical beliefs. It was also necessary to consider those participants within the minority who viewed play as a reward for children, after the completion of various formal activities aimed at improving children's academic skills. Depending on the beliefs held by participants, this study was provided with insight into teachers' beliefs about their roles during play – either as a facilitator, supervisor, or director of play.

4.3.2. Theme 2 – Teachers' beliefs about learning

The review of literature also revealed that several studies investigated teachers' beliefs about learning, and the ways in which teachers believe that children learn (Ryu, 2003; Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Vu et al., 2015; Clevenger, 2016; Phelps, 2016; Irvin, 2017; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Meran, 2019; Jensen et al., 2020; Nilsen, 2021; Walsh & Fallon, 2021). Based on these studies, it is understood that teachers have mixed beliefs regarding the implementation of a play-based learning curriculum and ensuring that children are introduced to formal schooling experiences from an early age. Some teachers followed inflexible guidelines to ensure that children developed academic skills in ECCE contexts in order to sufficiently prepare them for formal schooling in the years to come, while other teachers were confident that children learn best through play activities that fostered creativity, active exploration, and discovery (Irvin, 2017).

It becomes difficult to ignore teacher-centred views shared by ECCE teachers which are fast becoming a reality in the South African context, as well as worldwide. Some ECCE teachers believe that "earlier is better," based on the idea that it is never too early to start learning and developing academic skills that will benefit children later on in their lives, rather than wasting their energy on playful activity (Ryu, 2003, p.26). Teacher L's action beliefs indicate a similar position in which she argues that "the focus should be more on working", while play is enacted briefly to provide children with a break to refresh their minds, before refocusing their attention towards more structured activities (Mo, 2020). Researchers observed that

these teachers find it appealing when children are engaged in structured activities with predicted outcomes as they are able to witness children excelling in advanced academic tasks such as reading or counting, from a young age (Smit, 2015). Furthermore, these ECCE teachers were against the implementation of a child-centred approach as they believed it did not adequately address all aspects of children's learning, in comparison to a more structured, teacher-directed approach (Nilsen, 2021; Walsh & Fallon, 2021).

Despite Teacher C's efforts to acknowledge the overlap between play and learning, she still viewed learning as something that was more structured, in comparison to play. Teachers N and T understood the role of play in children's learning, yet described learning as a more structured, teacher-guided activity that took place in the classroom. Based on the findings from this research study, it was evident that some ECCE centres have taken on a structured approach being influenced by the current "academically rigorous" climate (Clevenger, 2016, p.2). Thus, more emphasis is placed on academic skills – which has led to a shift in focus from developing the whole child to developing the cognitive child (Irvin, 2017). Researchers also recognised this evolution within the ECCE curriculum which has been narrowed to focus mostly on developing key literacy and mathematical skills that are believed to be necessary for children's formal assessments in the years to come (Phelps, 2016; Jensen et al., 2020). In addition, children are expected to learn content to reproduce for assessment in order to indicate whether learning has taken place. Some examples were provided by Teachers N and T, highlighting the repetition involved in the process of children learning their colours, or teachers teaching children the alphabet, nursery rhymes, and songs. Although Teacher T stated that the learning of advanced academic concepts should only start when it is age-appropriate for the young child, it is often found that ECCE teachers repeat these common topics every morning to ensure children develop good foundational knowledge necessary for later learning (Phelps, 2016; Jensen et al., 2020). These views, however, were not acceptable to the remaining participants of this research study.

The participants of this research study were in agreement amongst themselves that play was a valuable contributor towards children's holistic learning and development (Teachers C; D; E; K). All participants, but one (Teacher L), viewed play as an opportunity for children to enhance their skills and abilities, and to develop a better understanding of themselves through their exploration of their world (Teacher I; Teacher T). While these teachers noted the impact of current academic pressures on the implementation of play within the ECCE curriculum, they strongly believed that play leads to learning. The play proponents aimed to encourage other ECCE teachers to adopt similar action beliefs by incorporating play into their existing curriculum in order to benefit the young child's learning and development (Mo, 2020). Not only did they believe that children improve their skills in each of the developmental domains (as did most participants of this research study), these teachers also considered play to be the ideal vehicle to support children's learning within a flexible, natural environment (Clevenger, 2016; Fesseha & Pyle,

2016). Therefore, participants' theoretical beliefs showed signs of support towards the Vygotskian perspective that viewed play as "the leading source of development in preschool years" where teachers encourage children to advance their learning and developmental abilities through active engagement in playful activities (Vygotsky, 1978; Ryu, 2003; Bodrova & Leong, 2015, p.376; Mo, 2020; Taylor & Boyer, 2020).

In order to break free from the current academic pressures, these ECCE teachers believed it was necessary to adopt a more balanced and integrated play-based learning approach to ensure that children's needs are put first (Walsh & Fallon, 2021). However, if teachers go against their theoretical beliefs and give in to pressures advocating formal learning practices, they would be more focused on the planning of structured activities, leading to less time being spent on play, or in some cases, the complete disappearance of play from the ECCE curriculum (Ryu, 2003; Phelps, 2016; Irvin, 2017; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Mo, 2020). In these cases, while children may enter into formal school settings with well-developed skills for literacy and mathematics; their academically rigorous schedules may have affected their other developmental domains in the process – ultimately, preventing children from reaching their optimal development, and possibly encouraging the onset of anxiety and stress at an early age (Smit, 2015; Irvin, 2017; Meran, 2019). Furthermore, it is evident in studies such as the PIRLS and TIMSS, that too much focus on developing children's formal academic skills, has led to South African children ranking among some of the weakest performing countries, at an international level (Juan et al., 2019; Gustafsson, 2020). Therefore, Teacher A spoke to the suitability of a play-based learning approach, stating that the younger children "don't learn so much through a very formal approach… Their main way of learning is through play." Participants also agreed that a less serious, and more informal approach was needed, to optimise children's learning and ensure children's needs were met in each of the developmental domains (Teacher A; Teacher K). Thus, these participants' action beliefs were realised through the implementation of an informal play-based approach where children were free to explore, able to learn more effectively, and were not forced to learn, in order to develop a strong foundation of concepts and skills to aid their later learning (Teachers A; D; E, H; K; O; R; Mo, 2020). Consequently, teachers were provided with the opportunity to assist children in the process of constructing new knowledge, within the ZPD. While playful activity may appear meaningless to some, Vygotsky believed that the learning experiences that children acquire during play, contribute to the development of children's holistic skills, including the ability to read and write (Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Anderson Nugent, 2017; Walther, 2019; Taylor & Boyer, 2020).

With the above discussion in mind, most participants were able to define *play* and *learning* as concepts that worked hand-in-hand, rather than functioning as two separate concepts (Teachers A-M; Teachers O-T). However, there were some participants who experienced difficulty in defining *learning* as a concept, while the majority of participants were quick to emphasise the role of play as an "educational tool" that promoted children's learning and exploration in a fun and natural way (Teachers A; B; H; O). Specifically, participants from disadvantaged ECCE settings struggled to provide a meaningful definition and resorted to vague definitions (Teacher N; Teacher Q; Teacher T). On the positive side, the majority of participants defined *learning* as the development of skills, the process of acquiring new information, as well as growing one's knowledge base (Teacher O). Teacher H made a point of discussing the concept of learning after she defined play. She stated that play referred to children's "innate need to learn new things" adding that it "basically encompasses everything that a child is learning." The ECCE teachers from a study by Jensen et al. (2020) described play as a means for children to put their learning into practice by using the play environment as an extension of the classroom. During the theme of 'My family', children were seen delegating and role-playing the 'family'. Teachers C and D supported these views, stating that play introduced children to various concepts in a concrete manner, and allowed children to make relevant connections with the abstract concepts. Regardless of their varying definitions, participants believed that children's play and their learning should be integrated in order to effectively support the needs of the whole child in preparation for the learning of more formal, abstract concepts (Teacher K; Teacher R; Walsh & Gardner, 2006; Walsh & Fallon, 2021).

To provide context as to where these definitions of learning emerged from, participants recalled their childhood memories of play, with specific reference to how learning took place during their early years. Teacher H mentioned that she had no memories of learning that were associated with "sitting at a desk." Rather, the experiences that were gained during "formalised games, and completely informal games on the playground", shaped her learning, and developed the necessary skills and abilities needed for formal schooling. Teacher H was only then able to associate her learning experiences with the idea of sitting at a desk. Teacher A also revisited her play memories, and stated that during play, "you don't even realise that you are learning things… it just kind of happens naturally." She took note of the different skills she learnt during play which essentially set the foundation upon which all other concepts were built. These experiences reinforced the notion that play had an integral role to play in children's learning, as well as preparing them for formal schooling.

Most participants from this research study clearly identified the importance and contribution of play towards children's learning and development despite the increasing academic pressures known to dictate the ways in which play and learning should be implemented in the ECCE curriculum. Regarding *learning*, researchers reported on teachers' mixed beliefs concerning the implementation of learning practices within

the ECCE setting, thus making their respective theoretical beliefs and action beliefs visible, and more relatable to participants. From the data collected, it was evident that some participants identified a structured and teacher-directed approach as the more effective approach in preparing children for formal schooling, and ensuring children reach their optimal development. However, the majority of participants opted to support the implementation of informal play-based learning practices by maintaining that play and learning should be integrated in order to effectively support the needs of the whole child.

4.3.3. Theme 3 – Role of the teacher

Based on literature, it is understood that teachers within the South African ECCE setting are expected to implement playful practices, as prescribed in the policies underpinning South African early childhood education (DoSD & UNICEF, 2007; Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Smit, 2015; Anderson Nugent; Walther, 2019; Taylor & Boyer, 2020; Nilsen, 2021). In particular, teachers are advised to implement a play-based approach that offers a balance of teacher-driven and child-centred activities which would be best suited to further the young child's learning and development (Jensen et al., 2020). Considering children's right to play, Meran (2019) argues that teachers should be aware of their role during play such as providing materials for children's play, ensuring that children play within a safe and secure environment, and that they are given a variety of opportunities for play – on their own or with others. As teachers fulfil what they believe their role to be, they ultimately draw on their theoretical beliefs and action beliefs to guide them in the implementation of such practices (Mo, 2020). However, not all teachers' beliefs are associated with creativity, exploring freely, and discovery; in some cases, teachers may prohibit play and choose to avoid any implementation of play-based activities due to a lack of awareness regarding the optimal play environment for young children (Nilsen, 2021). Depending on the various intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence teachers' beliefs, inconsistencies may be evident when analysing teachers' theoretical beliefs and action beliefs (Meehan, 2007; Mo, 2020). This then links to the research question which interrogates teachers' beliefs about play and learning, and the ways in which these beliefs are implemented in practice, if at all.

While it was established that the majority of participants promoted play-based learning practices within their respective ECCE setting, there were different beliefs regarding the ways in which these practices were implemented, and what teachers' views were surrounding their role during play. These beliefs about teachers' roles contribute to the core component of Mo's (2020) theoretical model – ultimately, reflecting on teachers' "fundamental understandings on the key elements in teaching, the idea of what constitutes a good teacher and education, a view of knowledge, as well as their positions about others in the school community" (Wang & Du, in Mo, 2020, p.58). Evidence emanating from this study indicated that the majority of teachers acknowledged that play can either be structured or unstructured (Teacher C; Teacher

D; Teacher E). Although participants previously stated that children learn best in an informal manner, they admitted that their daily activities involved an equal proportion of both teacher-initiated and child-initiated play (Teacher C; Teacher O). Teacher A and Teacher H approached their activities in a similar manner by using the theme of the week to guide the play activities that they planned. By implementing teacher-initiated activities in the daily programme, Teacher A identified her role as "guiding them towards what I was expecting of them." However, Teacher K noted that the amount of guidance would differ, depending on the type of activity implemented: some may require more involvement from the teacher, while others might encourage children to play independently. Accordingly, participants ensured that child-centred activities were also facilitated within the daily programme, allowing children to "come up with their own ideas, and… be free" (Teacher A). Not only were children free to explore the world around them during these activities, but they were also afforded a range of opportunities to make choices regarding what they would play, who they would play with, where they would engage in this play, and the resources or equipment that would be used to fulfil their goals during play (Vu et al., 2015; Nilsen, 2021). However, Teacher R argued that a child-centred approach would be more beneficial to the young child as she believed that the implementation of structured activities would limit children's play, and their learning as a result. Hence, she avoided any "serious" approaches to learning, based on the idea that children start to lose interest in their learning, and are unable to fully experience the benefits of play that follow.

Other participants within the majority adopted a unique view as they believed that their play activities were not structured – in the sense that they were not directing children's play or constantly telling children what to do. Rather, they considered themselves as facilitators who initiated play through the resources that they provided, the ways in which they organised the indoor and outdoor play environments, and how they were able to provide support to children during play (Teachers A; C; D; H; K; O; Vu et al., 2015; Nilsen, 2021). Teachers O, R and T described their role as being more interactive, based on their involvement during children's play. When discussing their responsibilities, Teacher A, among other participants, stated that she was required to set up the play environment in such a way that encouraged both play and learning at the same time. Thus, teachers' roles were considered 'multifaceted', based on their abilities to support, motivate, and engage with children, to reach higher levels of learning and build on their current mental potential (Saracho & Spodek, 1998; Ridgway & Quinones, 2012; Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Smit, 2015; Phelps, 2016; Meran, 2019; Nilsen, 2021). Participants ensured that a variety of resources and equipment were included in their indoor and outdoor play environments to stimulate the open-ended activities that were offered (Teachers A; C; H; I; K; P; N). In some cases, participants were also influenced by their theoretical beliefs, and often implemented practices or provided resources inspired by the Montessori and Reggio-Emilia approaches (Teachers C; H; I; K; T).

In addition to providing children with a variety of play opportunities, teachers were expected to optimise children's learning through teachable moments, question their actions, gain a deeper understanding of what children were doing during play, and provide suggestions that inspire children to explore further (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers are therefore encouraged to engage with children in this manner, within the ZPD, in order to assist them in moving beyond their current level of understanding (Hughes, 2009; Anderson Nugent, 2017). Teacher C also discussed how her observations of children's actions, interests, strengths and weaknesses, provided her with the necessary information to inform her future practices. Researchers contend that this information, exchanged during teacher-child interactions, also has the potential to engender a shift in teachers' initial beliefs, and the practices they choose to implement (Chakravarthi, 2009). Not only do teachers develop a deeper understanding of the young child, but they are also able to identify the current level at which the child is, and the level at which they are expected to move towards in order to reach their full potential and develop holistically.

Furthermore, the majority of participants believed that their role was centred around the needs of the child, by organising the play environment, to facilitate learning, and ensuring children's safety during play. Issues of safety were a concern shared by many teachers as they believed that supervision was essential in all areas of play (Teacher A). Information on teachers from various research studies, as well as participants of this research study, believed that it was important for children to feel comfortable within their play environment as they would be more likely to freely express themselves, explore their surroundings, and engage with others (Teachers C; E; H; I; K; R; T; Smit, 2015; Nilsen, 2021). If teachers approached children in an intrusive manner, researchers claimed that this would discourage children's independent learning and discovery (Ridgway & Quinones, 2012; Yogman et al., 2018; Meran, 2019). Therefore, constant supervision would provide children with adequate support during play to manage conflicts, avoid potential dangers, and teach children how to resolve arguments that may arise (Teachers B; G; H; P; Davies, 1997; Chakravarthi, 2009; Renick, 2009; Vu et al., 2015; Nilsen, 2021). While it was important to supervise children during play, these teachers asserted that they should discreetly direct children's play, and their learning.

In contrast, some teachers assumed their role during play to be more functional, rather than interactive or facilitative – which also had an influence on their beliefs about play (Davies, 1997; Chakravarthi, 2009; Renick, 2009; Vu et al., 2015; Nilsen, 2021). These teachers found themselves with "little time to play with the children" as they were expected to provide children with time, space and materials for play, supervise children during play, and clean up thereafter (Vu et al., 2015; Nilsen, 2021, p.9). Teacher N agreed with these teachers who believed that their role was to "show [children] how to play" and to "check if they are able to do what she tells them to do" – which resonated closely with a teacher-directed approach. In these cases, teachers believed that play activities were directed towards specific outcomes, to further

children's learning and development (Aronstam & Braund, 2015). However, while Teacher N was guided by the daily message board which outlined particular activities for the day, she also considered children's interests, and amended the daily programme accordingly.

Based on the data collected, it was evident that when teachers' beliefs about their roles are coupled with their theoretical beliefs and action beliefs, they form specific notions about themselves, the role of the child, the resources and equipment required, as well as the teaching and learning practices that they implement. Regardless of whether their approaches took on a more teacher-directed or child-centred approach, it is understood that ECCE teachers are expected to install measures in place to ensure children are comfortable in their environment, and are gainfully occupied in their explorations of the world around them. Due to the challenges that were present, some participants were left in a position such that they were unable to adequately fulfil their role as a teacher who should promote and implement play-based learning at all times. Despite these challenges, the majority of participants shared a common understanding of their role as an ECCE teacher – that is, as a facilitator of play who plays an active role in shaping the child's learning and development to their optimal level.

4.3.4. Theme 4 – Factors that influence the implementation of play

While recent studies have investigated teachers' beliefs regarding the way in which children learn through play, and how this approach proves effective in contributing towards children's early learning and development (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019), participants of this research study, as well as those mentioned in the literature review, have described various factors that either support or challenge the implementation of play-based learning within their early childhood setting. Researchers have identified "government policy, classroom environment, educational facilities, curriculum, teacher-children ratio, nature of play materials, access to play, and teachers' role in children's play activities" as factors that influence the implementation of practice within the ECCE setting (Chowdary & Rivalland, 2011, p.183). However, ECCE centres within the South African context are not always provided with the same opportunities due to the various socio-economic hardships experienced largely due to the effects of the legacy of apartheid (Harrison, 2020). As a result, teachers are faced with several challenges within the ECCE setting, as they endeavour to implement their beliefs into practice. Within the literature reviewed, researchers have noted a disconnect between teachers' beliefs about play, and the practices that actually implemented (Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Vu et al., 2015; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019), which Mo (2020) regards as inconsistencies between teachers' theoretical beliefs and their action beliefs. In this research study, it was necessary to consider whether each of these supporting or constraining factors (such as academic concerns, parental attitudes and beliefs, teacher education and qualifications, structural challenges, and children's

behaviour) also influence the participants to form part of their context beliefs (Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Vu et al., 2015; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Mo, 2020).

Evidence from literature reveals that rising academic pressures faced by ECCE teachers have become one of the most common factors affecting the implementation of play-based learning practices. Researchers have associated these academic concerns with teachers' need to follow "instructions from the system" or the idea of "teaching to certain standards" – often resulting in limited time for the implementation of and participation in playful activities (Nicholson et al., 2014; Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Vu et al., 2015; Lynch, in Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019, p.788). In some ECCE centres, *play* and *learning* are understood as separate entities which makes it difficult for teachers to establish an appropriate balance between play and learning activities within the ECCE curriculum (Clevenger, 2016; Yogman et al., 2018). In keeping with government standards, ECCE teachers across various studies were also advised to implement more direct instructional teaching methods – a practice that goes against their initial beliefs surrounding the ways in which children learn best. In these cases, children are forced into a more passive role within the classroom, as their freedom to explore and be actively involved becomes limited to a large extent (Excell, 2011; Smit, 2015). As a result, teachers' beliefs were at risk, as they were not able to implement their beliefs in practice.

Some participants from advantaged ECCE settings claimed that the companies who managed their ECCE centre also managed their ECCE curriculum; they dictated what children should be learning at a particular age. Teacher A considered it unnecessary when their company wanted children to learn more formal academic concepts throughout the daily programme. In her defence, she believed that children were already learning age-appropriate content in an informal play-based manner, and that "they will have lots of opportunities to develop these [academic] skills as they get up and as they get older." Similarly, some ECCE centres prescribed workbooks that children were expected to complete, in order to learn particular academic concepts throughout the year. However, Teacher K insisted that a play-based approach would be more effective in allowing children to discover the meaning behind each of these concepts, "as opposed to just sitting at a desk, and colouring in a picture." She, therefore, made a point of 'tweaking' the activities, to include exploration through play. Teacher C's views resonated with those mentioned above, as she encouraged children to develop a concrete understanding of concepts through play, which she believes is necessary in building a strong foundation for learning, before moving on to more formal, abstract concepts. While ECCE centres expect teachers to implement set curricula, Teacher H stated that the way in which you interpret the given curriculum, will determine how formalised your approach will be, and whether this approach includes any provisions for play-based practices. In her practice, Teacher H also chose to apply a play-based mindset when consulting the curriculum in order to ensure children are given abundant opportunities to learn and develop through play. Based on the views shared, it is evident that participants'

views differ to those shared by teachers across various research studies. Rather, participants' views resonate closely with those shared by Vygotsky, in the sense that participants' recognised the value of play as a contributor to children's holistic learning and development, and not as a practice that specifically focuses on the enhancement of children's academic learning. Through the implementation of play-based learning practices, it can be noted that participants aim to assist children in moving beyond their ZPD, at a level that is most appropriate for them (Anderson Nugent, 2017).

Other factors were also noted to have contributed to the academic concerns shared by ECCE teachers. With the lowering of the COVID-19 restrictions, schools and ECCE centres reopened, leaving teachers with additional administrative duties to fulfil, in addition to the tasks they were normally responsible for, such as completing forms or drafting lesson plans that focused on developing specific skills. However, at this point, teachers were overwhelmed and exhibited feelings of anxiety and stress due to the extra planning as a result of the shift in focus of the ECCE curriculum that was now directed towards the development of more structured academic activities, in preparation for children entering formal schooling (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Yogman et al., 2018; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Moreover, researchers identified an increase in anxiety levels experienced by ECCE teachers who were fearful of criticism should they choose to avoid the approaches prescribed by ECCE centre management and parents, or be seen prioritising play-based activities as opposed to predictable, teacher-directed methods (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). In these cases, where *play* and *learning* were understood as separate concepts, ECCE teachers found it difficult to maintain and practise their beliefs while fulfilling the directives of other stakeholders. In comparison, participants from disadvantaged ECCE settings did not share any academic concerns mentioned as their curriculum already addressed 'play' and encouraged practices that allowed teachers to incorporate play into their daily programmes, while still maintaining a balance between play and the learning of academic concepts (Teachers N; O; R; T).

In addition to adjusting to curriculum changes, parents exerted pressure by expressing their concerns regarding the implementation of play, and what they believed should be implemented within the ECCE curriculum which challenged teachers' initial beliefs, and promoting a shift towards a more academically-focused curriculum (Smit, 2015; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Some studies reported the extent to which parents go to achieve this; they intervene in ECCE teachers' play practices based on what they believe to be more appropriate, and safe for their child's academic development (Ginsburg, 2007; Hujala et al., 2010; Kleppe, 2018; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). It was evident that parents were determined to ensure the success of their children by influencing teachers' roles in the academic learning environment by emphasising the use of worksheets, drills, homework, and after-school enrichment programmes to promote the development of key skills needed when children enter formal schooling (Nicholson et al., 2014; Yogman et al., 2018; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). In other words, parents focused on the implementation

of direct instruction in the classroom setting, rather than 'frivolous' and 'risky' play that teachers are readily promoting (Kleppe, 2018; UNICEF, 2018; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). However, while teachers are expected to side-line their beliefs to accommodate parents' wishes, it is the children, who are left to experience the damaging effects of parents' choices. As children are expected to focus on their academically-rigorous schedules, they often experience feelings of stress, anxiety and depression as a result of reduced play time to accommodate structured practices (Smit, 2015; Yogman et al., 2018).

General concerns shared by participants from this research study centred around the aspect of communication with parents, or a lack thereof. Some participants from this research study experienced challenges educating parents on the value of play, while others developed healthy and supportive relationships with parents (Teacher O). In her experience, Teacher C described some parents as proactive and very involved in their children's lives, while others were "unfortunately, too busy with work, or just not interested." In order to keep parents informed of their children's progress, Teacher N and Teacher T ensured meetings were held on a weekly and monthly basis. Based on the attendance, however, it was clear as to which parents were interested in their child's learning experiences, and those who were not. However, Teacher C did advise against parents who were too involved or 'interfering' in their children's learning by restricting children's learning experiences by doing all tasks for them instead of offering guidance to complete such tasks.

Despite parents' strong views regarding the implementation of play, teachers have argued that parents have not taken sufficient time to understand the role of play in the young child's learning and development (Faour, 2003; Ncube, 2017; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). In some cases, parents have not fully understood the value of play as a tool for children's learning, and would rather question why their children were playing all day instead of developing key academic skills needed for formal schooling (Teacher T). Therefore, communication with parents was believed to be quite an important element in the ECCE programme. In order to circumvent challenges relating to communication with parents, Teacher H and Teacher K ensured that they documented each moment of learning that took place, in keeping with their Reggio Emilia approach to learning. Consequently, parents were regularly updated via photos or videos as to how their children were learning through play in order to make "the learning visible to parents" (Teacher H). Not only did this process increase parents' awareness of the value of play and its underlying benefits for the young child, but it also limited the number of queries posed to participants regarding the implementation of their play-based learning practices (Teacher H; Teacher K). Teacher A also found herself constantly reassuring parents that their children were safe and well-supervised during play as parents believed that some play areas were unhygienic or too risky for the young child (Aronstam & Braund, 2015). Teacher A commented that these negative attitudes restricted the child in terms of what they could experience, and the foundation that they would develop for future learning.

Additionally, in order for teachers to implement effective play practices within the ECCE setting, they should have also received specialised training to ensure they are well-equipped with the appropriate knowledge and skills to serve children's needs (DoSD & UNICEF, 2007). While South African tertiary education has aimed to prepare preservice teachers with the appropriate knowledge and skills to promote children's learning through play, there are many teachers who are unable to access professional development programmes and in-service training as a result of financial constraints (Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Smit, 2015; Ncube, 2017). As such, UNICEF (2018) has stated that many teachers are not adequately prepared to integrate play-based learning into their ECCE curricula as they have not witnessed the act of learning through play for themselves, and do not have a clear understanding of what is expected of them. In the context of this research study, however, the majority of participants were able to reflect on their early childhood play experiences, and could easily identify the skills they had learnt in the process. Furthermore, participants from both advantaged and disadvantaged ECCE settings did not mention any specific challenges concerning their current education and qualifications, although many participants were open to expanding their current knowledge and skills in order to fully understand and support the young child's learning and developmental needs through the implementation of appropriate practices (Teachers H; K; N; O; R; T).

Further, some ECCE settings, whether in South Africa or in other countries, have indicated a short supply of well-trained early childhood teachers who are expected to be aware of their role, understand why they implement the practices as they do, and how to overcome the challenges that are presented to them (Steyn et al., 2016; Stats SA, 2019; Harrison, 2020). In such cases, teachers' own limited knowledge and lack of qualifications and training prove to be a challenge. Aligned to this, Teacher K suggested that the age and experience of the teacher was another challenge, based on her observations of younger teachers who do not have the years of experience that allow them to effectively implement play in practice such that children are not always encouraged to think creatively, or make appropriate connections as they explore the world around them. Although, understanding these underlying concepts only form part of teachers' training, there is still a need for practical demonstration and instruction during training, on-site support to assist the implementation of theory into practice, and follow-up support after the completion of training to ensure teachers are consistent in their practices (Atmore et al., 2012). Since these teachers struggle to grasp the concept of *play as learning*, challenges arise when expected to implement play in practice (Smit, 2015; Vu et al., 2015; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Based on their limited understanding, teachers' beliefs were guided accordingly such that novice teachers believed their role to be more of a supervisor who ensures the safety of children, and only intervenes when a child is hurt (Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Ncube, 2017). It should be noted, however, that these views differ to those shared by participants in this research study, with regards to their roles during play (Teachers A, C, D, H, K, O).

While these challenges were all relevant and concerning, most participants discussed a variety of structural challenges that were specific to the ECCE setting they were situated in, thus affecting the way in which play practices were implemented. Common challenges included issues with resources and equipment, and the time allocated for play activities. Depending on the ECCE centre's financial position, ECCE teachers and children may be restricted to smaller areas in which to play, fewer staff to supervise the vast number of children, and a lack of basic facilities to adequately support the needs of the child (Atmore et al., 2012; Nicholson et al., 2014; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Very few participants could confidently say that they were satisfied with the space, resources and equipment, and staff support available in their ECCE settings (Teacher A). Specifically, in advantaged ECCE settings, participants' structural challenges were limited to the need for modern resources and equipment to stimulate better interest to assist children in developing a concrete understanding of mathematics and language, as well the funding for these resources (Teacher C; Teacher H; Teacher K). Teacher C stated that appropriate concrete materials were needed to establish a strong foundation, before children were expected to make connections with more abstract concepts. She added that children aged 3-4 should be provided with appropriate resources to enhance their learning: for example, sensory experiences as opposed to worksheets. While Teacher H was allowed to utilise a variety of resources and materials, she admitted that funding posed the biggest challenge as "it gets very costly to just have enough, to just satiate the children's appetite for drawing and folding." Furthermore, there is "a thirst from the teacher for more and more interesting things to put out" often resulting is more of her own money being spent on designing games, purchasing items from second-hand shops, or finding new toys for children to play with. In support, Teacher K explained that teachers are "not really paid huge amounts, so whenever you want to do something that's different, and it requires other resources, you have to fund it yourself." Although, Teacher K has managed to build a collection of resources for herself over the years, she believes that new teachers will find this most challenging. While other participants did not experience issues with the time allocated to play, Teacher K argued that her time is definitely limited, in terms of what she is expected to cover each day, and ensuring that children achieve each of these expected outcomes, as outlined in the ECCE curriculum. Researchers suggest that a balanced and integrated curriculum would work effectively to ensure children's optimal learning and development – such as longer periods of play-based learning, and shorter periods of teacher-directed activity (Miller & Almon, 2009). However, with the shift in focus towards more academic learning, this balance has been interrupted, leading to reduced play time, and inconsistencies evident between teachers' theoretical beliefs and action beliefs (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Mo, 2020).

Participants' image of the ideal play environment is where teachers provide children with a large space that is safe and secure to stimulate learning through playful activities and interaction (Cevher-Kalburan &

Yurt, 2011; Smit, 2015; De Souza et al., 2020). However, teachers from disadvantaged ECCE settings mentioned that their biggest challenge was the space within their ECCE centres. Teachers N, O, R and T mentioned that children were limited in the areas in which they were free to play. Since Teacher T's ECCE centre was situated at her house, children were limited to her garage space that was used as a playroom. Due to the confined indoor space, Teachers N, P, R and T often encouraged children to engage in outdoor play. However, children's outdoor play was also dependent on the weather which could restrict the play opportunities provided to children. In addition to space as a challenge, these participants also discussed the lack of resources and financial support received from the school, and parents alike. In most disadvantaged ECCE centres, parents were only required to pay what they could afford. Hence, Teachers N, O and T were often found creating their own toys with the children, made from recycled materials. Drawing on these experiences, participants felt their play practices could be enhanced if resources and fixed playground equipment were provided, as opposed to resources only made from recycled materials (Teacher O).

The need for additional staff support in the form of teacher assistants was emphasised by participants who believed such support to teachers allows them (teachers) to be more present, as they implement the ECCE curriculum (Teacher H). However, some participants experienced challenges with staff support, or a lack thereof. While teachers from advantaged ECCE settings were allocated teacher-assistants, Teacher C explained that there were not sufficient teacher-assistants at her ECCE centre. As a result, teacher-assistants were expected to provide support on a rotational basis – but this proved to be problematic when some teachers were left without the additional support at a time when it was most needed. Teacher C believed it was necessary to have this extra support to avoid 'burnout' during the day. She noted that she becomes exhausted on the preparation of activities and the tidying up thereafter that she is not able to effectively implement her beliefs in practice. Teacher R also believed additional staff support was necessary; however, she admitted that she could not afford to pay them based on the financial situation within the disadvantaged ECCE setting. In contrast, Teacher H had no complaints concerning teacher-assistants, and reflected on the key role they played in seeing to the physical needs of the young child. She found it difficult to understand how teachers with big classes managed without the additional support, especially in the South African ECCE setting where overcrowded classrooms have become the norm, often leaving teachers feeling overworked, physically drained, and unable to support every child effectively (Chowdary & Rivalland, 2011; Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Smit, 2015; UNICEF, 2018; Hunter, 2019).

Some participants mentioned children's behaviour as a problem present during play. In most cases, ECCE teachers planned for various play activities throughout the day; however, they did not anticipate the unpredictable behaviour of young children during play (Nicholson et al., 2014; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Teacher A and Teacher O reflected on the fights and tantrums that were observed during play which mostly centred around the lack of sharing and turn-taking between children. In light of this occurrence, Teacher H asserted that such behaviour problems are common for children aged 3-4, but these "interrupt play" and "hinder the teachers' ability to just be present." Therefore, some teachers discussed strategies used to manage these behavioural issues: a temporary ban in a particular play area, or a 'calm down corner' to allow children to reflect on the consequences of their actions before re-joining the group (Teacher A; Teacher K). Connected to ill-discipline during play, Teacher O believed that it is important to make children feel comfortable within their environment because when children are forced into participating in 'uninteresting' activity, teachers begin to see more aggressive behaviours present themselves. However, it should be noted that the majority of children across the various ECCE centres in this research study did not present behaviour problems (Teacher A; Teacher C; Teacher R). In other cases, where there has been a reduction in play time, children have lost their sense of creativity and concentration, and exhibited more aggressive behaviours such as hyperactivity, being easily distracted, and bullying, among others (Meran, 2019). Ultimately, this has resulted in lower rates of academic achievement as children have not been given the opportunity to develop holistically through play, or refine their skills that could enhance their academic performance (Nicholson et al., 2014). Thus, due to some ECCE curricula shifting focus from play-based learning to the learning of formal academic skills, children are faced with additional challenges that impact their overall learning and development.

Evidence from this study reveals that participants share similar concerns with ECCE teachers across various research studies regarding factors that either support or constrain the implementation of play. While teachers have identified the importance of implementing play within the early childhood setting, there are several challenges that disrupt teachers' beliefs that prevent the effective implementation of play practices for the young child. Common challenges within the South African ECCE setting included the pressures faced from various stakeholders who emphasise a shift towards formal learning and the development of advanced academic skills in early childhood. When faced with such challenges, ECCE teachers often felt pressured into implementing these beliefs, as opposed to their own views on play, thus leading to a disconnect between their theoretical beliefs and action beliefs. Moreover, participants from both advantaged and disadvantaged ECCE settings experienced a range of structural challenges based on their financial situation, the time and space available, stimulating resources and equipment to enhance children's play, as well as additional staff to support teachers in facilitating play-based learning practices throughout the day. Furthermore, children's behaviour was also considered to be a challenge, often leading

to disruptions during playful activities and interactions. In most cases, where these factors were lacking, participants found that they were restricted to implement their initial beliefs effectively. However, in comparison to those teachers identified across various research studies, participants persevered, despite the challenges that were present.

4.4. Conclusion

After eliciting information from the survey and interviews regarding ECCE teachers, both the participants and I gained a better understanding of *play* and *learning*, and how individual beliefs concerning *play as learning* had an impact on the practices implemented within the daily ECCE programme. Participants unanimously believed that children learn through play; only one participant indicated that children should focus on the development of academic skills in preparation for formal schooling. Furthermore, participants admitted where these beliefs emanated from, after reflecting on their theoretical beliefs, action beliefs, and beliefs concerning their roles. Based on this study's evidence, it was apparent that participants' beliefs were in line with Vygotskian philosophy, as well as the majority of teachers mentioned in relevant literature studies. However, teachers' practices were still dependent on whether their resources, support, and management would allow for the implementation of play within their ECCE curriculum. Specific to their ECCE setting, participants from both advantaged and disadvantaged ECCE settings experienced a number of challenges that affected the implementation of their play practices. Participants found themselves enduring such challenges in order to ensure children received the necessary benefits from some form of playful activity during the day.

Chapter Five – Conclusion & Recommendations

5.1. Introduction

As the value of play and its impact on the young child's learning and development, has gained recognition among researchers, theorists, teachers, and policy makers, respectively; this research study aimed to consider the role of ECCE teachers' beliefs surrounding play and learning, and the ways in which these beliefs influence the implementation of teachers' practices, within the South African ECCE setting. Research focusing on the historical and theoretical perspectives of play, has shown a strong link between teachers' beliefs about play and its links to learning, as well as their teaching practices in the ECCE setting. Therefore, this study identified the beliefs held by participants, surrounding play and learning, in relation to the play-based learning practices that they have implemented – in light of the challenges specific to advantaged and disadvantaged ECCE settings respectively. This chapter will provide an outline of each chapter, and will reflect on the suitability of the theoretical framework and research methodology, in context of the research study. In addition, a brief overview of the key findings of the research study will be presented, in relation to the central aim, the research problem identified, and the research questions that have emerged as a result. Lastly, this chapter will address limitations that have been identified throughout the research study, and will propose recommendations for both policy and practice, and future research, before presenting a conclusion of the research study as a whole.

5.2. Outline of the Chapters

Chapter 1 – *Introduction to the Study*: Chapter 1 served as an important foundation from which this research study was framed. The reader was given insight into the background of the study, the problem statement, aim, research questions, and rationale for the study. Next, the theoretical framework and research methodology of the study were presented.

Chapter 2 – *Literature Review & Theoretical Framework*: Chapter 2 provided a comprehensive review of the empirical research literature on the history of play, ECCE teachers' beliefs about play and learning, and the challenges faced by ECCE teachers when implementing play as a practice in the ECCE setting. The research questions of this study were addressed by consulting both national and international perspectives. Further, an exposition of Vygotsky's (1929) theory of the Cultural-Historical Development of Higher Mental Functions was provided in relation to play, as well as its role in shaping teachers' beliefs and their practices. In addition, Mo's (2020) theoretical model was applied to the current study which focused on understanding teachers' beliefs, where their beliefs emanate from, and how teachers' beliefs influence the practices they choose to implement.

Chapter 3 – *Research Methodology*: Chapter 3 presented an overview of the research methodology used in the study. This allowed one to gain a better understanding of the specific methods and approaches that were selected in order to answer the research questions. An illustrative case study approach was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' individual beliefs, and the ways in which these beliefs influence their practices within the ECCE setting. Also, the processes of data collection and data analysis were discussed. Then followed the identification of the four main themes emanating from the data collected. Lastly, aspects of trustworthiness and ethics were outlined.

Chapter 4 – *Findings & Discussion*: Chapter 4 summarised the findings of the research study, and then provided a discussion of these findings in relation to each theme, the literature reviewed, the theoretical framework, and the research study as a whole.

5.3. Reflections on the Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework, presented in Chapter 2 of this research study, focused on understanding teachers' beliefs as a guide for the practices they chose to implement within the ECCE setting. Specifically, understanding teachers' beliefs in relation to their practices, where these beliefs emanate from, and possible factors that influence the implementation of teachers' beliefs, were considered through the lens of Vygotsky's (1929) theory of the Cultural-Historical Development of Higher Mental Functions, as well as the theoretical model of beliefs, presented by Mo (2020). By applying this theoretical framework to underpin the entire research study, it was possible to answer each of the research questions of this study.

Within the Vygotskian perspective, play is viewed as an important contributor to the young child's learning and development. As children engage in various play types, involving imitation, social interactions, and experiences with their imagination, it should be noted that children develop their higher mental functions, as well as their cognitive abilities and language skills. Participants' beliefs regarding play and learning resonated with those of Vygotsky's, as they were able to identify the value of play in relation to the holistic development of the child. Therefore, the majority of participants observed the holistic benefits of play, in addition to the academic benefits, that allowed children to develop a foundation to aid their later learning. In their current practices, however, it was important for participants to provide children with appropriate play opportunities that allow children to act within and move beyond their zone of proximal development. While Vygotsky's (1929) theory addressed the study's research questions concerning teachers' beliefs and the implementation of play in ECCE contexts, it was necessary to consult Mo's (2020) theoretical model of beliefs to address all the research questions that were posed. Each of the four components identified by Mo (2020) – theoretical beliefs, action beliefs, context beliefs, and beliefs about teachers' roles – focused on the different aspects that contribute to teachers' overall belief system. After analysing the collected data, it became clear how participants' beliefs should be compartmentalised;

thus, uncovering the meaning that teachers assign to their daily lives and practices within the ECCE setting. Ultimately, this theoretical framework allowed me to understand the basis of teachers' beliefs, before focusing on how teachers' beliefs influence their practice in the face of the challenges that may be present within the South African ECCE setting.

5.4. Reflections on the Research Methodology

In line with the interpretivist paradigm and within this empirical research study, emphasis was placed on participants' views in order to understand what influenced their beliefs and practices within the ECCE setting. Additionally, a qualitative research method was considered most suitable when exploring ECCE teachers' beliefs regarding play and learning in order to develop meaning and gain a better understanding. Since the study focused on a sample of 20 participants, an illustrative case study approach was chosen to understand the participants' experiences with play within the ECCE setting, and the practices they chose to implement to enhance children's learning and development. These approaches were carefully selected to encourage participants to share their beliefs and discuss their experiences of implementing play. Participants described the various play types offered at their ECCE centre, the resources and equipment available to stimulate children's learning through play, and the factors that either support or constrain the processes of play as practice within the South African ECCE setting. Accordingly, participants' in-depth responses facilitated the answering of each of the research questions of this study. Furthermore, the research context included a selection of both advantaged and disadvantaged ECCE settings within the Gauteng Province in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of teachers' beliefs of play. Following the effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic, it was necessary to adapt the research methodology accordingly to ensure the safety of both myself and the participants. Hence, online methods were selected for the data collection processes, as opposed traditional face-to face approaches. While it would have been ideal to observe teachers within their respective ECCE settings to understand how they implement play as a practice, online modes also proved to be useful and efficient, given the circumstances. Although in some cases, within disadvantaged ECCE settings, online modes proved to be a challenge for those participants without internet access – but telephonic modes sufficed. After the data was collected in two appropriately-planned stages (i.e. Stage 1 – Online Surveys via Google forms, and Stage 2 – Individual Online Interviews via Zoom), the data was analysed and coded into themes via thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six phases that made up this process were as considered as being sufficient to organise and refine the data, before deciding upon suitable and meaningful themes that would contribute to the research study as a whole.

5.5. Key findings of the study

The key findings of this research study have been summarised in Table 5.1 below. They are in relation to the four main themes that were identified throughout the data analysis process. Interpretations and implications have been included to offer guidance for teachers, parents, and other educational professionals to implement appropriate play-based practices to stimulate the young child's learning and development.

Table 5.1. Key findings of the study.

Theme	***Key Findings***	***Interpretations & Implications***
Theme 1 – Teachers' beliefs about play	Regardless of their ECCE setting and the challenges that they are faced with, the majority of participants were aware of the value of play, the benefits of play for the whole child, and a variety of play-based practices to ensure that children receive many opportunities to learn, develop, and experience the world around them.	ECCE teachers have appropriate knowledge of the value of play as a way in which children further their learning and development. However, this should be consistently understood and implemented by all teachers within the ECCE centre. Therefore, ECCE teachers and ECCE centre management staff should meet to discuss their interpretations of the ECCE curricula, and decide on an appropriate standard for the practices they choose to implement. All stakeholders involved, should keep in mind children's rights, and ensure that their practices are aligned with South African ECCE policies.
	Teachers' action beliefs are realised through the practices they choose to implement, and are often influenced by various intrinsic and extrinsic factors that form part of their theoretical beliefs.	
	The minority of participants viewed play as a reward for children, after the completion of formal activities that focused on developing children's academic skills.	
	The theoretical beliefs and action beliefs held by each participant, influenced teachers' beliefs about their roles during play.	
Theme 2 – Teachers' beliefs about learning	Most participants identified the importance and contribution of play towards children's learning and development despite the increasing academic pressures that dictate the ways in which play and learning should be implemented in the ECCE curriculum.	Although most ECCE teachers have acknowledged the value of 'learning through play', not all ECCE teachers implement an informal approach to learning within the ECCE setting. A common understanding should be reached between all stakeholders involved in the implementation of the ECCE curriculum. Appropriate training and workshops should be scheduled to increase their awareness on the value of play-based learning for the young child, in preparation for future learning and development.
	While some participants preferred a more structured and teacher-directed approach to prepare children for formal schooling, the majority of participants implemented informal play-based learning practices.	

Theme 3 – Role of the teacher	When teachers' beliefs about their roles are coupled with their theoretical beliefs and action beliefs, they form a specific notion about themselves, the role of the child, the resources and equipment required, as well as the teaching and learning practices that they implement.	While ECCE teachers have certain beliefs about their professional roles, it is important that consistency is maintained throughout the ECCE centre. Quality teacher-training programmes and workshops should advise on appropriate roles and practices that teachers should adopt within the play-based environment. ECCE teachers should meet with ECCE centre management staff, to decide on the roles that will best support the child.
	Some participants were unable to adequately fulfil their roles as teachers who promote play-based learning due to the challenges present within their ECCE setting.	
	The majority of participants understood their role as a facilitator of play; i.e. someone who actively shapes children's learning and development, and provides many opportunities for children to engage in playful activities, at an appropriate level.	
Theme 4 – Factors that influence the implementation of play	Based on their context beliefs, there are several challenges that prevent teachers from implementing effective play practices for the young child – especially within the South African ECCE setting, where many parents, teachers and ECCE centres have faced socio-economic hardships. Common challenges include academic concerns, parental attitudes and beliefs, teacher education and qualifications, structural challenges, and children's behaviour.	It was noted that teachers are aware of the importance of play, their roles during play, and how to implement play in practice. However, certain challenges have emerged within the ECCE setting; thus, causing difficulties for teachers who wish to implement play-based learning practices. While weekly and monthly meetings to keep stakeholders informed of the learning process, have been implemented in some ECCE centres; these methods are not sufficient due to the lack of interest received. It is suggested that regular documentation of play-based practices, should be adopted by ECCE teachers, to make learning more visible to all stakeholders involved. Quality teacher-training and workshops should be made available to all ECCE teachers – regardless of where their ECCE centre is situated. ECCE centres should meet regularly with community members to decide how they can overcome structural challenges, given the resources available.
	Some participants experienced challenges with increasing academic pressures affecting their ECCE curricula. Other stakeholders, such as parents, also demanded more emphasis to be placed on formal learning and the development of advanced academic skills. In these cases, teachers were not given the freedom to implement their own beliefs.	
	Participants from both advantaged and disadvantaged ECCE settings experienced a range of structural challenges, based on their financial situation, the time and space available, resources and equipment, and additional staff support to assist teachers.	
	Children's behaviour was also considered a challenge – often causing disruptions during playful interactions.	
	In comparison to those teachers identified across various research studies, participants were able to implement appropriate play-based practices, despite the challenges within their ECCE setting. Thus, no disconnect between teachers' beliefs and their practices, was evident.	

5.6. Limitations, Challenges & Strengths

Firstly, for long periods of time during the COVID-19 pandemic, the South African Government enforced a nationwide lockdown, leading to the closure of schools and ECCE centres. These restrictions prevented me from observing teachers in their natural ECCE settings, especially in terms of seeing how they planned for play activities. Considering safety precautions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, this study was therefore limited to online modes of data collection. The data production process occurred in two stages. I utilised online platforms such as a Google forms and Zoom. While participants from advantaged ECCE settings were familiar with the various online platforms, and were comfortable to answer questions via these online modes, the challenge arose when participants from disadvantaged settings did not have access to the internet. Hence, the survey and interview for such participants were done telephonically during the respective stage of data collection. Thereafter, I was able to record and submit participants' responses. While these processes of data collection and data analysis proved to be time-consuming – especially during the transcription and coding phases – the online methods were cost-effective for both the participants and myself. Due to the interpretivist nature of this qualitative study, the data production methods used in Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the data collection process, ensured that rich, in-depth responses were gathered from participants' experiences within the ECCE setting. Furthermore, transcribing each interview personally, allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of participants' position regarding the implementation of play-based learning practices – ultimately, contributing to the strengths of this research study.

Secondly, it should be noted that COVID-19's preventative measures aimed to keep both the children and school staff safe; however, ECCE teachers felt pressured to complete the curriculum within a limited time-frame, along with administrative tasks and other duties. As a result, many other ECCE teachers declined the opportunity to participate in this research study as they did not have sufficient time. Therefore, while this study aimed to survey 30 participants via Google forms, from both advantaged and disadvantaged ECCE settings respectively, consent was received from 22 participants in total. Also, during Stage 1 of the data collection process, only 20 survey responses were completed and submitted via Google forms – 2 participants decided to withdraw during the early stages of the research study due to their busy schedules. Hence, this research study was also limited by its small sample. While these cases did not represent the entire population of ECCE teachers, my intention was not to generalise findings to other contexts, but rather to explore this sample of teachers and how their beliefs about play influenced their practice, and children's learning. However, the sample was further limited in its focus on the beliefs held by ECCE teachers. While parental attitudes and beliefs were considered as a factor that impeded the implementation of play-based learning practices, the perspectives held by other stakeholders were not considered for this research study.

Lastly, due to the inaccessibility of hard-copy texts from the library due to the pandemic restrictions, I became reliant on online journal articles and theses when sourcing literature to review. While online sources of information proved to be valuable, current, and cost-effective, the literature obtained was mainly in line with the hypothesis, with minimum diverse opinions. However, this may have been the motivation to embark on this topic due to a paucity of research within the field of study, and within the South African ECCE context specifically.

5.7. Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Depending on the ECCE setting of participants – either advantaged or disadvantaged – it was noted that different curricula were used as a result of being influenced by the theoretical approaches adopted by some participants, or the ECCE centre as a whole. While all participants opted to use their respective curriculum frameworks as a guideline, in conjunction with their own knowledge of play, their experiences that they accumulated over the years, and their beliefs surrounding the ways in which play should be implemented, inconsistencies were evident in the opportunities that each curriculum allocated to the aspect of play within the ECCE setting. Therefore, it is necessary for South African early childhood education policies to revise and institute standard provisions for play, suited to the young child. In addition, appropriate suggestions should be offered to ECCE teachers on how best to implement play effectively within the ECCE setting, and how to promote active learning and encourage children's development during play – given the resources they have available, within their specific ECCE setting.

Specifically in disadvantaged ECCE settings, the literature reviewed indicated that there were many teachers who lack proper teacher-training and consequently do not understand how children learn through play in order to plan and implement effective play-based learning. Therefore, quality teacher education programmes and ongoing in-service teacher-training workshops involving specialised ECCE courses should be provided to all teachers within the South African ECCE context to ensure consistency is maintained in the practices that teachers are expected to implement. In their early years, it is important that all children build a strong foundation of concepts and skills in order to assist them in their later learning during formal schooling. Hence, teachers' knowledge of the value of play has a significant value in contributing to children's learning and development through the practices they choose to implement.

Finally, it was noted that participants shared concerns regarding communication with parents and other stakeholders within the ECCE setting. In some cases, participants were tasked with educating parents, other teachers, and ECCE centre management staff on the value of play as a tool for children's learning and development. It was evident that some teachers hosted weekly and monthly meetings for parents; this together with regular documentation or record-keeping of each learning moment, proved to be successful in making it more visible to parents about their children's progress through play. Similarly, regular

documentation shown to other teachers and ECCE centre management staff, can increase their awareness of play and its role in contributing towards children's learning and development. These practices are especially important in instances where it appears that children are not developing key academic skills needed for formal schooling; hence, enlightening stakeholders on the informal approach to learning should be encouraged within the ECCE setting.

5.8. Recommendations for Future Research

A paucity of research exists within this field of study, and more specifically, within the South African ECCE setting. While I had intended to fill this gap through the current research study, future studies are recommended in order to supplement knowledge on the subject. Although there have been many studies investigating teachers' beliefs, there have been only a few that address the relationship between play and learning, and the effective implementation of play-based learning practices within South African ECCE settings which considers teachers' beliefs. Ultimately, future studies will increase the awareness of play as a beneficial tool, implemented to aid children's learning and development.

Additionally, future studies should also consider the roles played by other stakeholders who are key to shaping the practices that are implemented within the ECCE setting. Specifically, researchers should consider the quality of training and the relevancy and effectiveness of programmes regarding pre-service teachers in relation to play and learning. The role of curriculum developers, parents, teachers, children, other educational professionals, and management staff, within the ECCE setting should be revisited to instil a philosophy of play-based teaching-learning that would enhance the quality of ECCE to cascade smoothly into the formal education stage. Exploring additional perspectives will assist researchers in identifying the various factors that influence the implementation of play, which will also allow stakeholders to develop a better understanding of teacher-beliefs in order to minimise possible challenges that may prevent the child from reaching an optimal level of learning and development.

In future studies, triangulating in context is suggested to gain a more nuanced understanding of teachers' beliefs. With the easing of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, observations of teachers within their particular ECCE setting, becomes possible and more accessible to all participants – despite some risk. However, COVID-19 preventative measures such as the wearing of masks, social distancing, and frequent sanitisation, will contribute to the safety of both the researcher and all participants involved. Consequently, issues of online accessibility, internet connectivity, and data costs, would not pose challenges for participants, should future research studies not be limited to online modes of data collection. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic which affected the recruiting of many potential participants of this research study, is gradually diminishing; hence, this would allow for a broader sample population to precipitate better and expansive results.

5.9. Conclusion to the Study

Throughout history, ECCE teachers have become aware of the importance and value of play for the young child. They have identified that their roles during play are not limited to merely planning and facilitating, but also focusing on the play environment, the resources to be used, and the time allocated for children to play and explore – much of which is influenced by their own beliefs. While Mo's (2020) theoretical model outlined four components that contribute to teachers' beliefs as a whole, he has also stated that inconsistencies would be evident, should these beliefs not align with the practices that teachers choose to implement. Further, it is necessary to consider how teachers view their roles within the ECCE setting, what approaches they use to implement the ECCE curriculum, and how they deal with challenges specific to their ECCE setting in order to understand how these factors play a role in shaping teachers' beliefs that influence practice. Based on teachers' experiences recorded in literature, it is clear that researchers have identified a disconnect between teachers' beliefs and the practices implemented in the ECCE curriculum. Most research studies reveal that the common challenges are academic concerns, parental attitudes and beliefs, teacher education and qualifications, structural challenges, and children's behaviour – all these prevented teachers from implementing effective play-based learning practices – thus, leading to this disconnect. In other words, researchers observed that play was no longer the focus of the ECCE curriculum, often replaced with more structured activities in order to accommodate the shift towards academic activities and the introduction of formal learning. While it would appear that participants from this research study would also experience similar challenges due to the socio-economic hardships faced in the South African ECCE setting (mainly as a result of the lasting effects of the legacy of apartheid), it should be noted that the majority of participants from both advantaged and disadvantaged ECCE settings have persevered and succeeded, despite the various challenges that were present. Learning and development occurs by circumventing these challenges to ensure that children are exposed to a variety of opportunities throughout the day to engage in playful activities. It can be said that participants share the Vygotskian perspective on 'play' and 'learning through play'. Finally, a paucity of research was also identified within the field of study, and specifically within the South African ECCE context. Hence, this investigation (which has much room left for further research) of teachers' beliefs and the ways in which these beliefs influence their practice in the South African ECCE setting, intended to fill this particular gap.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Survey via Google Forms

Section A – Personal Background

Read the following questions, and select the answer that best describes your personal background. There are 7 questions in this section.

1. What is your gender?
   - Male
   - Female

2. What is your age?
   - 18-24
   - 25-29
   - 30-39
   - 40-49
   - 50-59
   - 60+

3. What language do you speak?
   - English
   - Afrikaans
   - isiZulu
   - isiXhosa
   - isiNdebele
   - Sesotho
   - Sesotho sa Leboa
   - Setswana
   - siSwati
   - Tshivenda
   - Xitsonga
   - Sign Language
   - Other

4. What is the highest level of education that you have attained?
- NQF Level 4 – National Senior Certificate
- NQF Level 5 – Higher Certificate
- NQF Level 6 – Diploma & Advanced Certificate
- NQF Level 7 – Bachelor's Degree & Advanced Diploma
- NQF Level 8 – Honours Degree & Postgraduate Diploma
- NQF Level 9 – Master's Degree
- NQF Level 10 – Doctoral Degree
- Other

5. How long have you been working as a teacher in the ECCE context?
- This is my first year.
- 1-2 years
- 3-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- More than 20 years

6. Which description best describes your ECCE centre?
- Public (publicly managed and financed)
- Private (privately managed and financed by private or public resources)
- Privately-owned non-profit organisation

7. If you have selected 'Public' above – Are parents required to pay any form of fees to your ECCE centre?
- Yes
- No

Section B – Likert Scale

Listed below are questions relating to children's play in the ECCE setting, and how you as a teacher, possibly plan for play within the ECCE curriculum. These questions have been adapted from Clevenger (2016). There are 6 questions in this section. Answer the following questions based on how important you believe each one to be. Use the following scale when circling your answer:

1 = Unimportant 2 = Slightly important 3 = Moderately important 4 = Important
5 = Very important

1. How important is play in the ECCE setting?
   1 2 3 4 5

2. How important is it for ECCE teachers to provide a variety of materials to support children's play?
   1 2 3 4 5

3. How important is it for ECCE teachers to provide extended periods of play during the ECCE curriculum?
   1 2 3 4 5

4. How important is it for ECCE teachers to participate or collaborate in children's play?
   1 2 3 4 5

5. How important is it for children to play more in the ECCE setting, rather than completing worksheets and other structured activities throughout the day?
   1 2 3 4 5

6. How important do you think it is for the ECCE curriculum to focus on the development of advanced academic skills before the commencement of formal schooling?
   1 2 3 4 5

Section C – Open-ended Questions

Read the following questions, and then describe your responses briefly. Try to reflect on your experiences, using examples where necessary. There are 5 questions in this section.

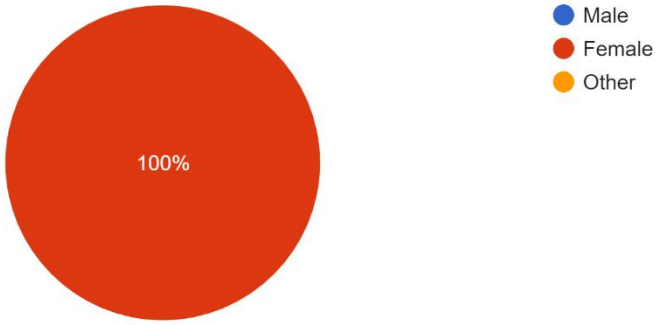
1. What is your understanding of play?
2. What do you understand about the concept 'learning'?
3. What do you think is the relationship between play and learning?
4. How do you integrate play in your daily routine?
5. How would you describe your role during children's play?

Appendix B – Auto-Generated Summary of Survey Responses

Part A - Personal Background

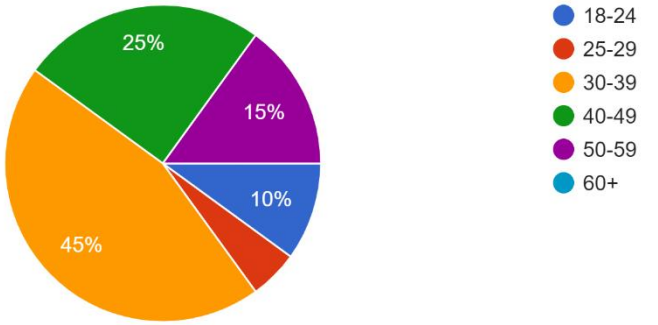
1. What is your Gender?

20 responses



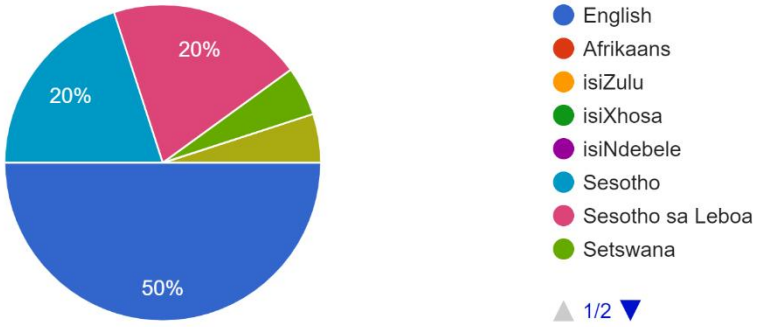
2. How old are you?

20 responses



3. What language do you speak?

20 responses



4. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

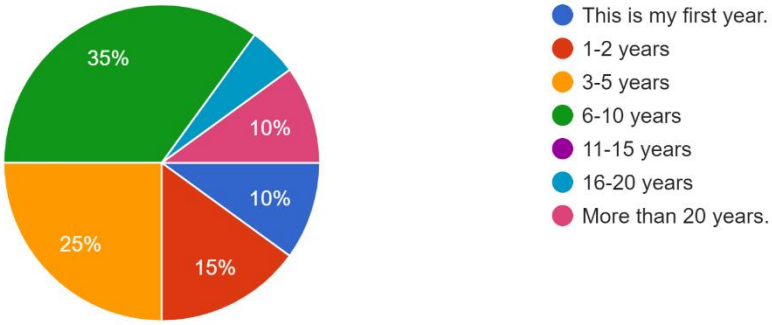
20 responses



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5. How long have you been working as a teacher in the ECCE context?

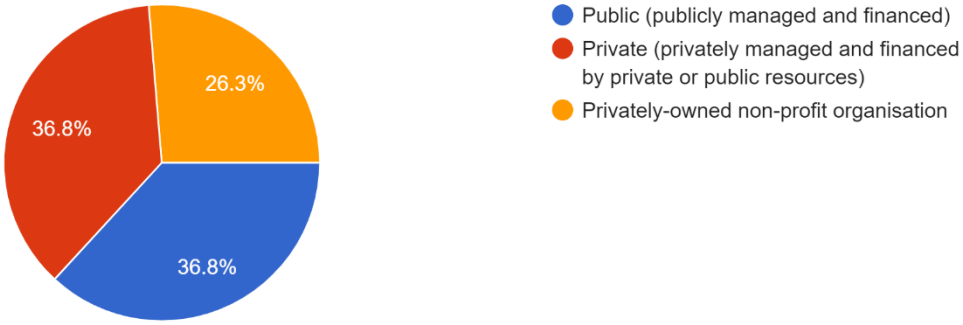
20 responses



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6. Which description best describes your ECCE centre?

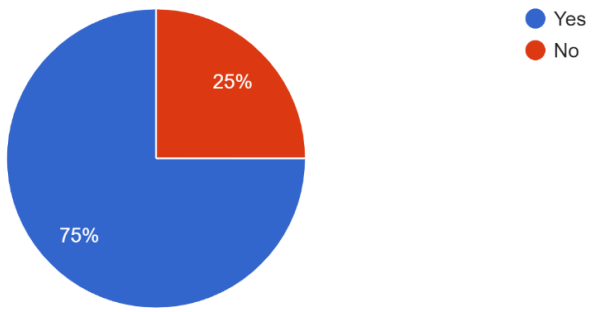
19 responses



*Some answered incorrectly, 7 are Public (35%), 10 are Private (50%), 3 are Privately-owned non-profit organisations (15%). However, 1 participant from the Private sector did not respond.

7. If you have selected 'Public' above – Are parents required to contribute any form of fees to your ECCE centre?

12 responses

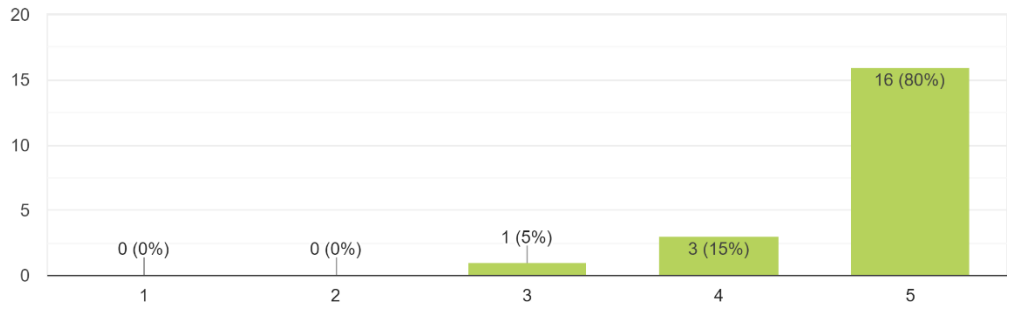


*Should only be 7 responses. Those who selected **Yes** indicated "usually only those that can afford it."

Part B - Likert Scale

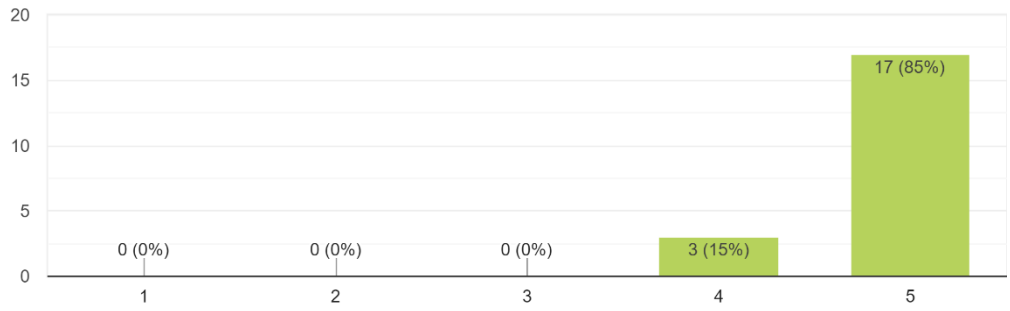
1. How important is play in the ECCE setting?

20 responses



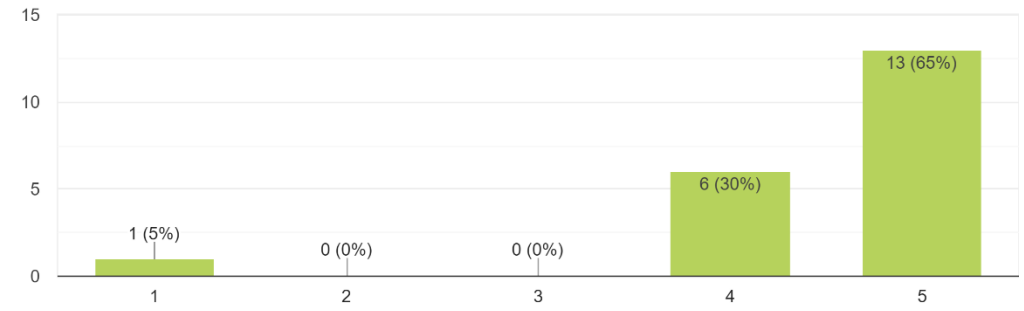
2. How important is it for ECCE teachers to provide a variety of materials to support children's play?

20 responses



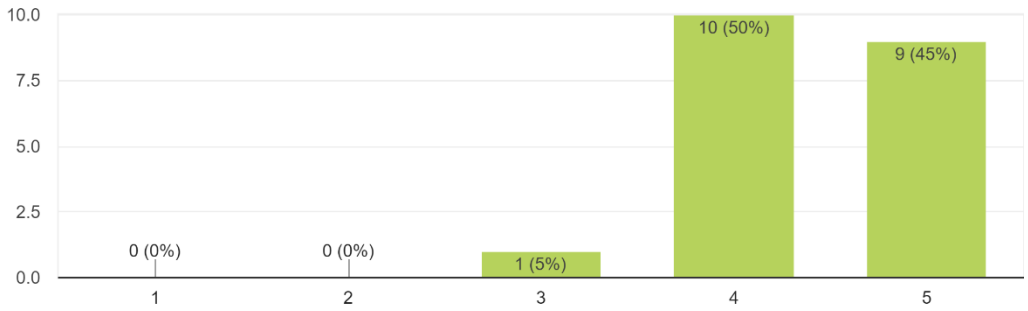
3. How important is it for ECCE teachers to have extended periods of play during the ECCE curriculum?

20 responses



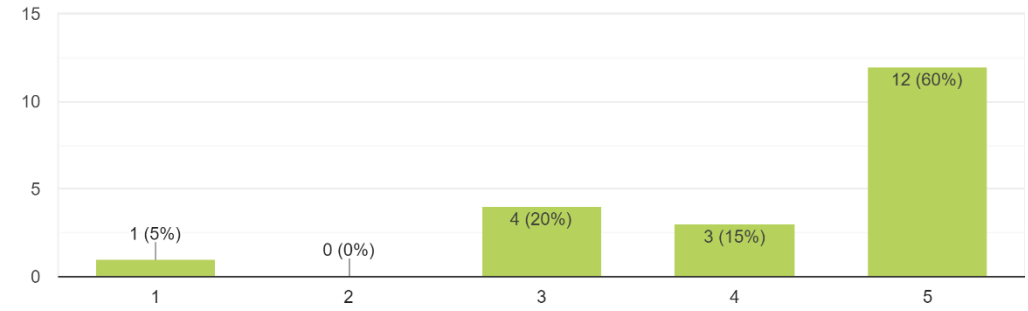
4. How important is it for ECCE teachers to participate or collaborate in children's play?

20 responses



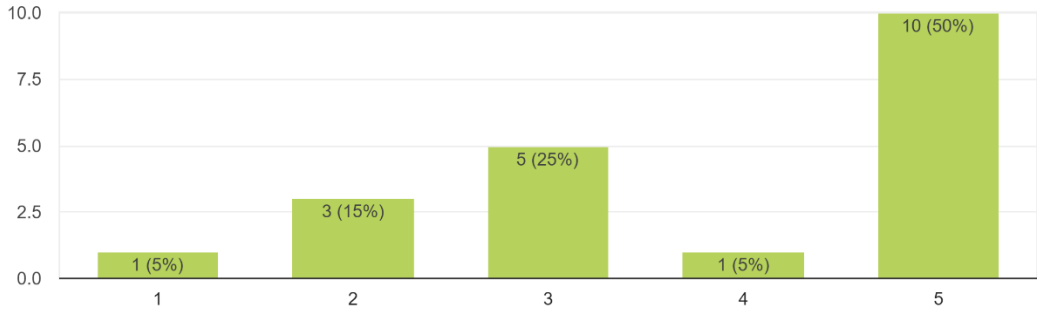
5. How important is it for children to play more in the ECCE setting, rather than completing worksheets and other structured activities throughout the day?

20 responses



6. How important is it for the ECCE curriculum to focus on the development of advanced academic skills before the start of formal schooling?

20 responses



Part C - Open-ended Questions

1. What is your understanding of play?

20 responses

Children learn through play and it is vital for their development. Play is when children interact with their environment (people and equipment) in an informal manner. They can make choices for themselves as to where they would like to play and what they would like to do. Play has been said "to be the work of a child".
Children need to learn through play, they learn through exploration and play.
My understanding of play could be divided into two sections, outdoors and indoors. Outdoor play focusses on building a child's gross motor skills such as running, climbing, balancing, riding a bike, bouncing a ball or jumping on a trampoline. This focusses more on the physical and social development of a child. Physical being that the child is building its core muscles and increasing hand-eye co-ordination. The social development entails connecting with other children, making friends, learning to share, taking turns and learning how to resolve conflict by themselves. Indoor play such as playing with Lego or building blocks with develop cognitive function such as crossing the midline, control of movement etc. whereas toys such as dolls or 'kitchens' will assist in a child's imagination or creativity.
I understand play as a way of children freely exploring ones environment (inside or outside) with the use of their imagination, using concrete tools, socialising and figuring out how things work. Also using imagination to explore their creative side that they enjoy themselves. A way to learn how to socialize with others too.
Play is an activity either intentional or unintentional. Play is a huge part of the child's learning and it encourages different areas of their learning. This can either happen through physical or mental activities.
is important because it improves the child socially and also a child can express their feelings. It also important for their gross motor and fine motor development.
Play is very important because the children have to learn through play.
Play is allowing children the freedom to explore and create their own meaning in the world. Play is an advanced form of research as children construct their own learning.

Play is a way of making children learn in a relaxed fun way. It gives children an opportunity to learn from each other. Play gives children a chance to discover their capabilities and their interests/ talents. Some friendship relationships are formed during playtime.
Having fun through interactive activities in many different forms.
Play is how children learn. Play helps children develop cognitive, social, emotional and motor skills. Play is a very important part of a child's day. Play can be fun, social, educational, it can reduce stress, and offers a physical outlet. All academic concepts at an early age can be taught through play. Children who get the opportunity to play, whether it is guided play or free play learn important skills and both are as important. It is the basis of teaching communication skills and learning to interact. Play is the first stage of learning.
Takin free time to refresh minds so that they can concentrate for an appropriate time while working
Play is child directed
Play is when you involve children, you use play materials, you ask questions and children respond to you, children also ask questions and you respond to them. If anyone is struggling, you make time to play with them.
There's a lot that you learn during play, it's not only fun. Children explore and learn during play.
It is very important for children to play outside. They play with different materials, such as sand, rings and balls.
To play with the child - especially when they say "Ma'am, can you play with us?" It is important to play with children.
Play is fun for the child. When the child enjoys something, that's when they learn, in an educational way.
Play is when the children learn through my skills, and I learn through their skills.
Play is to stimulate children and direct their learning. Play is for children to explore freely, and to understand themselves.

2. What do you understand about the concept 'learning'?

20 responses

Learning is the ability to gain new knowledge and understanding of concepts. Once something has been learnt, the person should be able to use what they learnt and adapt it different situations.
Learning is where children acquire new skills. knowledge and behaviours.
I believe learning can be in the form of play so long as there are a variety of different skills that are being developed. I think that a child should first experience concrete learning and once that concept has been mastered then to match the concrete and the abstract concepts together and then only move over to the abstract towards the end. I studied a Montessori Diploma and believe strongly in the method. Learning should be a sensorial and hands-on experience, especially for brain development. The child should be shown how to do something and then left to try on his/her own even if they struggle a bit, they need to become independent. I think that the basis of learning is through concentration, if the child cannot concentrate then no learning will occur. Concentration occurs through uninterrupted play or 'work'. The teacher needs to ensure there are as little interruptions as possible.
Learning is very broad, as learning occurs in different ways for everyone. But learning in all comes to a new concept that they learn, whether it is using Lego, social skills, or academically.
Learning is knowledge or gaining an understanding of various new things that may have been taught. It consists of various abilities.
Learning is important for a child because it trains them for the future and to make right decisions when they grow old.
Learning is the key to success children have to learn so that they can brighten their future.

Learning happens when children are given play opportunities with materials and games that have been chosen to stimulate skills and ideas development.
Learning is the ability to acquire knowledge and then implement the acquired knowledge.
It is the ability to grasp things that are taught through various mediums. Music and play being the most important one.
Learning is acquiring new skills, and then using those learnt skills.
Discovering new things
Gaining new skills and knowledge.
You look at how children are responding, you see who is slow and you is faster, and you record their marks. Later, you go back and give more time to learners who were slow.
Learning is when you have an understanding of things and the world around you.
Children learn before they start formal schooling. They develop the necessary skills for reading and writing.
Learning is very important. Children want to learn.
Learning is all about developing. The child can learn through play, stories, puzzles, art, numeracy and counting, etc. I give children objects to play with, and understand their interests to see what they are good at, because children develop and learn from all areas.
Learning is when you teach children different words and languages for their learning, then they do the work.
Learning is when children get knowledge about things.

3. What do you think is the relationship between play and learning?

20 responses

Play and learning are intertwined. Children learn primarily through play. They learn through being active with their bodies. As they play, they develop various areas e.g. language, social, gross motor, fine motor, basic concepts etc. For example: two children playing in the water trough with various sized containers. This activity allows the children to experiment and find out for themselves about full/empty and big/small (concept development). While they play and experiment, they will probably talk to their peers around them about what they are doing (language and social skills). Children don't realise that they are learning as they are playing. They think they are just having fun.
Children learn through play; they learn to understand the world around them through play. Their senses are also developed through play.
They are integrated however they assist with certain aspects of learning, play focusses more on the physical, social and emotional development whereas learning (in a more structured/formal way) focusses more on the cognitive/intellectual development such as fine motor skills e.g. a threading activity. It also depends on whether or not the toys are educational or not.
Very important, as one can learn academically through something as simple as sorting their toys by colour. Play offers a way that one can learn that suits the individual (well mostly suits them- play doesn't always go in their own favour).
Play and learning are closely linked. It is impossible to play and not learn. Play acts as a way to learn skills and acquire knowledge. The 'whole' child is developed through play (academically, socially, emotionally, physically etc.)
The relationship is important because a child can also learn through play, for example their speech, fine motor, gross motor and numeracy can improve through play.

Because children learn a lot through playing and also to socialize with other children.
Please see the question above. You cannot have one without the other. They are reliant on each other.
I think they go together because children enjoy and grasp learning easily through play. Children like to be active at this early stage, so play helps.
They are integrated.
Play is an integral path to learning. Through play children/adults are learning important skills. Even if it looks like it is just for fun learning is taking place during play.
Play is important but the focus should be more on the working
Children learn through play all the time.
Children use their minds, their eyes, and their hands to play and learn.
Goes hand in hand. For example, when children are skipping, they are counting how many types they are skipping, and essentially, learn more about numbers and counting in the process. There is a strong relationship between play and learning.
It is necessary for children to learn before they start formal schooling. They play and learn at the same time.
It is very important to learn, and children can learn through play.
Because the child is so young, we can't be so strict or serious on the child, as the child will lose interest or focus, when teaching particular concepts. I make it more fun and exciting for them, that's how they develop. It is important to keep the child's mind busy or occupied, by doing something they enjoy, as this is how children learn.
There is a relationship when you play with children, as they learn during play.
There is a lot of relationship between play and learning. When the child plays, she is also learning.

4. How do you integrate play in your daily routine?

20 responses

At my school we have 3 times during the morning when the children play. First thing in the morning between 7:30 and 8:00 the children play outside (depending on the weather) or have free play inside. During the time that smaller groups of children are completing their art activities, there is free play in the classroom (45 -60 minutes). Then after the children have their mid-morning snack, there is free play outside in the garden for 1 hour.
We allow the children to have free play indoors and outdoors with them being able to explore all the areas in our class rooms and play in them.
Play is integrated during the morning by doing Lego, building blocks, memory games, matching activities, puzzles, playing with toys or buying from the grocery shop.
Free play in the class, free play outside, guided play through learning (e.g. counting out toys, patterning...).
Play is integrated in our daily routine throughout the day. The learners are presented with opportunities to play inside of the classroom when they arrive at school. They have various toys they may choose to play with (construction toys, fantasy play or reading a book in the book corner. Learners then go out to the playground where they play on the jungle gym, monkey bars, swings or simply running around with their friends. They are then given the same opportunity once they have completed their activities.
play is used throughout the day every day during: first ring time, skills time, gross motor time, free play and story time.
During welcome time, skills time, gross motor time and play time.
Play is part of our whole day. There is not a moment when our children are not playing. We have provocations in the morning which encourage exploration and learning. We then have art/stem time where children play with

materials to create things. The we have a ring time in which more focused learning happens through a group play opportunities or discussion.
By setting up a variety of provocations with different materials. Also, preparing the environment in an inviting way e.g play equipment provided, sand pits and safe open space.
Through learning, drama, science rings, gross and fine motor activities.
All areas in my classroom are play based. Each day I set out new table top activities for the children to discover, for example if we are learning about our 5 senses, I would set out a game incorporating and encouraging the use of the 5 senses. I would then take the opportunity to discuss in passing what sense the child is using for that particular activity. When learning letters I like to use sensory trays to help with the formation of the letters, I use rice, foam, sand, water, ice, play dough. When introducing numerical concepts we play matching games, hide and seek, fishing games, building games and dice games. Our morning ring always includes counting song. I also like to include some STEM/STEAM activities at least once a week. (ScienceTechnologyEngeneeringMaths/ (ScienceTechnologyEngeneeringArtMaths). I also have a fantasy area, a block corner and a literacy corner with books and puppets. These areas are available to the children to discover throughout the day.
More than 1 playing session per day
Make sure there are times set aside for free play.
Children play outside and inside. There are rings, balls and hula hoops for them to play with. I encourage them to play in the garden and outside mostly, because the inside space is too small.
There is allocated play time in the daily programme - 1 hour. During this time, the child can choose a different area to play in. For example, children may choose to play in the block area, and I ask them what they have built, and develop an understanding of what they are doing with the blocks.
There is an allocated play time of 30 minutes. When it is raining, children play inside. When the weather is fine, children play outside.
In the morning is teaching time. Children play with toys after teaching time.
No specific time is allocated for play, as play occurs throughout the daily programme, and features in all activities in small ways. We always sing and make actions, or use props for story time, so children will not be bored.
We have play time for 20 minutes each day. Children play with toys, and there are separate toys for indoor play and separate toys for outdoor play.
Most of the time, when working with the children, play is involved - eg. fantasy play. We also have outdoor play, where the children play outdoors for 45 minutes.

5. How would you describe your role during children's play?

20 responses

The teacher's role in play is to be a facilitator. She needs to be aware of the needs of the children and then plan the set up of the environment and activities accordingly. All activities are set up with an outcome in mind. There needs to be a variety of areas where the children can play and develop different skills. For example in my classroom I have a fantasy corner (dress up and imaginary play), a carpet for playing with construction toys and activities set out at tables where the children can play (perceptual games, free drawing/art activities and fine motor games). The children are given turns to play in all the areas in the classroom. In our playground we have different areas too. We have the bicycle track with a variety of bikes for the children to use, jungle gyms and swings, a sandpit, a dry sensory tray (e.g. pom poms and animals/yoghurt cups and beans etc) and a water trough (containers, coloured water, bubbles, sponges, animals etc). we also set out other equipment like balance beams, balls and hoops. Once the environment has been set up then the teacher needs to monitor the children

and intervene if there are any problems (children fighting or a child is not sure what to do). As a teacher one can learn a lot about a child by just observing them play.
My role during children's play would be that I supervise them and lay the foundation for their play.
I put out a variety of different toys and educational toys so that the child has a lot of choice and that they can be adequately stimulated (not too difficult or not too easy). I try not to interrupt them while they are playing and observe them and notice what they like or dislike and what their strengths or weaknesses are. I create a safe, nurturing, interesting and clean environment so that the children feel comfortable and at ease.
To facilitate (put the toys/ objects out but almost let the child guide their own playing).
The teacher plays an important role in child play. He/she is able to guide the children in the right way. (Considering morals values, acceptable behaviour and what's not). The children also need to know that their teacher can relate to them and come down to their level. It creates trust and understanding.
During play the children ask lots of questions and helps them to engage with their teacher.
Be responsible by watching them and help them when they need help.
My role is to think very carefully and to curate what is put out for children to explore. Then my job is to sit alongside the children and ask questions which encourage discovery and deepen the learning. While observing and learning from the child about what and how they think.
My role is to observe what children are interested in so that I can support them by providing materials I think they might need in their games of interest. Also to be an anchor of safety and kindness play among the children.
You would be an active participant with them during their play time, leading and guiding them to achieve a desired outcome.
There are several types of play - physical play, social play, constructive play, fantasy play, and games with rules. The role of the teacher depends on the type of play. Some games require teachers guidance and others allow the children to play independently. The teachers involvement would be to provide a safe space for play and if necessary, the equipment. To observe the children and be available when help is needed or asked for.
Trustworthy and observant
Allow play to happen and create opportunities for play.
I play with them, look after them, communicate with them, and help them if they are struggling.
Be involved. Children are left to play by themselves, but I get involved by asking them questions, and asking them to recall what they did in previous play areas.
When children are playing, I am with them. I make sure they don't fight or get injured.
I just play with them outside. I play in the garden with them, and sometimes do gardening with them too.
My role is very important. The child looks up to me, and will copy what I do. I do whatever I can so the child feels comfortable and safe with me. They trust me, as I show them love, kindness, and patience. This is how I get their attention.
I play with the children and just be with them during play.
I interact a lot. I expand their learning through play. I ask a lot of questions.

Appendix C – Semi-Structured Interview via Zoom

Based on participants' responses in the survey via Google forms, I have used these to inform the following interview questions, to be conducted via Zoom. These interview questions have been adapted from Renick (2009) and Edwards (2017).

1. How would you define play?
2. How would you define learning?
3. In what ways do you believe play influences children's learning and development?
4. In what ways did your own childhood play experiences influence your beliefs about the role and implementation of play in the ECCE setting? Discuss a few of your earliest play memories, and compare them to your current play practices.
5. Has the knowledge gained during teacher training influenced your beliefs about the role and implementation of play in the ECCE setting? Elaborate further on your answer.
6. To what extent has the curriculum framework influenced your beliefs about the role and implementation of play in the ECCE setting?
7. Are you a member of any professional groups or organisations, that influence your approach to play? Elaborate further on your response.
8. What is the role of play, in preparing children for formal schooling?
9. Do you believe that play forms an integral part of the ECCE curriculum? Substantiate.
10. How much time per school day do you devote to play? Provide examples of how you integrate play into your teaching and learning activities.
11. How much of this play is initiated by the teacher vs. how much of this play is initiated by the child?
12. What do you think the teacher's role is during children's play?
13. What barriers prevent play, in your ECCE setting?
14. What changes (if any) would you make to your current practice, that would enable you to support children during play?

Appendix D – Permission Letter to the ECCE Centre Manager

Permission Letter to the ECCE Centre Manager



UNIVERSITY OF THE
WITWATERSRAND,
JOHANNESBURG

University of the Witwatersrand
Wits School of Education
+27 (0)11 717 3007

ECCE Centre Manager's name
ECCE Centre's name
ECCE Centre's address

3 September 2021

Dear Sir/Madam

Permission to Conduct Research with the teachers at your ECCE Centre.

My name is Pavithra Viranna, and I am a Masters student at the School of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. As part of the requirements for my degree, I am required to submit a research report on a particular topic, under the supervision of Dr Colwyn Martin. My research study – titled "Exploring play as learning: Beliefs and practices in South African Early Childhood Contexts" – is aimed at understanding Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) teachers' beliefs about play and learning, and the ways in which these beliefs influence their practice, in the South African ECCE setting.

I will collect data from teachers who are teaching children aged 3-4 years, and in an ECCE setting that is situated within the Gauteng Province. I request permission to invite teachers who are teaching children aged 3-4 years from your ECCE centre, to participate in this research study. If they agree to participate, they will be required to complete a 15-minute online survey via Google Forms. After reviewing their responses, only 8 participants will be selected to participate in a semi-structured one-on-one interview with the researcher, to be conducted online via Zoom. The broad topic of the interview will be their beliefs surrounding play and learning, and how they implement play in their practices within the ECCE curriculum. The interview will be about 45 minutes to an hour in duration, and participants will be responsible for their own data costs, connectivity, and online accessibility throughout the study. This data

collection process will not interfere with the teachers' daily programme, or respective school duties, and interviews will take place after working hours, or at a time convenient to participants' schedules.

Participants will be asked to give their written and verbal consent before the research begins. With their permission, these interviews will be recorded, using the record function on Zoom, which will be later transcribed by the researcher. The audio-recordings and transcriptions will be kept in a locked cabinet, while electronic information will be secured in password-protected files for a period of 5 years, only to be accessed by the researcher and the academic supervisor. Teachers' responses will be treated confidentially, and all identities will be kept strictly private. In the final report, the anonymity of the ECCE centre and its respective teachers will be protected by using pseudonyms or codes.

The final study will be written up as a research report. Should you wish to receive a summary of this research study, I will be agreeable to send it to you via email.

The research participants will not be advantaged or disadvantaged in any way. They will be reassured that participation in this research study is completely voluntary, and that they are free to withdraw at any stage of the research process. Participants are also free to refrain from answering any question in the survey or interview that makes them feel uncomfortable. There are no anticipated risks in participating in this study, and there will be no remuneration for voluntary participation in this research study.

I humbly request permission in writing to conduct my research with the selected teachers at your ECCE centre. This permission letter should be on your ECCE centre's headed paper, signed and dated, and should specifically refer to myself by name including the title of my study.

If you have any questions, or require further information, please contact me on the details listed below. I look forward to your cooperation.

Kind regards,
Pavithra Viranna.

Researcher:

Pavithra Viranna | 2410193@students.wits.ac.za | +27 (0)82 080 0954

Supervisor:

Dr C.D. Martin | colwyn.martin@wits.ac.za | +27 (0)11 717 3006

Appendix E – Participant Information Sheet for ECCE Teachers & Consent Form

Participant Information Sheet: ECCE Teachers



UNIVERSITY OF THE
WITWATERSRAND,
JOHANNESBURG

3 September 2021

Dear Sir/Madam

My name is Pavithra Viranna, and I am a Masters student at the School of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. As part of the requirements for my degree, I am required to submit a research report on a particular topic, under the supervision of Dr C.D. Martin. My research study – titled "Exploring play as learning: Beliefs and practices in South African Early Childhood Contexts" – is aimed at understanding Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) teachers' beliefs about play and learning, and the ways in which these beliefs influence their practice, in the South African ECCE setting. Participants in this research study need to be teaching children aged 3-4 years, and in an ECCE setting that is situated within the Gauteng Province.

I would like to invite you to participate in this research study. In order to participate, you will be required to complete a 15-minute online survey via Google Forms. After reviewing your responses, only 8 participants will be selected to participate in a semi-structured one-on-one interview with the researcher, conducted online via Zoom. The broad topic of the interview will be your beliefs surrounding play and learning, and how you implement play in your practices within the ECCE curriculum. The interview will be about 45 minutes to an hour in duration. You will be responsible for your own data costs, connectivity, and online accessibility throughout the study. This data collection process will not interfere with your daily programme, or respective school duties, and interviews will take place after working hours, or at a convenient time to suit your schedule.

With your permission, these interviews will be recorded, using the record function on Zoom, which will be later transcribed by the researcher. The audio-recordings and transcriptions will be kept in a locked cabinet and electronic data will be stored in password-protected files for a period of 5 years, and only the researcher and supervisor will have access to it. All identities will be kept strictly confidential. In the final report, your information will be kept confidential via the use of pseudonyms or codes.

It is important to note that your participation in this research study is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any stage without being disadvantaged in any way. You are also free to refrain from answering any question in the survey or interview that makes you feel uncomfortable. There will be no remuneration as your participation is purely voluntary.

If you have any questions, either during or after this research study, please contact me on the details listed below. If you agree to participate in this research study, please complete the consent form attached to this document. With your permission, the data collected may be used for academic purposes by other researchers, such as in books, journals, and/or conference proceedings, subject to their own ethics clearance being obtained. This study will be written up as a research report. Should you wish to receive a summary of this research study, I will be agreeable to send it to you via email. Please ensure that you provide your email address in the consent form attached. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the ethical procedures of this study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) via telephone: +27 (0)11 717 1408, or via email at: hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za

I look forward to your cooperation.

Kind regards,
Pavithra Viranna.

Researcher:
Pavithra Viranna | 2410193@students.wits.ac.za | +27 (0)82 080 0954
Supervisor:
Dr C.D. Martin | colwyn.martin@wits.ac.za | +27 (0)11 717 3006

Consent Form: ECCE Teachers

Title of Research Study: Exploring play as learning: Beliefs and practices in South African Early Childhood Contexts.

Name of Researcher: Pavithra Viranna

I, _____ *(Participant's full name)*, agree to voluntarily participate in Pavithra Viranna's research study. This research study's details have been explained to me, and I understand what my participation will involve.

Please circle the relevant response below.

As a participant in this research study, I agree to the following:

I have read and understood the information sheet, and I am aware of its contents.	Yes	No
I am aware that my involvement in this research study is completely voluntary, and I can choose to withdraw at any given time, without any negative consequences.	Yes	No
I agree that the data collection process will not interfere with my daily programme, or respective school duties, and interviews will take place after working hours, or at a time convenient to my schedule.	Yes	No
I agree that my identity and personal information will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity.	Yes	No
I agree that the interview will be audio-recorded, and later transcribed by the researcher.	Yes	No
I am aware that I will responsible for my own data costs, connectivity, and online accessibility throughout the study.	Yes	No
I agree that the information I provide may be used for academic purposes by other researchers, in books, journals, and/or conference proceedings, subject to their own ethics clearance being obtained.	Yes	No

Participant's Name: _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Participant's Email address: _____

Researcher's Name: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix F – Six Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012)

Six Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012).

Phase		*What occurs during this phase of analysis?*
1	***Familiarising yourself with the data***	The researcher will first transcribe the data (E.g. from interviews or audio recordings), and is later, expected to immerse themselves in the data, in order to familiarise themselves with the collected data. This involves actively reading and re-reading the data, while making notes or highlighting ideas of interest – which might be relevant to the research questions.
2	***Generating initial codes***	Next, the researcher will start coding the data that seems potentially relevant to the research questions, by identifying meanings and patterns that lie within the data extracts. At this point, the researcher aims to find as many initial codes as possible. Eventually, all extracts will be coded thoroughly and systematically, and the researcher will collate certain data sets together within a particular code.
3	***Searching for themes***	Once all data has been coded and collated, the researcher is expected to revisit this long list of codes, in order to sort the collated data into respective themes and subthemes. This active process requires the researcher to identify codes that share collective meanings, and cluster them into one broad theme. It is suggested that a thematic map be used, to represent the initial themes and subthemes that have been identified.
4	***Reviewing potential themes***	This phase involves the reviewing (Step 1) and refining (Step 2) of the initial themes that were previously identified. The researcher reviews the initial themes, and determines whether these themes form a meaningful, coherent pattern. This is later reviewed, in relation to the entire data set, and refined to more specific themes, that meaningfully describe the data set. Recoding may be necessary if themes are not yet coherent.
5	***Defining & naming themes***	During this phase, the researcher will further refine and define the themes and subthemes that will be used for analysis. A written narrative will accompany the final thematic map; briefly explaining each theme in relation to the research questions, and research study as a whole. The researcher will also consider names for each theme, to be used in the final analysis, that will ultimately, capture the essence of the theme.
6	***Producing the report***	Lastly, the researcher is able to complete the final write-up and analysis of the themes identified. The researcher must not only provide a concise and coherent account of each theme; an argument that goes beyond the analytical overview, is also necessary, along with sufficient evidence from the data extracts, in relation to the research questions.

Appendix G – Complete list of codes identified in Phase 2: Online Surveys via Google Forms (Teacher C)

Initial codes identified in Phase 2: Online Surveys via Google Forms (Teacher C).

Initial Codes	*Data Extracts*
Play	**Teacher C.** My understanding of play could be divided into two sections, outdoors and indoors. Outdoor play focuses on building a child's gross motor skills such as running, climbing, balancing, riding a bike, bouncing a ball or jumping on a trampoline. This focuses more on the physical and social development of a child. Physical being that the child is building its core muscles and increasing hand-eye coordination. The social development entails connecting with other children, making friends, learning to share, taking turns and learning how to resolve conflict by themselves. Indoor play such as playing with Lego or building blocks will develop cognitive function such as crossing the midline, control of movement etc. whereas toys such as dolls or 'kitchens' will assist in a child's imagination or creativity.
Learning	**Teacher C.** I believe learning can be in the form of play so long as there are a variety of different skills that are being developed. I think that a child should first experience concrete learning and once that concept has been mastered then to match the concrete and abstract concepts together and then only move over to the abstract towards the end. I studied a Montessori Diploma and strongly believe in the method. Learning should be a sensorial and hands-on experience, especially for brain development. The child should be shown how to do something and then left to try on his/her own even if they struggle a bit, they need to become independent. I think that the basis of learning is through concentration, if the child cannot concentrate then no learning will occur. Concentration occurs through uninterrupted play or 'work'. The teacher needs to ensure there are as little interruptions as possible. …learning (in a more structured/formal way) focuses more on the cognitive/intellectual development such as fine motor skills e.g. a threading activity. It also depends on whether or not the toys are educational or not.
Learning through play	**Teacher C.** I believe learning can be in the form of play so long as there are a variety of different skills that are being developed. They [play and learning] are integrated however they assist with certain aspects of learning, play focuses more on the physical, social and emotional development whereas learning (in a more structured/formal way) focuses more on the cognitive/intellectual development such as fine motor skills e.g. a threading activity. It also depends on whether or not the toys are educational or not. I put out a variety of different toys and educational toys so that the child has a lot of choice and that they can be adequately stimulated (not too difficult or too easy).

Development of different areas during play (ie. holistic development of the child)/ Benefits of Play.	**Teacher C.** Outdoor play focuses on building a child's gross motor skills such as running, climbing, balancing, riding a bike, bouncing a ball or jumping on a trampoline. This focuses more on the physical and social development of a child. Physical being that the child is building its core muscles and increasing hand-eye coordination. The social development entails connecting with other children, making friends, learning to share, taking turns and learning how to resolve conflict by themselves. Indoor play such as playing with Lego or building blocks will develop cognitive function such as crossing the midline, control of movement etc. whereas toys such as dolls or 'kitchens' will assist in a child's imagination or creativity. Learning should be a sensorial and hands-on experience, especially for brain development. The child should be shown how to do something and then left to try on his/her own even if they struggle a bit, they need to become independent. …play focuses more on the physical, social and emotional development whereas learning (in a more structured/formal way) focuses more on the cognitive/intellectual development such as fine motor skills e.g. a threading activity. It also depends on whether or not the toys are educational or not.
Teacher-initiated play	**Teacher C.** …play focuses more on the physical, social and emotional development whereas learning (in a more structured/formal way) focuses more on the cognitive/intellectual development such as fine motor skills e.g. a threading activity. It also depends on whether or not the toys are educational or not. I put out a variety of different toys and educational toys so that the child has a lot of choice and that they can be adequately stimulated (not too difficult or too easy).
Child-initiated play	**Teacher C.** Play is integrated during the morning by doing Lego, building blocks, memory games, matching activities, puzzles, playing with toys or buying from the grocery shop. I put out a variety of different toys and educational toys so that the child has a lot of choice and that they can be adequately stimulated (not too difficult or too easy).
Play environment (ie. space + resources)/ Safe play environment.	**Teacher C.** I put out a variety of different toys and educational toys so that the child has a lot of choice and that they can be adequately stimulated (not too difficult or too easy). I try not to interrupt them while they are playing and observe them and notice what they like or dislike and what their strengths or weaknesses are. I create a safe, nurturing, interesting and clean environment so that the children feel comfortable and at ease.
Integration and implementation of play practices in ECCE curriculum/ Types of Play.	**Teacher C.** Outdoor play focuses on building a child's gross motor skills such as running, climbing, balancing, riding a bike, bouncing a ball or jumping on a trampoline. Indoor play such as playing with Lego or building blocks will develop cognitive function such as crossing the midline, control of movement etc. whereas toys such as dolls or 'kitchens' will assist in a child's imagination or creativity. Play is integrated during the morning by doing Lego, building blocks, memory games, matching activities, puzzles, playing with toys or buying from the grocery shop. I put

	out a variety of different toys and educational toys so that the child has a lot of choice and that they can be adequately stimulated (not too difficult or too easy).
Factors that influence teachers' beliefs	**Teacher C.** I studied a Montessori Diploma and believe strongly in the method.
Theoretical beliefs	**Teacher C.** I studied a Montessori Diploma and believe strongly in the method. Learning should be a sensorial and hands-on experience, especially for brain development. The child should be shown how to do something and then left to try on his/her own even if they struggle a bit, they need to become independent. I think that the basis of learning is through concentration, if the child cannot concentrate then no learning will occur. Concentration occurs through uninterrupted play or 'work'. The teacher needs to ensure there are as little interruptions as possible.
Action beliefs	**Teacher C.** I put out a variety of different toys and educational toys so that the child has a lot of choice and that they can be adequately stimulated (not too difficult or too easy). I try not to interrupt them while they are playing and observe them and notice what they like or dislike and what their strengths or weaknesses are. I create a safe, nurturing, interesting and clean environment so that the children feel comfortable and at ease.
Context beliefs/ Challenges when implementing play as a practice.	**Teacher C.** [Learning through play] … also depends on whether or not the toys are educational or not. I think that the basis of learning is through concentration, if the child cannot concentrate then no learning will occur. Concentration occurs through uninterrupted play or 'work'. The teacher needs to ensure there are as little interruptions as possible. I try not to interrupt them while they are playing and observe them and notice what they like or dislike and what their strengths or weaknesses are. I create a safe, nurturing, interesting and clean environment so that the children feel comfortable and at ease.
Beliefs about teachers' roles/ Teacher's role during play.	**Teacher C.** Concentration occurs through uninterrupted play or 'work'. The teacher needs to ensure there are as little interruptions as possible. I put out a variety of different toys and educational toys so that the child has a lot of choice and that they can be adequately stimulated (not too difficult or too easy). I try not to interrupt them while they are playing and observe them and notice what they like or dislike and what their strengths or weaknesses are. I create a safe, nurturing, interesting and clean environment so that the children feel comfortable and at ease.

Appendix H – Complete list of codes identified in Phase 2: Individual Online Interviews via Zoom (Teacher C)

Initial codes identified in Phase 2: Individual Online Interviews via Zoom (Teacher C).

Initial Codes	*Data Extracts*
Play	**Teacher C.** I would say play is anything from being outdoors, on the jungle gym, with children running around, developing the gross motor skills, to just being in the classroom. So we've got this little…it's like a grocery store…like a little stand, and then they say to me, "Oh, do you want like a cup of tea?" and they bring me tea or something to eat. It's almost like there's that whole imagination side of things, and then there's the whole social aspect of play. Then you can also have play that is a little more structured, where you know, particularly in the morning, when they come in for about an hour – well depends what time the child arrives – we have, well, they can either play on the carpet, do something on the table. For example, we've got all the Lego there, they love Lego. I'd say Lego is like a winner, you know what I mean. Yeah, whether it's a boy or a girl. Obviously, the boys *love* it, whereas some of the girls will go more towards the grocery store or play thing. So that, or building blocks, that's great, they love that. When they use the Lego, they'll make like a pool or they'll make a house or they'll make a shop or make a garage for cars. So it's all very sort of structural and good for engineering in the future or something like that. And we also try and use puzzles and things like that. But I mean, it's not really play…I wouldn't really call *that* play. And I mean, if they want to do it [play] in a spontaneous group with other children, then they can – which is actually even better, you know. Maybe one child is better at it than the other, and then they can learn from that child. But the important thing is, if you put something out that they don't know how to do, you've got to show them how to do it, in a way, and then they can choose what they want to do.
Learning	**Teacher C.** It is interlinked with play, it does overlap. But I would say learning is just a bit more structured. For example, when we do an art activity or a craft activity, you know, they're learning how to hold the paintbrush, they're learning how to dip the paintbrush into paint and dry it on the sides, you know, like wipe it on the sides, so it doesn't blob everywhere. There's more structure to it. [Drilling or rote learning] is in your memory, BUT, it doesn't really tell you, if you take one pen and you times it by two, that you're going to get two pens. The deep concept of it – they're not going to get. Then I feel like it's not real learning, it's just using your memory.
Learning through play	**Teacher C.** When they use the Lego, they'll make like a pool or they'll make a house or they'll make a shop or make a garage for cars. So it's all very sort of structural and good for engineering in the future or something like that. And I mean, if they want to do it [play] in a spontaneous group with other children, then they can – which is actually even better, you know. Maybe one child is better at it than the other, and then they can learn from that child. So even categorising is so important too. These

	blocks go there, these toys go in that box, the Legos and the puzzles go in the cupboard. … but that's like a skill in itself – because you are classifying, categorising where things need to go – and you can't rush them, because they are still learning.
Development of different areas during play (ie. holistic development of the child)/ Benefits of Play.	**Teacher C.** I would say play is anything from being outdoors, on the jungle gym, with children running around, developing the gross motor skills, to just being in the classroom. It's almost like there's that whole imagination side of things, and then there's the whole social aspect of play. Yeah, whether it's a boy or a girl. Obviously, the boys *love* it, whereas some of the girls will go more towards the grocery store or play thing. So that, or building blocks, that's great, they love that. When they use the Lego, they'll make like a pool or they'll make a house or they'll make a shop or make a garage for cars. So it's all very sort of structural and good for engineering in the future or something like that. I suppose it would influence the gross-motor skills, the fine-motor skills, hand-eye coordination, using both hands equally…like dexterity, increasing or strengthening the hand muscles, finger muscles, wrist muscles, arm…well you could say the whole body, but particularly for when you use tongs – like when they do tonging exercises. I remember I had a girl…she struggled with it. She didn't actually have the physical strength to push the tongs together. And then you're thinking, how are you going to be able to hold your paintbrush nicely or hold your pen correctly, and pre-writing skills…that is really important to strengthen those muscles. With Montessori, you do tweezing, that's even more refined, you know. And also, the social aspects of sharing, who goes first, and taking turns, tidying up the classroom, learning how to be orderly, putting things back in their place. So even categorising is so important too. These blocks go there, these toys go in that box, the Legos and the puzzles go in the cupboard. … but that's like a skill in itself – because you are classifying, categorising where things need to go – and you can't rush them, because they are still learning. Emotional aspects – learning to be helpful, caring, kind towards each other, manners I suppose, learning 'pleases and thank yous'. I often give them little errands – "Please take this to the other teacher", "Can you go to the kitchen for me?" "Can you bring this for me?" – just learning how to do those things as well. There is a spiritual development side as well, but that does touch on just being kind towards each other. Yeah, respect for others and respect for the environment that you're in. You know, not writing on the wall, if you make a mess…tidy up. [When giving them a task to do] - They love it, then they're in their element, they feel like they're being productive, they're being helpful, they're enjoying the skill, they're learning – even how to wring out a cloth. They're increasing their hand muscles again, and it gives them that sense of…you're helping not just yourself, but the whole class in a way, like the community.
Teacher-initiated play	**Teacher C.** Then you can also have play that is a little more structured… and then after [free play] that we have a morning ring for half an hour – which is when I sort of chat to them and say, especially on like a Monday, I say "How was your weekend? What did you do?" We go through days of the week, months of the year, that sort of

	thing. Then we go through a theme, which is normally about a month long, so quite in depth, but each week could be part of that theme, but a different aspect each week. Then they we do an arts and crafts for about an hour. Then we have to fit in, somewhere there in the day, some maths or numeracy and literacy as well. With the numeracy and literacy, it's quite nice if you have a dice or something to roll, almost like a game – so it is like play – otherwise if it's too abstract, then they're not going to get it.
Child-initiated play	**Teacher C.** So we've got this little…it's like a grocery store…like a little stand, and then they say to me, "Oh, do you want like a cup of tea?" and they bring me tea or something to eat. It's almost like there's that whole imagination side of things, and then there's the whole social aspect of play. Yeah, whether it's a boy or a girl. Obviously, the boys *love* it [Lego], whereas some of the girls will go more towards the grocery store or play thing. So that, or building blocks, that's great, they love that. When they use the Lego, they'll make like a pool or they'll make a house or they'll make a shop or make a garage for cars. So it's all very sort of structural and good for engineering in the future or something like that. And I mean, if they want to do it in a spontaneous group with other children, then they can – which is actually even better, you know. Maybe one child is better at it than the other, and then they can learn from that child… and then they can choose what they want to do.
Play environment (ie. space + resources)/ Safe play environment.	**Teacher C.** I would say play is anything from being outdoors, on the jungle gym, with children running around, developing the gross motor skills, to just being in the classroom. So we've got this little…it's like a grocery store…like a little stand, and then they say to me, "Oh, do you want like a cup of tea?" and they bring me tea or something to eat. Obviously, the boys *love* it [Lego], whereas some of the girls will go more towards the grocery store or play thing. So that, or building blocks, that's great, they love that. … they can either play on the carpet, do something on the table. We've got all the Lego there.
Integration and implementation of play practices in ECCE curriculum/ Types of Play.	**Teacher C.** Then you can also have play that is a little more structured, where you know, particularly in the morning, when they come in for about an hour – well depends what time the child arrives – we have, well, they can either play on the carpet, do something on the table. So in the morning, we come in, we have like a free play time, and then after that we have a morning ring for half an hour – which is when I sort of chat to them and say, especially on like a Monday, I say "How was your weekend? What did you do?" We go through days of the week, months of the year, that sort of thing. Then we go through a theme, which is normally about a month long, so quite in depth, but each week could be part of that theme, but a different aspect each week. And then we have our snack for half an hour. Then they we do an arts and crafts for about an hour. Then they go out to play for half an hour. Then we have to fit in, somewhere there in the day, some maths or numeracy and literacy as well. With the numeracy and literacy, it's quite nice if you have a dice or something

	to roll, almost like a game – so it is like play – otherwise if it's too abstract, then they're not going to get it.
Factors that influence teachers' beliefs	**Teacher C.** … because I studied the Montessori method, but now I'm obviously doing the traditional method.
Theoretical beliefs	**Teacher C.** … because I studied the Montessori method, but now I'm obviously doing the traditional method and that's why I worry that it's too abstract too soon. They should be learning things in a more concrete manner, and then you join the abstract and the concrete. Eventually, you get to the abstract – you know, going straight into worksheets and things.
Action beliefs	**Teacher C.** … because I studied the Montessori method, but now I'm obviously doing the traditional method and that's why I worry that it's too abstract too soon. They should be learning things in a more concrete manner, and then you join the abstract and the concrete. Eventually, you get to the abstract – you know, going straight into worksheets and things. I quite like them to clean up after themselves. I try not to do things for them, because otherwise, they're never going to learn. Sometimes, their parents do far too much for them…
Context beliefs/ Challenges when implementing play as a practice.	**Teacher C.** Yeah, whether it's a boy or a girl. Obviously, the boys *love* it, whereas some of the girls will go more towards the grocery store or play thing. So that, or building blocks, that's great, they love that. … they've got to learn how to not disrupt a child while they are doing a puzzle by themselves. I think disruption is a big thing. It's a concentration killer, you know. And we're living in this age of disruption and cell phones, where your focus is interrupted all the time. I quite like them to clean up after themselves. I try not to do things for them, because otherwise, they're never going to learn. Sometimes, their parents do far too much for them…
Beliefs about teachers' roles/ Teacher's role during play.	**Teacher C.** But obviously with art, I try and let them be more creative and not say you have to do it in blue. You can put out a blue paint, a red paint and a yellow paint, and they get to choose what colour they want. Or what medium they want to do the art in [Teacher as a facilitator, tries not to be director, or too prescriptive].

Appendix I – Ethics Clearance Certificate

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND JOHANNESBURG

Research Office

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)
R14/49 Viranna

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: H21/08/39**
PROJECT TITLE	Exploring play and learning: Beliefs and practices in South African Early Childhood Contexts
INVESTIGATOR(S)	Miss P Viranna
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT	Wits School of Education/
DATE CONSIDERED	20 August 2021
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved Risk Level: Minimal
EXPIRY DATE	15 September 2024

DATE 16 September 2021 **CHAIRPERSON** J-Wright
(Professor J Knight)

cc: Supervisor : Dr C Martin

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR(S)

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Secretary at Room 10004, 10th Floor, Senate House, University. Unreported changes to the application may invalidate the clearance given by the HREC (Non-Medical)

I/~~We~~ fully understand the conditions under which I am/~~we are~~ authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/~~we~~ guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/~~we~~ undertake to submit an amendment of the protocol to the Committee. **I agree to completion of a regular progress report. For Minimal and Low studies, this is due annually on 31 December. For Medium and High Risk studies, this is due twice annually on 30 June and 31 December.**

Viranna
Signature

20 / 10 / 2021
Date

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES

Appendix J – Language Editing Certificate

590 Miami Road
Hibberdene
KZN
4220
Cell: 0842648401
brian.naidoo25@gmail

PROFESSIONAL LANGUAGE EDITING SERVICES



STRIVING FOR EXCELLENCE

Brian Naidoo (BA Hons English; BA Hons TESOL; BEd Hons.
BA- English major; Univ. Dip. in Ed.[English special];UCT Cert.in
Legal and Business Writing; UCT Cert. in Copy-Editing; MA coursework in Research UFS. Assessor's Cert. UFS. Unisa
Counselling Certificate; Evaluator of Schools for Umalusi.

SPECIALISING IN THE LANGUAGE EDITING OF THESES, DISSERTATIONS, JOURNAL ARTICLES, PROPOSALS, POLICIES AND PUBLICATIONS.

CERTIFICATE FOR LANGUAGE EDITING A DRAFT DISSERTATION (MEd)

Exploring play as learning: Beliefs and practices in South African Early Childhood Contexts

Pavithra Kanchana Viranna

WITS UNIVERSITY

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084 264 8401
brian.naidoo25@gmail.com

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