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PERCEPTIONS OF PLAY-BASED CURRICULA AS AN EFFECTIVE MODEL OF INSTRUCTION FOR
CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

BY

ANGELA COOPER

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PERCEPTIONS OF PLAY-BASED CURRICULA AS AN EFFECTIVE MODEL OF INSTRUCTION
FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

BY

ANGELA BERNICE COOPER

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Eastern Kentucky University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTORATE OF EDUCATION

2023

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family. I cannot thank you enough for your support and love throughout my journey. Family is everything. To my amazing Mommie: Thank you for always believing in me, pushing me to be my best, and the adventures when I needed a break. To my sister, Amy, and brother-in-law, Barry: Thank you for always being there for me along this journey and throughout life. To my sister-in-law, Cathy: Thank you for your constant cheerleading.

To my daughter Whitnee: You inspire me daily to be better. I cannot wait to celebrate accomplishing our doctorates together. You are forever the wind beneath my wings.

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Last, but certainly not least, to my husband, Tim: Thank you for loving all parts of me—the good, the bad, and the ugly—through this journey and for enduring countless movie nights without me while I plugged away in the office.

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ABSTRACT

This is a study of teachers' perceptions of the use of play-based curricula as an effective model of instruction for children with special needs. Participants surveyed were representative of preschool teachers in rural southeastern Kentucky. The study employed qualitative methods. Semi structured interviews were used to collect data from the participants to elicit rich responses based on real-life experiences using play-based curricula. No earlier studies had been conducted on this topic, and the research base was limited. Research participants consisted of thirteen preschool teachers from both public preschool and licensed childcare programs. The findings indicated that most teachers interviewed agreed with theoretical and evidence-based findings that use of play-based curricula is an effective model of instruction for children with special needs, specifically children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD, Communication Disorders, and Down Syndrome). The study includes discussion of recommendations for further research.

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I. Introduction

Problem Statement

In early childhood education, active debate has been ensuing about whether play-based curricula form an effective way to teach language skills to children with autism spectrum disorder, communication delays, and down syndrome. Play is an essential part of child development. It is important to note the difference between direct skill instruction and play-based instruction. Direct instruction is a systematic approach to teaching and maintaining basic academic skills (Watkins, 2012). Direct instruction is deeply rooted in behavioral theory and has been in existence since about 1990 (Magliaro et al., 2005). Play-based instruction supports child-initiated play. Play-based instruction involves teaching developmental skills indirectly through facilitation and interactions with teachers and peers; in play, children often demonstrate skills and behaviors thought to be beyond their age and development (Bodrova & Leong, 2005; Vygotsky, 1967). Some researchers have argued that adults should not interrupt children in play, and others have argued that adults can use play to teach children specific skills and academic concepts (Bodrova & Leong, 2005).

The recent push for kindergarten readiness has placed emphasis on direct instruction (Popham, 2001). Teachers have often felt pressured to use direct instruction to teach specific test-related skills. The catalyst for direct instruction in kindergarten is related to high stakes standardized testing, which has resulted in educators' lack of understanding of how play serves as an important strategy for teaching preschool

children (Christensen et al., 2010). This lack of understanding has been present in both certified preschool teachers and licensed childcare teachers.

A belief has also emerged that play-based early childhood classrooms are laissez-faire, and this belief has allowed play-based instruction to receive blame when classrooms have failed. Play benefits children across all developmental domains (Ginsburg, 2007). Furthermore, pretend play ability is one of the best predictors of language competence in later childhood (Trawick-Smith & Waite, 2009). Given existing research findings regarding the importance of using play as a strategy for instructing young children, it is imperative that teachers understand, and the ability to implement, play-based curricula.

Rationale and Perspectives

In this study, I wanted to learn more about teachers' perceptions regarding the use of play-based curricula and instruction to teach children with special needs—specifically, children diagnosed with communication delays, Down syndrome, and autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The classrooms of the teachers interviewed included such children. Often these diagnoses are categorized in preschool classrooms under the encompassing umbrella of developmental delays.

Children with communication delays have trouble understanding and using spoken language. The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (2022) reported that 11% of children aged 3–6 years received diagnoses of communication disorders. Communication delays have formed the most frequently

reported class of delays, with 5%–12% of children aged 2–5 years receiving diagnoses of communication delays. A child who has difficulty communicating verbally has an expressive communication delay. A receptive communication delay occurs when a child has difficulty understanding language. Communication delays identified in preschool children may be expressive, receptive, or both. Play is conducive to the development of language and communication skills. Children are more likely to use rare words and complicated language skills when they learn these through play (Trawick-Smith & Waite, 2009).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), the most common chromosomal disorder in America was Down syndrome; 98% of cases of the syndrome resulted from an extra copy of Chromosome 21. In the United States, 1 in 700 live births resulted in a child receiving a diagnosis of Down syndrome. Children with Down syndrome often struggle with expressive language skills relative to receptive language skills. Development of language and communication skills affects development in other domains (Martin et al., 2009). Communication delays in young children with Down syndrome manifest as reading and writing skill delays in older children and adolescents (Martin et al., 2009).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2023), ASD occurred in 1 in 36 children in the United States. ASD affects overall development, including reciprocal social relations and communication (Rutherford et al., 2007). Children with ASD spend less time engaged in play relative to children with other

developmental delays (Wong & Kasari, 2012). Communication delays in children with ASD vary based on their intellectual and social development. Such children may struggle in areas of expressive and receptive language skill development (National Institutes of Health, 2020). Given the increase in incidence of ASD, and the occurrences of communication delays and Down syndrome, it is important that teachers know effective practices for working with young children with such diagnoses in preschool settings.

Although researchers have written extensively about play-based instruction, they have not addressed teachers' perceptions of using play-based instruction as a method to teach children with special needs. In this study, the term "teachers' perceptions" includes both teachers' understanding of play-based instruction and teachers' confidence in the use of play-based instruction. Few researchers have reported teachers' perceptions of the use of play to teach children communication skills. As I refined the focus of this study, I began to wonder whether there were differences among the perceptions of teachers regarding the use of play-based curricula. I sought to find out what teachers in the rural southeastern part of Kentucky had to say about using a play-based curriculum as a method of instruction.

II. Research

Research Questions

1. What are preschool teachers' perceptions of using play-based curricula with children identified as having special needs (specifically, communication delays, ASD, and Down syndrome)?
2. How do preschool teachers use play-based curricula to teach language skills to children identified as having special needs (specifically, communication delays, ASD, and down Syndrome)?
3. What language skills do children develop through play-based curricula?

Literature Review

Play as an effective method of teaching has been the subject of widespread debate. This literature review draws together findings suggesting that play-based instruction is an effective model of instruction for children, including children with special needs. Movahedazarhouli (2018) indicated that play gives children access to skills they need to learn, develop, and grow. This review presents the idea that a wide variety of learning opportunities are present during play-based instruction. Gillian and Konstantareas (2007) asserted that nonverbal cognitive ability and expressive language are notably and distinctively related to symbolic play, although they could find no support for a similar relationship with receptive language. In children with strong nonverbal cognitive abilities, the researchers found a connection between social

development and symbolic play. However, no such connection appeared for children with weak nonverbal cognitive abilities. Both language and symbolic play develop at the same time, with the latter recognized in the development of language (Gillian & Konstantareas, 2007).

Play-Based Curricula

A play-based curriculum provides a framework for play-based instruction. Children internally motivate themselves to play, which is active and results in exploration and discovery. Play is spontaneous and fun, and children volunteer to participate in play (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2018). Children's interests and individual needs form the foundation of a play-based curriculum. Teachers set learning goals for achievement through play. A play-based curriculum is important for improving children's abilities to learn and to build foundational academic skills and social-emotional skills. Two main types of play often fall into this category: free play and guided play. In free play, children direct the play, and adults are observers. In guided play, adults facilitate children's play and set up needed materials. Although a play-based curriculum sets the stage for learning in many ways, it is important for teaching young children language and communication skills, developing imagination, promoting critical thinking, independence, and problem solving (Prodigy Education, n.d.). Among the several well-recognized examples of play-based curricula and learning are the Montessori and Reggio Emilia methods. Play-based curricula align with state preschool standards.

Play-Based Instruction

During play-based instruction, children receive exposure to learning opportunities to interact with each other, materials, and objects. The children have the opportunity to investigate, hypothesize, and demonstrate their learning through multiple modes of documentation, including drawing, dramatic play, dictation, and writing. Play-based instruction provides children with the opportunities to learn based on their interests, in child-directed environments, while increasing their knowledge and developmental skills. Play-based instruction is particularly important for young children with special needs because when they interact routinely with their peers they develop valuable skills in the areas of language, communication, and social–emotional development. Children with ASD typically lack, either partly or completely, developmental skills in these areas. Such children struggle to participate in pretend play (Rutherford et al., 2007).

Play is an essential part of child development. Skill deficits and behavior problems often prohibit productive play in children diagnosed with ASD. Vygotsky (as cited in Bodrova & Leong, 2005) argued that play creates opportunities for children to be spontaneous. During play-based instruction, teaching of developmental skills occurs indirectly through guidance and interactions with teachers and peers. Play-based instruction gives a child with ASD the opportunity to explore their environment and relationships within that environment; teaching of developmental skills occurs with the support of a teacher through child-chosen and child-directed activities.

Use of integrated play groups is a method of play-based instruction derived from Vygotsky's social constructivist theory. Integrated play groups help children with special needs, especially ASD, to improve their play skills and encourage their willingness to play with others (Lantz et al., 2004). A common suggestion has been that integrated playgroups can be successfully introduced and used in school settings, especially settings containing preschool and kindergarten students, because these types of settings usually have free time built into daily schedules. The American Academy of Pediatrics (as cited in Ginsburg, 2007) defined play as important for all children to promote healthy development.

Although debate has continued regarding the merits of play as a means of instruction for children with special needs, one key factor is that play should focus on developing the skills of particular children. A one size-fits-all approach therefore does not benefit a developing child (Mastrangelo, 2009). Because play is a powerful way to reach all children, including children with special needs, the goals of the development of classroom programming for children with ASD should include both developmentally and socially beneficial play (Lantz et al., 2004).

Naturally Occurring Play

Children diagnosed with ASD may lack the ability to use their imaginations and creativity to play spontaneously (Lantz et al., 2004). This may restrict or limit their play, and poor communication skills may impede their social play and reciprocity in play (Gurlanick, 1990). Because children diagnosed with ASD also may have difficulty

understanding their peers' actions and feelings, they may have difficulty forming friendships. Language delays also occur in children with ASD, even such children with average development (Ganz & Flores, 2008). When children cannot engage in play they are in danger of future delays and struggle in preschool environments (Morrison et al., 2002). Play gives children relevant, real-world opportunities to develop and maintain skills they will use in the future. Children with or without special needs who do not play often in a variety of ways and who play with low complexity should receive prompts with instructional goals within play (Movahedazarhouligh, 2018).

Typically developing children engage in play that they find fun, exploratory, and engaging, both with and without peers (Lantz et al., 2004). Children developing typically often use their imaginations and creativity to engage others in play and their rapidly developing communication and social skills help them to cultivate friendships.

Children diagnosed with ASD often engage in play that is easy and uncomplicated or simplistic relative to the play of their typically developing peers (Gilman, 2007). Play is a complex and natural occurrence for most children. Many have argued that play is the one area of childhood that occurs all the time and in all places. Play is essential to all developmental domains. Essentially every skill a person needs as an adult they learn in childhood, and play can facilitate the teaching of all those skills (Landreth, 2012, pp. 7–8). In play children use their curiosity, creativity, and imagination while developing skills across all developmental domains and building their social–

emotional fortitude (Ginsburg, 2007). Play forms the developmentally appropriate practice behind many early childhood programs (Rutherford et al., 2007).

In play-based instruction, a teacher does not offer choices to children randomly; instead, the teacher carefully plans choices to allow opportunities for learning to take place. The teacher arranges the learning centers and materials in the classroom, from which the children make their own choices, so that they contain materials and items that address multiple developmental domains and content areas. According to Ginsburg (2007), play is of utmost importance in the preschool classroom environment. Play guarantees structuring of the strategies used for the advancement of both cognitive and social–emotional development of individual children.

Early childhood educators have recently begun to shift to boxed or scripted curricula, directly challenging the beliefs and knowledge of early childhood experts (Assaf, 2012). Although many educators have continued to straddle the fence on this issue, evidence supports the use of child-specific interventions based on assessment of individuals and reflecting their strengths, interests, and preferences (Guldburg, 2010).

Play has a profound effect on children with special needs with respect to elaborate language. According to Trawick-Smith and Waite (2009), researchers have found that children with ASD speak more often and use more complex utterances when playing than when not playing. Trawick-Smith and Waite also described study results indicating that the quality of play in the first year of Head Start predicts the scores on children’s language assessments in the second year. According to Sherratt and Peter

(2002), when play is meaningful to children with ASD, they participate more in areas that promote creativity and imagination, relative to children for whom play is not meaningful. Although during free play children with ASD often explore objects less than their peers do, it is reasonable to suppose that appropriate scaffolding can increase a child's exploratory play behavior (Mastrangelo, 2009).

Preschool children with communication delays are likely to be less successful in peer interactions and seem to be less authoritative with their peers (Guralnick, Conner, Hammond, Gottman, & Kinnish, 1996). Symbolic play continues to be strongly linked with the development of receptive and express communication skills (Lewis, Boucher, & Lupton, (2000). Often children with developmental delays including Down syndrome, lack cooperative play skills, interaction with materials, and interest in their classmates (Denning & Stanton-Chapman, 2014). Movahedazarhouligh (2018) argued that using research-based recommendations to teach play skills to young children with disabilities provides those children with opportunities for learning, retaining, and supporting other skills.

Types of Play

Rock (2013) suggested there are eleven types of play:

- Unoccupied play is the first stage of play demonstrated by infants and does not resemble play in the conventional sense because it often manifests as observation of surroundings and unintentional movements.

- Independent play occurs when a child can play alone. Infants, toddlers, and preschoolers engage in solitary or independent play, but it is most common among toddlers and preschoolers. Children with special needs may prefer this type of play.
- In onlooker play, children prefer to watch and observe play or adults rather than join in the play. This play is typical for children 2–3 years of age, children with limited vocabulary, and children with special needs. This type of play is an important part of learning.
- Parallel play happens when children play side by side with limited interaction. Children learn important skills while engaging in parallel play, and this type of play is a bridge to later play stages.
- Associative play begins around 3–4 years of age. Children still play separately, but they also become involved in play happening around them. Many developmental skills—such as language, problem solving, cooperation, turn taking, and social development—find use in this stage of play.
- Cooperative play starts around 4 years of age and occurs when a child starts to build up in the other stages of play. Children put social skills into action in this type of play.
- Competitive play contributes to social, cognitive, and physical skills. Children involved in competitive play demonstrate the skills of rules of engagement and self-regulation.

- Constructive play teaches children how things work in their environments. This type of play includes building and manipulating materials to create things. Children really hone cognitive skills and problem-solving during this type of play.
- During dramatic play, children get creative and use their imaginations. They use skills such as taking turns and sharing, and they develop language skills while they create schemata of everyday life.
- Physical play develops gross motor skills and helps children use balance, coordination, and fine motor development.
- Symbolic play includes singing, rhyming, and creative activities such as drawing, manipulating playdough, and making music. This type of play helps children begin to identify and experience ideas and emotions.

Play is progressive, and skills build on one another. There are many ways to play and define play; however, children should lead free play so that they can experience the processes of cause and effect and trial and error. When children receive opportunities to participate in play voluntarily and manipulate their environments spontaneously, they use their innate abilities to learn and build social constructs (Kasari et al., 2013).

Play Routines

Incorporating play as an instructional strategy is important both for teaching and development (Chen et al., 2012). Children can learn most play skills with little intervention or guidance from adults. However, children with special needs may need

assistance with these skills. Teachers in early childhood special education classrooms should provide opportunities for children to engage in play within classroom environments that emphasize academic skills. Play affords children many opportunities to learn and practice a variety of developmental skills, including social–emotional skills and language and literacy building.

Play is a unique teaching strategy because it has no predefined goal or outcome (Chen et al., 2012). For this reason, play can increase in complexity as children develop. In play, children progress from dependence on adults until they reach the stage of independence and begin to self-regulate (Yugman et al., 2018). Although play is not the only avenue for learning, it is an important and necessary part of early childhood and early childhood special education. During a TED Talk Dr. Brown (2008), founder of the National Institute for Play, contended that “nothing lights up a child’s brain like play”. Vygotsky’s theory of development as interactive challenges the way teachers think about children’s learning. Mooney (2000) asserted that peer interactions, discussions, and experimentation help children increase their skills and accomplish goals.

Direct Instruction

An alternative to play-based instruction in early childhood education is direct instruction. The focus of this model is teacher-directed activities and lessons. Teachers use modeling and reinforcement to provide instruction with corresponding feedback (Magliaro et al., 2005). Because direct instruction is a behavior-based model of learning, it involves an assumption that learners must be active (behaving) to learn (Magliaro et

al., 2005). The behavior problems present in many children diagnosed with ASD could lead to the assumption that a child with ASD is never active to learn. However, an alternative assumption is that once children with ASD or other special needs become active participants in their environments, improvement may occur in their language, social–emotional skills, and undesired behaviors (Morrison et al., 2002).

Erosion of Play

The importance of play as a learning strategy in early childhood classrooms has received widespread research attention; however, researchers have provided limited information on teachers' perceptions of the existing practice of using play-based curricula in early childhood classrooms (Barblett et al., 2016). Despite the research available and educators' knowledge that play is a central part of child development, play-based programming for children has been growing scarce in classrooms. As a result of poor communication about what play-based instruction is and its use in classrooms, some people may have concluded that using play as a teaching strategy contradicts traditional teaching strategies. Wood (2014a) suggested that policies have brought about change in play, causing it to become more technical.

Barblett et al. (2016) conducted a study in which participants identified pushdown curriculum, misunderstanding of play, and undervaluation of play by teachers and leaders as reasons for erosion of play-based learning. Leaders seem to have developed the belief that school needs a formalized structured setting to build academic achievement. Fesseha and Pyle (2016) argued that as researchers began to create

concrete definitions of play through differing theoretical lenses, educators were left with contradictory definitions that challenged their understanding of the role of play in student development and implementation of play-based programs. Fesseha and Pyle also pointed to teachers' identification of their role in play as affecting how and whether they implemented play-based learning. Some believe that play and schoolwork are two separate activities within a child's day. Jung and Jin (2015) contended that play and learning are of equal importance in the early childhood classroom. Participants in Barblett et al.'s study cited support (or lack of support) by colleagues and leaders for play-based curricula as a deciding factor in whether a teacher implemented such a curriculum in their classroom. Participants in Barblett et al.'s study also said that their philosophy of teaching often did not match up with the way leaders told them to teach, and their classrooms were devoid of play-based learning.

Jung and Jin (2015) reiterated that play has been the subject of widespread debate over many years, with advocates of play pointing out the benefits to children—such as development of cognitive, language, and social–emotional skills—and critics pointing out that effects of play defy measurement, teachers feel pressured to meet specific short-term academic outcomes, and learning outcomes of play are not evident. Wood (2014b) asserted that tensions between proponents of play-based curricula and proponents of other curricula have become visible in national policy frameworks. Wood (2014a) studied free choice and free play and determined that children with special needs often have difficulty accessing play. Adults can make play for children with special

needs more challenging than it needs to be without realizing the outcomes of their actions.

High-Quality Environments

According to Kentucky's Cabinet for Health and Family Services (n.d.), public preschools and private childcare programs could participate in Kentucky All STARS, a quality-rating and improvement system in which participating programs must meet specific criteria in required domains to reach the points needed to gain STARS in Levels 1–5, with the Division of Child Care recognizing Levels 3–5 as high quality. Children enrolled in high-quality learning environments developed better skills in the math, language, and social–emotional domains.

Benefits of Play

According to Mielonen and Paterson (2009), communicating with others builds children's language competence throughout their lives. Since 1998, understanding of the link connecting play with literacy and learning has improved: "The benefits of play for language development include the use of oral language, complex cognitive abilities, reading and writing skills, challenges, experimentation, approximations, and negotiations" (p. 30).

Yugman et al. (2018) asserted, "Play is not frivolous: it enhances brain structure and function and promotes executive function (i.e., the process of learning, rather than the content), which allows us to pursue goals and ignore distractions" (p. 1). Play begins

in infancy and continues throughout life. The simple games parents or caregivers play with children, such as serve and return games, constitute play-based skill development. As a child grows, they develop more locomotor skills and become more independent and secure in their environment. Throughout this period, the child's language skills develop from their interactions with their caregivers and environment. As the child moves into the preschool stage, symbolic functioning and pretend play become noticeable, and the child begins to learn to solve problems and focus their attention. Play provides opportunities to develop executive functioning, improve language skills, and form safe relationships and social–emotional resilience (Yugman et al., 2018).

Conclusions

Although debate has continued about the credibility of play as a method of instruction, Kossyvaki and Papoudi (2016) argued that play is an effective method of instruction for teaching children with special needs, even though its use may be more restricted for children with ASD. Teachers have often overlooked play as a teaching method because they have focused on academic gains and had trouble engaging children with ASD in play. Play-based instruction, especially pretend play, helps improve communication skills in children, and symbolic play is linked closely with language development. Children learn language and how to communicate and interact with others while they play. Piaget (as cited in Mooney, 2000) argued that children learn and understand concepts and the world around them by participating in play. According to

Vygotskyian theory, language and development depend on each other, and when children play, they always use language (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009).

Play of children with ASD is often repetitious and object focused, whereas play of typical children allows the children to tap into their creativity while developing their imaginations and physical, social, and emotional skills. Children with ASD often lack these skills. Play-based instruction therefore allows children with ASD to attend to their internal drive to play. During play, children address learning in all domains. In children with ASD, imitation skills are likely to relate directly to language ability and predict language ability later in life.

Children diagnosed with Communication delays often struggle with the ability to express themselves during play. Communication delays may manifest as deficits in manipulating objects, interactions with peers, and demonstrating simple problem-solving skills (Dennis & Stockall, 2015). In children with Down syndrome the duration of play is shorter, and the child can need more assistance than their typically developing peers (Play, 2023). Young children imitate and learn from the play they witness (Venuti, DeFalco, & Bornstein, 2009). Children diagnosed with Down syndrome display a reduced propensity for exploring both objects and their environment (Sharpe, 1997). It has been reported that children, regardless of their impairment, benefit from collaborative play (Childress, 2011).

Play addresses the social communication impairments observed in children with special needs. Play is linked to academic success and teaches children self-regulation.

The effects of play-based instruction provide phenomenal opportunities for practice and reinforcement. Past and present early childhood theorists and educators have recognized learning through play as an effective method of instruction for all children. Piaget's theory suggests play results from children acting out and modeling constructs within their world (Rutherford et al., 2007). Ability to emulate skills during play is linked to language aptitude throughout childhood (Toth et al., 2006). Developmentally appropriate play sets the potential of all children free. Play gives a child opportunity to demonstrate their developmental skills and knowledge in an environment where they feel secure and safe.

III. Methodology

Methods

This chapter discusses the design and methodology of the study. The first two chapters presented an overview of the study and a review of existing literature to support the purpose of the study, which was to explore preschool teachers' perceptions of play-based instruction when teaching children with communication delays, Down syndrome, and ASD. Specifically, this study involved comparing the perceptions of certified public preschool teachers with those of preschool teachers in licensed childcare settings in rural Kentucky.

Research Approach

According to Roberts and Hyatt (2019), a qualitative approach to research involves focusing on people's experiences from their perspectives. A qualitative researcher seeks to build a complete and comprehensive picture of the topic they study in a natural setting. I took a qualitative approach and employed a phenomenological strategy of inquiry to learn about the perceptions of play-based curricula as an effective model of instruction for children with Autism spectrum disorder, Communication delay, and Down syndrome by comparing the perceptions of preschool teachers in licensed childcare settings with those of certified public preschool teachers. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), a phenomenological strategy utilizes the lived experiences of individuals that have all experienced a phenomenon. This type of strategy utilizes

interviews to collect data from the participants. This inquiry was complex, and (unlike in quantitative research) there were no variables to define; consequently, little existing research was available regarding the perceptions teachers have of the effectiveness of play-based curricula or comparisons of the two groups studied. Qualitative inquiry was thus essential in this case.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data from participants employing both face to face and virtual meetings. Creswell and Creswell (2018), explain this type of interview is beneficial to the research as current and historical information can be provided and the researcher has some control over the line of questioning. By using this type of questioning I was able to glean basic information to get to know the interviewee, phrase the research questions in a friendly way, and use probing questions to illicit more information or gain a better understanding of the ideas being shared.

Participants

For the purposes of this study, the term “preschool teacher” denotes both certified and noncertified preschool teachers. Certified preschool teachers work in the public-school setting and have met the following educational requirements: completion of a bachelor’s degree, completion of an educator preparation program, and achievement of a passing score on state exams. A non-certified preschool teacher working in a licensed childcare program must have a high school diploma, a general equivalency diploma, or a commonwealth childcare credential. The participants in the research study all lived in the southeastern/eastern region of Kentucky and identifies as

women between the ages of 20 and 59 years. All participants worked in settings participating with high quality levels according to the Kentucky All STARS quality-rating system.

This research study included certified public preschool teachers and preschool teachers in high-quality licensed childcare centers who worked in classrooms in settings enrolling students with or without special needs across the southeastern part of Kentucky. In the literature reviewed Cre, 2007) well (2007) suggests that a heterogeneous population would require between 25 and 30 interviews, and semi-structured/in-depth interviews require a minimum sample size of between 5 and 25. Given this recommendation twelve to sixteen participants were chosen to participate in this study to avoid saturation. The two groups of teachers were contacted via email survey and asked to participate in the research study. Participants were selected based on whether the following criteria, 1) currently working as a certified public preschool teacher or preschool teacher in a high quality licensed childcare center, 2) working in a classroom setting enrolling students with or without special needs, and 3) located in the southeastern portion of Kentucky. If fewer than desired initially agreed to participate, I would send a follow up email to gather more volunteers. If the number of participants desired could not be found, I would complete the research with a smaller number of participants. The rationale for choosing this number of participants was to avoid saturation or the collection of repetitive data from interviews that would not provide any added information to support the findings regarding the phenomenon (Creswell &

Creswell, 2007). I chose to employ a purposeful sampling method when choosing the pool of preschool teachers from public schools and high-quality childcare settings to participate in the research study. A purposeful sampling method is defined as a researcher using his or her own judgement when choosing study participants to obtain a representative sample of the desired population.

Setting

Following the recommendations of Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Roberts and Hyatt (2019), the teachers were interviewed, when possible, in their classrooms; the purpose of doing so was to study the participants in their natural setting. The interviews could be conducted in both settings virtually as needed. This study allowed the teachers to share their perceptions in their own words; semi-structured interview questions were used, such as the following: “Tell me about your experience using play-based curriculum.” This technique yielded unsolicited detailed accounts from the teachers in connection with their perspectives and provided me with a better understanding of the subject matter.

Researcher Subjectivity

Given my prior knowledge and my participation in a previous inquiry with a similar topic, it was important for me to think deeply about the ways I could be influenced during the study. Biases resulting from my years of experience in the field—as a preschool teacher, center director, early childhood trainer, and adjunct instructor—

could have influenced my subjectivity, as could my lack of experience in the public-school setting. By acknowledging my role as a researcher–practitioner, I used my internal understanding of the phenomenon explored to gain a better understanding of my participants and the contexts in which they lived and shared their stories. I approached this inquiry with curiosity rather than expertise, identified my personal values to maintain neutrality in my inquiry, and sought to enlist experts in the field to review my findings (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Trustworthiness

Each participating teacher was provided with a copy of the transcribed notes from her interview and asked to review it for accuracy. They also were provided with a draft copy of the dissertation report so that they could provide feedback. These provisions met the requirements for member checking (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to reduce the effects of research bias and subjectivity.

Benefits and Risks

The benefits of this study include the information it provides to educators, administrators, and parents regarding the benefits of play-based curricula for both typically developing children and children with special needs in the areas of language development and communication skills. The study incorporated the main principles for conducting training with human subjects as described by Roberts and Hyatt (2019). With respect to people, the risks were extremely low because participants voluntarily

provided informed consented to take part, and I ensured their privacy and confidentiality. The study designed limited risks, and the potential benefits justified the risks that remained.

Limitations

Limitations of this study were the education level of the participants. Participants could have feared joining a study that went against their administrators' or employers' philosophies and therefore not shared their personal beliefs. I had a working relationship with some of the participants, and this may have influenced their responses. This study was not culturally representative.

IV. Findings

Overview

In this chapter I will present an overview of the findings. This study specifically involved looking at comparing the perceptions of certified public preschool teachers with those of preschool teachers in high-quality licensed childcare settings (Kentucky All STARS Levels 3–5) in rural Kentucky. A phenomenological strategy of inquiry and a qualitative approach were used to explore the perceptions of preschool teachers in early childhood settings in licensed Type 1 childcare centers and public preschool classrooms. My intent with this study was to better understand the participants' perceptions of using play-based curricula in inclusive classrooms. During interviews, preschool teachers described their perceptions, knowledge, and understanding of using play-based curricula and the ways play-based curricula can be used to teach language skills to children enrolled in inclusive classrooms. This qualitative research study addressed the following three research questions:

1. What are preschool teachers' perceptions of using play-based curricula with children identified as having special needs (specifically communication delays, ASD, and Down syndrome)?
2. How do preschool teachers use play-based curricula to teach language skills to children identified as having special needs (specifically communication delays, ASD, and Down syndrome)?
3. What language skills do children develop through play-based curricula?

The information in this chapter includes participant demographics; teachers' perceptions, views, and understandings of play-based curricula; and ways play-based curricula might be used to teach language skills to children with special needs. The data are organized by theme. Narratives and direct quotes describe the themes. The direct quotes from the participant interviews have been edited for grammatical correctness, and research participants have been assigned codes to protect their identities.

Participants

Thirteen preschool teachers agreed to participate in the research study. All participants lived and worked in the southeastern/eastern region of Kentucky. Fifty-four percent ($n = 7$) of the research participants worked in licensed childcare preschool classrooms, and 46% ($n = 6$) work in public school preschool classrooms. Eighty-four percent ($n = 11$) of the teachers were employed as lead teachers in classrooms, and 16% ($n = 2$) were co-teachers. All participants worked in licensed childcare or public preschool classrooms considered high quality (Levels 3– 5 in the Kentucky All STARS rating system) and inclusive. All participants self-identified as women. Their ages ranged from 20 to 59 years, and one participant declined to disclose her age. Figure 1 summarizes the participants' experience. Figure 2 summarizes quality ratings.

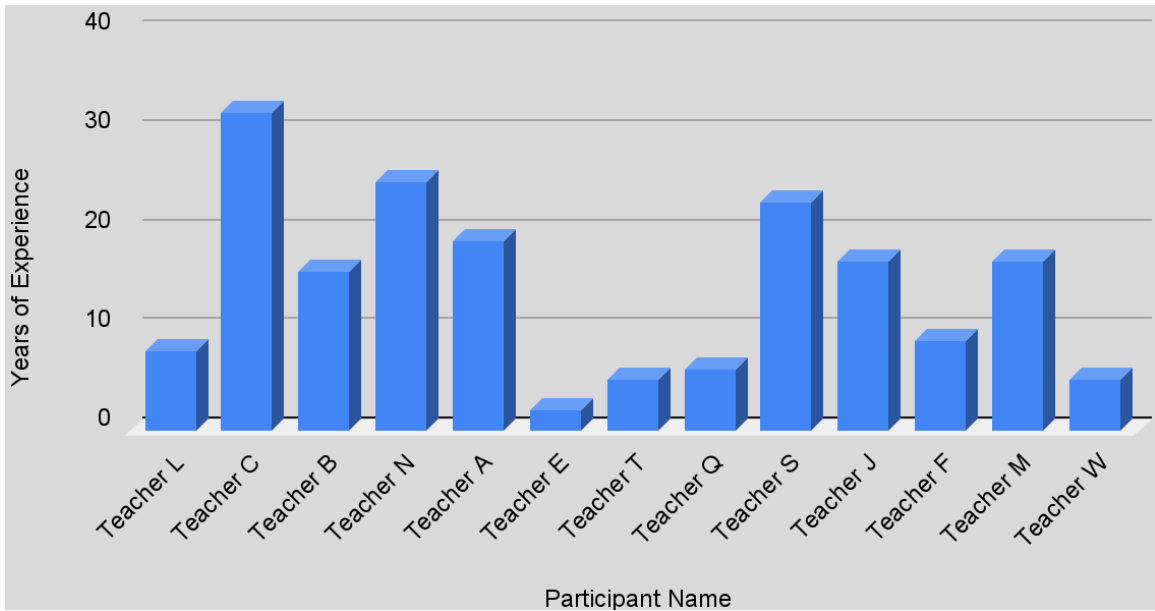


Figure 1 Participants' Years of Experience in Early Childhood

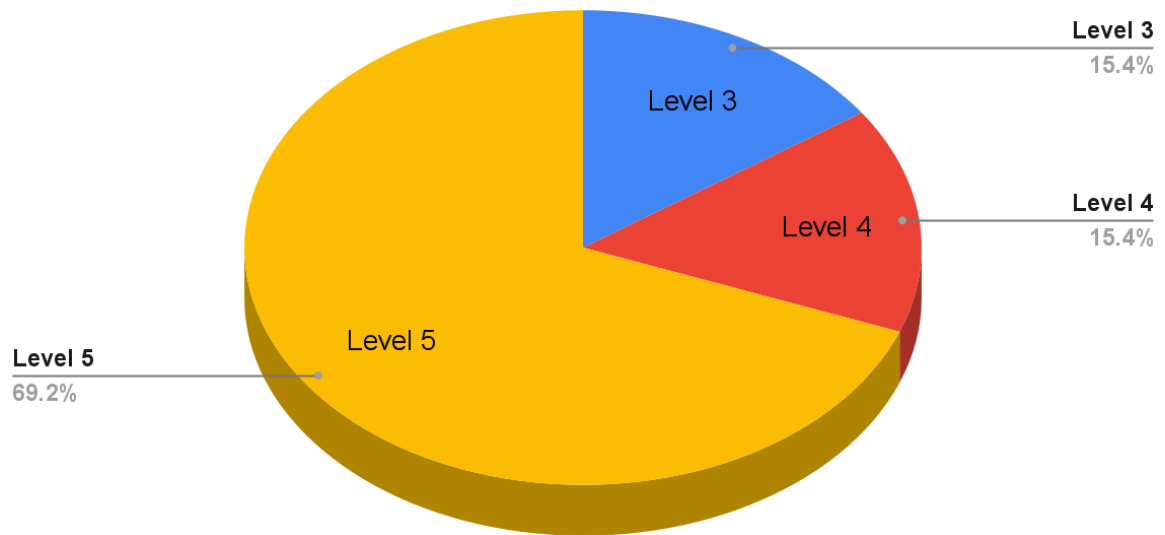


Figure 2 Kentucky Quality-Rating System (All STARS) Levels for Classrooms

Interviews

Semi structured interviews were used to collect information from the preschool teachers. I developed the interview questions, which related to participant demographics, further understanding of teachers' perceptions of play-based curricula, and ways play-based curricula might be used to teach language skills to children with autism spectrum disorder, communication delays, and Down syndrome:

Tell me about yourself and your teaching experience in early childhood.

1. Describe what an early childhood classroom looks like (routines, daily schedule, opportunity for play). curriculum? How has teaching experience shaped your perspective?

2. What does an early childhood classroom look like that uses a play-based curriculum?

3. How has your teaching experience shaped your perspective on the use of play-based curriculum in a classroom that includes children with special needs?

4. Describe for me your thoughts on using play-based curriculum as a method to teach children with special needs.

5. How might a play-based curriculum be used to teach language skills to children with special needs?

6. What types of language skills are developed through a play-based curriculum?

7. Describe the amount of input teachers have in decision-making in choosing classroom curriculum.

Procedures

Data Collection

After interviews were scheduled, each participant was contacted by email or phone to confirm the date, time, location, and mode of the scheduled interview; this resulted in four interviews being rescheduled due to illness. The mode and location of each interview were mutually decided between me and the participant. The interviews

consisted of both in-person and virtual meeting platform interviews. The audio of the interviews was recorded. The participants were asked a series of semi structured questions, and they were asked relevant follow-up questions to gain more information or for clarification as needed. The use of semi structured open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their individual perceptions, lived experiences, and understandings of the topic.

Fewer than half of the interviews took place in person, and the remainder of the interviews took place via virtual meeting rooms. Each interview was scheduled for 2 hours, and the average interview lasted 1 hour and 50 minutes. Each participant had an opportunity to preview the questions before their scheduled interview; all but three of the participants declined. No more than two interviews were scheduled in a week to allow me time to review and transcribe the data in a timely manner before sharing the transcripts with the participants along with a request to review and approve them for accuracy. The participants suggested no edits or changes to the transcripts, except for the correction of a spelling error. The transcripts and the recordings were stored on my password-protected laptop and in a locked cabinet in my home office.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2018) was used in this study. The data were organized by transcribing and typing up interview notes. The data were read multiple times over several days and reviewed to gain a sense of the information present, identify general ideas and tones, and establish the credibility and

depth of the information. The data were coded and organized into sections and segments. Descriptions and themes were generated by using a highlighting coding method. Narratives or visuals were used to represent the descriptions and themes. The first step in the data analysis was to separate the substantial information to begin identifying themes and patterns (Creswell, 2009) and to create categories of related, similar, and different responses based on the participant interviews. I labeled each participant with initials and used a color-coding system to keep track of the information gathered and retained for the study. I highlighted responses based on perceptions, trends, similarities, and differences and grouped them into categories; after categorization, I pinpointed the emerging themes. By using this process, I was able to identify commonalities and differences in the participants' perceptions of the topic and lived experiences in relation to the research questions.

Themes

Once the data analysis was complete, the significant statements and relevant information were identified. I discovered four main themes and several subthemes within each theme:

1. The theme of play curriculum (play-based learning) included three subthemes: (a) types of play, (b) developmental skills, and (c) free choice.
2. The theme of program type (classroom environments) included two subthemes: (a) Kentucky All STARS rating and (b) inclusive classrooms.

3. The theme of teaching strategies (language development through play) included three subthemes: (a) developmental domains/skills, (b) individualized strategies/goals, and (c) lesson plans/schedules.
4. The theme of decision making (autonomy) included three themes: (a) administrative support, (b) curriculum choice, and (c) personal teaching philosophy.

Theme 1: Play Curriculum

This theme emerged several times throughout the interviews. During data collection, all participants discussed this theme, which related to the learning and skill development that takes place while using play-based curricula in inclusive preschool classrooms. Many of the teachers defined play-based learning. Teacher L. shared, “Teaching a play-based curriculum, to me, means teachers are working to provide an environment rich with materials for the children to manipulate and explore.” Teacher L. also shared, “An early childhood classroom using a play-based curriculum looks like children leading through their interests and with the freedom of choice.” Teacher B. described an environment divided into learning centers in which teachers “place specific materials to meet the lesson plan, learning objectives, and individualized children’s goals into categorized stations such as math, science, language and literacy.”

Several teachers referred to the learning environment being set up by the teacher and most of the activities being child led rather than teacher directed. Teacher B. shared, “If the structure is too rigid, children can struggle with learning specific

concepts and skills, when there are guided yet child-led learning opportunities children learn through play and interaction with their peers.” She elaborated, indicating that her classroom was set up to be inviting to children and encourage hands-on exploration of materials: “As I am working my way through the room to encourage children and to prompt and ask questions to move all children to higher levels of thinking” (teacher B.).

Teacher S. discussed during her interview how she used several types of play in her classroom, although she noted that she did not use free play as often as she would like. She cited being held accountable for ensuring children are kindergarten ready, which is very academic skill based, and she went on to explain she was not always able to give the children time to learn through play because of the strict schedule and learning standards she had to adhere to. She continued to explain how drill play and teacher-directed structured play were some of the types of play used in her classroom on a daily basis, and she estimated that the children had opportunities for free play at the beginning of each day when arriving and at the end of each day before dismissal.

Developmental skills constituted another subtheme that emerged several times during data analysis. Teacher M. discussed the developmental skills encouraged by play-based curricula, pointing out self-confidence, problem solving, creativity, thinking, retaining information, and building attention as skills that children need to be ready for school. She added, “There is such a push for children to be ready for kindergarten, that sometimes the parents and administrators think play is too simple to bring about great strides in learning and development of children” (teacher M.).

Many of the teachers pointed out that a play-based curriculum allows children with special needs to manipulate and work with materials in ways that best fit their needs and help them to grasp concepts in their own time and using their abilities. Teacher B. described an instance in her classroom in which a child with low vision worked in a free-choice learning center that offered magnetic alphabet letters with magnet wands and a board. The child used the materials in the way they learned best: They did not often use the magnet wand but instead used their hands to place letters on the board. The opportunity for the child to use the materials in a way that worked best for them allowed the child to manipulate the letters, hold them close, identify the letters, and place them in the corresponding place on the board. Providing the materials, setting up the environment, and giving the child the opportunity to explore and manipulate the materials allowed the child to succeed in their own way.

Teacher N. described her use of a play-based curriculum as follows: "About 75% of the day is spent in child-lead play-based learning with materials and guidance I provide." Teacher N. continued:

"The introduction to the materials encourages them to explore the materials and activities that are set up in my classroom. There is no right or wrong way to play, I only intervene when needed and certainly when guidance is needed so everyone stays safe."

She added that she intervened when needed to model, ask questions, answer questions, and help children learn to solve problems.

Theme 2: Program Type

All participants pointed to their participation in the Kentucky All STARS quality-rating system. All research participants worked in programs rated high quality (Levels 3–5). Teacher W. indicated that play-based curricula did not form a large part of the daily curriculum in her classroom because her teaching was guided by the public preschool learning standards. Children did not often have opportunities to play, because their days were already so full. She mentioned that they did get a few minutes of recess, silent reading, and board games, and they had gross motor time in physical education class. She explained that she knew play to be important but also felt pressure from parents who sent their children to preschool to learn.

Teacher E. noted that Kentucky All STARS is a tiered quality-rating system used to determine overall quality of licensed childcare, Head Start, and public prekindergarten programs and that it promotes learning through play and quality interactions. Teacher E. also discussed how childcare programs receiving state or federal funding must participate in the rating system but not at higher levels.

In relation to the subtheme of inclusion, data analysis revealed that all teachers worked in classrooms considered inclusive with enrolled children with or without special needs. Every classroom but one had one or more children with special needs diagnoses at the time of the study. Teacher J. worked in a public prekindergarten classroom with eighteen enrolled children, she had six children with individualized education plans. She had one assistant teacher and one student-specific paraprofessional working in the

classroom. A teacher working in a licensed Type 1 childcare program pointed out that she had only two children with diagnosed special needs, but she said, “I include individualized goals and activities on my weekly lesson plan” (teacher B.). She pointed out that all children need specific goals to keep their development progressing. In her classroom she used observation and assessment to ensure children were developing and learning.

Theme 3: Teaching Strategies

The teachers repeatedly mentioned teaching strategies and the ways they set up their classroom environments. Participants often described writing lesson plans that included activities for the whole group and distinctive individualized goals for specific children or small groups. One participant, teacher W., showed an example of a lesson plan that included the statement “small group time does not have to be teacher-led in order to meet the child (ren) specific or individual needs.” She said that her classroom was set up with learning centers so that children could use materials in the ways they wanted to with assistance from adults or peers. She used observations to determine whether children were meeting their individual goals and the classroom goals. She spoke about being very methodical and thoughtful in her planning of activities and learning centers, keeping both the whole classroom and individual children in mind. She worked one on one with individual children and in small groups. Teacher W. contended that she believed in scaffolding and giving children challenging yet achievable activities because all children, regardless of developmental level, thrive in those types of

classrooms. According to Teacher L., children with and without special needs who had the opportunity to act on their environment and explore were developing many vital skills, such as problem solving, cognitive and joint attention, language, social–emotional skills, and motor skills.

Many of the research participants touched on the basis for all children’s learning, placing play at the core of development. Several repeated the adage that “play is learning” throughout their interviews. Teacher E. highlighted that the schedule in her classroom revolved around regulatory compliance about inclusion of items such as mealtimes and routine times. She said that she ensured play was scheduled throughout the day. Teacher E. defined play and detailed how she incorporated play into the classroom. Play was called “free choice” or “free play” in the classroom. The terms used sometimes made the director or parents nervous. The schedule in the classroom included a lot of free play. When a child starts in the classroom, the teacher holds a parent meeting to explain the reasons for, and benefits of, having free play in the classroom and the importance of play in relation to a child’s learning and development. After the meeting, most parents usually understood and were more open to their children exploring the concept. Those who did not fully understand the concept of learning through play still drew a sharp line in the sand. Results of previous research on this topic support this finding. Fesesha and Pyle (2016) contended, “In the midst of these many opinions concerning best practices and potential shortcomings of using

play-based pedagogical approaches, teachers continue to face implementation challenges” (p. 365).

A few participants detailed children’s learning through teacher-led whole-group exercises and small-group activities. Teacher J. shared that she believed children learn best in a structured and scheduled classroom and that play is useful for building social-emotional skills and learning to get along in a group setting. She shared her belief that parents who enroll their children in public school understand it will include minimum play. Play should occur mostly at home or during gross motor time. Teacher J. went on to explain that although she had received education regarding the play theory of learning, she had never accepted the belief that play is the way all children learn. For example, she noted “I would not expect a child with special needs to learn their ABCs through play. That requires one-on-one teaching; using picture cards repetitively might be an avenue by which a child could grasp the concept.” She finished her interview by stating that there were so many early learning standards to meet to ensure children are ready for kindergarten that her class had hardly enough time to get the academic work completed; time for daily play was therefore rare.

Several of the teachers recognized language development as a developmental skill learned through play. Teachers F., N., and E. all had similar responses when it came to identifying language skills children learn through play. They each said that play encourages communication and that as children engage with their peers and teachers and act on classroom materials they gain new vocabulary, expressive and receptive

language skills, and early literacy (reading and writing) skills. Teacher F. stated that she completed a developmental screening on children when they entered her classroom, and one of the areas screened for was language. She used the screener to help her develop lesson plans and activities to encourage language development for the whole group and individual children. If the screener showed a concern or potential deficit, she would inform the child's parent and refer them to the appropriate agency. She continued to screen children throughout the year to ensure they developed expressive and receptive language skills.

According to teacher A., "role playing and symbolic play lead to development of language and the use of complex words." She elaborated, "While role playing or playing in the dramatic play area with props and real-life materials, children use rich language as they develop the rules and scripts for themselves and their peers." For example, she shared an observation she had made while a few children were playing in the dramatic play area, set up as a home environment. One child had self-identified as a mother, and identified another as a child as a child, and a third as a nurse. The play continued, with one child leading the play and the other children adding in character attributes. The "child" was sick, and the "mother" called the "nurse" to attend to the "child." They used words such as "nurse," "thermometer," "medicine," and "fever." Each child would add something to the play to keep it going. Spoons became the thermometer placed under the arm, and a doll's blanket became a cool cloth on the head. The teacher observed

and identified many language and academic skills in development and use as the children played.

Several teachers mentioned dramatic play as a free-play learning center. Teacher Q. described how she set up the learning center to be inviting for all children and to encourage its use by children who may not use the more social areas of the classroom. Teacher Q. explained that she knew that one of the children with ASD in the class did not typically go into the dramatic play area, so she would observe and find the child's interests and set up the center with materials that all children could use but that would specifically pique the interest of that particular child. This intentional opportunity set the stage for the child to play with or alongside their classmates. This interaction provided additional opportunities for the child to observe, interact with, and take in the environment without a specific goal or task set through direct instruction.

Some research participants discussed how children learn social-emotional skills and how to identify and label emotions through interactions with classmates and teachers who model and label behavior. Teacher Q. said that she had a child in her class who comforted his classmates and labeled their feelings because his mother did the same for him. She said many of the other children had also begun to do the same throughout the day when classmates were having trouble self-regulating.

A few teachers pointed out that language skills and play go hand in hand. As children play, they naturally build curiosity and creativity, and language development naturally occurring in those settings is compounded with intentional teaching strategies

and lesson planning. When asked about language skills, teacher T. replied that she often heard the most language and rare words used between children playing in the learning centers. She continued to express that the words and phrases they used and heard throughout the day from reading books, singing songs, circle time discussions, and transition times most often ended up in peer-to-peer communication and interactions. Observing a child using a word or phrase in context without prompting during play gave her the anecdotal data needed to prove that learning happens through play in the classroom.

Some teachers expanded on language development of children with diagnosed special needs. Teacher C. detailed how children with special needs can grasp concepts through play that they may not grasp during teacher-led whole-group instruction. She provided the example of a child with Down syndrome in her class who was nonverbal at the beginning of the year. She used communication cards, modeled language, and labeled for him. One day, he was with a small group in a learning center working on a puppy floor puzzle. When they completed the puzzle, they all clapped and verbalized their happiness. He jumped up from the floor, clapped, and said, "pup pup." This was the first word he had spoken in their presence. She continued, saying that his classmates cheered for him, and he repeatedly said, "pup pup." They watched his vocabulary increase over the next weeks and months; he was using one- and two-word phrases by the end of the year. This is another example of how play is a conduit for

learning. All children learn through doing, hands-on activities, and peer and teacher interactions. Children learn through play.

Play opens avenues for children to learn about themselves, others, and the world in which they live. Teacher F. summed it up well:

“Play is the vehicle by which developmental skills are taught without children realizing they are being taught skills and concepts. Play is fun; children simply believe they are having fun and anyone observing the action can see all the new skills and development occurring as they play.”

She went on to reiterate that when a child plays, the child works: That work is learning and developing the whole child.

Theme 4: Decision Making

All the teachers spoke about the autonomy of decision making they had within their classrooms. Some indicated they had more autonomy in decision making than others, and the degree of autonomy they had correlated with the degree of administrative support they received—especially in relation to implementing a play-based curriculum. Some teachers mentioned that although their personal teaching philosophy was built around the foundation of learning through play in early childhood classrooms, they lacked the support of administrators to fully implement play-based curricula. Teacher W. explained that she had received instructions to omit the words “free play” or “free choice” from her daily schedule so that parents would not think all their children did each day was play. She went on to confirm that her employers advertised that they used Creative Curriculum, a play-based curriculum. The program

she worked for also used ditto sheets, teacher-led memory drills, and rote learning under the direction of administrators. Most of her day was spent in small-group work, with the teacher leading the children.

Few teachers said they were part of decision making within their programs. Some received consultation on curriculum and parameters within which they could teach in a manner of their choosing if they met the Kentucky Early Childhood Learning Standards, made developmental progress on yearly assessments, and maintained their Kentucky All STARS rating. More often, teachers reported that most classroom and program decisions came top down.

All participants stated that they did not make curriculum decisions on their own, and some indicated a lack of support from administrators. Some pointed out they were worried about speaking up about perceived lack of support and participation in program decision making. Teacher B. shared that her program subscribed to the philosophy that children learn through play. She continued, citing the following example:

“Our leadership is on the same page as the teachers in our program and promotes play as the foundation of all learning. They believe that children learn at their own pace and activities should be planned for the whole child, large group and individualized. They regularly assess the program to ensure the children are receiving what they need to develop and learn. ... We create our own lesson plans using the Kentucky Early Childhood Learning Standards and supplemental curriculums. Our lesson plans are accepted by the state licensure agency and the Kentucky All STARS.”

When participants expanded on the idea of personal teaching philosophy and how it relates to use of a play-based curriculum, their responses were more similar than different. Eleven of the thirteen teachers indicated their personal teaching philosophies

were built on the foundation that play-based curricula are developmentally appropriate and effective as a model of instruction in inclusive classrooms. Two teachers reported that they did not believe play-based curricula form an effective model of instruction for teaching children with special needs. Teacher J. expressed concern that play is not serious enough for much learning to take place. She stated that she felt that way because play is chaotic and lacks structure, which children with special needs require. Teacher S. also opposed using a play-based curriculum: "Children with special needs should be taught using teacher-led instruction based on their skill level at that time."

Some of the other responses in favor of using a play-based curriculum included teacher M.'s statement:

"I majored in early childhood education, and all my coursework was taught using the theorist's beliefs that play is the way children learn and develop. I particularly remember the Piaget theory of stages of development and how he believed play to be imperative for children's cognitive and language development. I still use this information as I create lesson plans and activities for my class."

She went on to explain that her education and experience regarding teaching children with special needs proved to her daily that these theorists were right, all children can play, all children can learn, and teachers should set the stage for them to do so by planning experiences through play that address all ages and stages of development.

Teacher A. stated that she was always learning about the individual needs of children in her classroom through observation of their free play:

"I can gauge interests, skills mastered, skills that need more practice by observing the children as they play. I hear the language they use; I can gauge their social emotional maturity; problem solving and watch them manipulate the

materials in ways that make sense to them. I witness them use their creativity and develop skills needed to move them forward in their individual development.”

V. Summary Discussion

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand preschool teachers' perceptions of play-based curricula as an effective method of instruction for children with special needs. The study was guided by three central research questions. The sections that follow discuss the findings in connection with the questions.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 was as follows: What are preschool teachers' perceptions of using play-based curricula with children identified as having special needs (specifically communication delays, ASD, and Down syndrome)? Vygotsky (as cited in Bodrova & Leong, 2005) believed that "play continually creates demands on the child to act against immediate impulse, i.e., to act according to the line of greatest resistance" (p. 375). In this study, Teacher E. said:

"For children with autism, play-based learning and help a child with language and social emotional skills. The dramatic play is a learning center where I intentionally set up the environment to encourage peer interactions, language and problem solving. I provided real world materials for the children to manipulate and learn through hands-on and peer to peer interactions."

This response is in line with the findings of Sherratt and Peter (2002): "Children on the autism spectrum are more likely to engage in imaginative and creative play when it is meaningful to them".

Open-ended play leads to creativity, language acquisition, and building of self-confidence. Teacher F. said, "I will set up the environment for it to be explored by the

children, give them real life materials to manipulate and use.” She elaborated, saying that she found that giving children simple directions and asking open-ended questions helped to build both their expressive and their receptive language skills. Labeling items helped them identify objects and understand their meaning. Teacher C. shared the importance of building language skills for all children:

“I especially like to offer children materials that can teach practical life skills. It is important for children with special needs or language delay to be provided materials that encourage communication between their peers and the teacher. I also like to use songs, books, chants, and fingerplays to introduce sounds and concepts.”

Teacher S. responded, “Using items such as picture word cards to label and identify animals, shapes, letters, are ways I teach language skills to the children with and without disabilities in my classroom.” She went on to explain that the cards were scaled down to the level of the child:

“If I have a child that is non-verbal, we will practice the cards with just the child pointing to the card as I identify the item on the card, then move to pointing and saying the sound of the first letter with emphasis in one-on-one sessions with the child. I would progress as the child progresses.”

Overall, perspectives of the research participants fit with findings of existing research on the benefits of implementing play-based curricula in inclusive classrooms.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 was as follows: How do preschool teachers use play-based curricula to teach language skills to children identified as having special needs (specifically communication delays, ASD, and Down syndrome)? Researchers have demonstrated that “play serves an important role in the social communication

impairments that are central to autism spectrum disorders” (Christensen et al., 2010, p. 949). Children learn many skills across developmental domains in classrooms using play-based instruction. Participants interviewed for this study pointed out how children learn to listen, follow directions, and understand language during play. Several mentioned that children learn to express themselves and communicate their needs, wants, and ideas. Teacher N. reported:

“While engaged in playing, children in my classroom mimic, repeat, and hold conversations that are meaningful to them. This may be while they are engaged in pretend play, labeling their feelings, or making up the words to a favorite story.”

Researchers have agreed that children are immersed in language during play (Tsao, as cited in Mielonen & Paterson, 2009).

By hearing spoken language, children develop skills in literacy. Teacher J. presented a differing opinion: “Although children absorb language skills from non-direct teaching strategies, it is proper language and literacy gained through teacher-led instruction that helps children be prepared and kindergarten ready.”

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 was as follows: What language skills do children develop through play-based curricula? Teachers participating in the study reported that all children receive exposure to more rare and complex words and language composition through play than through other activities. Children develop both receptive and expressive language skills when they participate in play. The research participants

discussed how children learn during play to create scripts and practice communicating and interacting with their peers while building their vocabulary. Findings reported in existing research indicate that children with special needs who participate in symbolic play often have higher levels of communication skills than those who do not participate (Pizzo & Bruce, 2010). The teachers participating in this study agreed that play provides opportunities for children to solve problems, build self-regulation, develop language and communication skills such as listening, follow directions, and model language and words of peers and teachers. This finding receives support from the findings of existing research on associated topics. Opportunities that arise through play allow children to use language more often (Lifter & Bloom, 1998). Language and communication skills in preschool children improve when teachers use play-based teaching strategies in their classrooms (Hemmeter et al., 1996).

Conclusions

The findings of this study indicated some differences in the perceptions of preschool teachers. The data collected derived from semi structured interviews conducted following the principles of qualitative research and phenomenological inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The data collected related primarily to the lived experiences of thirteen preschool teachers in rural southeastern Kentucky working in Kentucky All STARS-rated inclusive preschool classrooms located in six public schools and seven licensed Type 1 childcare programs. The teachers in the study ranged in age from 20 to 55 years and had between 2 and 32 years of teaching experience.

Based on responses of the teachers, 11 of the 13 study participants (84.6%) viewed the use of a play-based curriculum as an effective model of instruction for children with special needs; their educational background, classroom experience, and knowledge of child development contributed to their philosophy of play-based learning teaching valuable skills to children with special needs across all developmental domains.

Teachers provided some specific examples of skills taught using play-based curricula, and most teachers agreed that using a play-based curriculum in a preschool classroom is an effective model of instruction for all children. Teachers B., C., and L. agreed that play-based curricula should be the basis of all learning in early childhood classrooms. Teacher B. said:

“Children in my classroom with and without special needs showed growth in their development on the end year screeners compared to the screeners completed at the beginning and middle of the year last year, specifically in the areas of language, cognitive, and social emotional skills.”

Teacher L. shared:

“Through comparing anecdotal observation notes, portfolio entries, and the beginning and year end assessments. I can provide a whole picture of the child’s growth and development to inform my teaching and share progress with parents. I consider this to be the result of the way I utilize play-based curriculum in my classroom. It is hard to beat the data, showing this to parents, stakeholders and leadership is well received even by the naysayers.”

It was also important for the teachers to witness the growth and development of their students. Teacher C. shared, “when I see a child get it, grasp a concept or a skill through an activity or the environment I’ve set up, it is empowering and encouraging for me to help educate others to the success of promoting play in my classroom.” This finding

receives support from existing research indicating that play-based curricula are developmentally appropriate for all children (Gilman, 2007; Movahedazarhouligh, 2018; Trawick-Smith & Waite, 2009). However, it is important to note that previous research studies did not include the perspectives of preschool teachers related to use of play-based curricula in inclusive classrooms. Findings from this study can form a foundation from which to inform and educate parents, teachers, and administrators when choosing an effective curriculum for all preschool classrooms.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study support and add to the existing research regarding benefits of play-based curricula in inclusive preschool classrooms. To extend the scope of these findings, research that includes teachers from more areas across Kentucky may widen the perspective regarding the use of play-based curricula in preschool classrooms. This would yield a greater variety of responses and a more diverse sample of participants. This study was not culturally representative. The study was limited geographically to only preschool teachers in rural settings in the southeastern part of Kentucky. The education level of the participants and fear of speaking out against their administrators' or employers' philosophies were also identified as limitations. The limitations of the study may affect the generalization of the findings.

Although a great deal of research strongly indicates that play is a vital part of the growth and development of all children across all developmental domains, unanswered

questions remain. If teachers undergo preparation using a foundation of theoretical and evidence-based practices and understand the benefits of play-based curricula, why do they struggle to implement play-based curricula in their classrooms? Could lack of understanding and support from administrators be a barrier to implementation? Another potential avenue for future research would be to compare the perspectives of administrators who support teachers in implementation of play-based curricula with those of administrators who oppose the use of play-based curricula as an effective method of instruction.

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Appendix: Research Study Cover Letter

Appendix: Research Study Cover Letter

Dear Preschool Teacher,

My name is Angela Cooper, and I am a doctoral candidate at Eastern Kentucky University. For my dissertation study, I am examining perceptions of play-based curriculum as an effective model of instruction for children with special needs. You have been identified as a preschool teacher in either an All STARS rated classroom level 3-5 based in a public preschool or childcare program setting that includes children with special needs enrolled across the southeastern portion of the state. We need YOUR perceptions and perspectives about curriculum!!

Participation in this in-person and/or recorded virtual interview is voluntary and you may refuse to participate. There is no penalty or compensation for responding. The risks are minimal to participate in the study and no identifying information will be collected.

The information collected from this research study will benefit educators, administrators, and parents regarding the benefits of play-based curriculum for both typically developing children and children with special needs.

If you choose to participate in this study or have questions, please contact me on my cell phone 859-230-0616 or by email at angela_cooper60@mymail.eku.edu

Respectfully,

Angela Cooper

EKU Doctoral Student