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Exploring play as learning: beliefs and practices in South African early childhood contexts

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2022
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/34781

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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