

Play as a Teaching Strategy Experienced by Early Childhood Educators

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Abstract

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The role of using play as a teaching strategy in the development of young children has been an ongoing discourse for quite a long time. From philosophers to researchers, it remains an inquiry that educators of young children should continue to critically examine to deepen understanding of its pedagogical value. Hence, this phenomenological study explores lived experiences of using play as a teaching strategy in early childhood education, particularly among kindergarten teachers in Indonesia. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Eight kindergarten teachers participated in the study, selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Data analysis included transcribing interview responses, cool and warm analyses, and thematic analysis to identify common themes and experiences among participants. The findings of this study exposed strategies used by early childhood educators, the benefits of play as a teaching strategy, the challenges faced in its implementation, and the drawbacks remedied. This research concludes that play is experienced by kindergarten teachers as a multifaceted pedagogical strategy, serving varied purposes and significantly impacting the holistic development of kindergarten learners. The recommendations of this research highlight the importance of expanding future research to include a bigger sample size of ECEs to elicit more diverse perspectives and richer thematic insights. Although parents as participants can be advantageous for the study, it would also be beneficial to explore the views and expectations of parents about play as a teaching strategy. Lastly, it is recommended to include in future research how the study can significantly help in making a guideline on successfully using play as a teaching strategy.

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Introduction

Play is a fundamental activity in young children's lives recognized as necessary for their physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development. It is a voluntary and pleasurable activity often characterized by spontaneity, imagination, and creativity. Play also builds a foundation for children's learning. In early childhood education, play is usually used as a teaching strategy as soon as children enter school. The children already participate in different forms of play that strengthen their skills, such as fine and gross motor skills, socio-emotional skills, and various fundamental skills for their growth and development.

Within early childhood education, play is widely recognized as a central component of children's learning experiences. A study by Zosh (1990) supports this, noting

that play is enjoyable, voluntary, and intrinsically motivated. It also involves active engagement and supports broader cognitive and social functions outside of the play context. Play can take many different forms, from symbolic play involving pretense and imagination to physical activities like running, jumping, and climbing, all of which exhibit these qualities. From a developmental perspective, like both Freud and Erikson, they position play as a tool for emotional development and a medium for children to cope with difficult experiences and solve their problems (Hughes, 1999). Along the same lines, from Montessori (1965), when children engage in play, they learn about the world and the reality of how things work. Now, from a constructivist perspective like Bruner's (1966), learning is viewed as an active process in which learners create new

ideas or concepts based on their prior knowledge (Tai et al., 2021). As children master the world around them, they develop new competencies that can lead to enhanced confidence and resiliencies that they will need to face new challenges (Ginsburg, 2007). Current research has proven that play is learning and has multiple effects on early development (Bowdon, 2015). Bowdon (2015) further mentioned that “play lets children engage in extended interactions that build oral language, imagination, critical thinking, and social skills. Moreover, recent evidence suggests that, at least for some skills, playful learning is more effective for producing student learning than direct instruction” (p. 33).

Early childhood educators play a vital role in supporting the holistic development of young learners. In practice, teachers can act as links or connectors between children and their environment by engaging them in play. Play requires a variety of teacher interactions. Several studies have also emphasized the teacher's role in facilitating children's learning through play and how the teacher's participation in classroom play activities encourages children's engagement in these activities (Johnson et al., 1999; Anning & Edwards, 2006). As a result, the impact of ECEs is far-reaching, as the skills and knowledge children acquire during their early years shape their future success in school and life.

Within actual classroom contexts, early childhood educators have successfully implemented various play-based activities that promote young children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. Many preschool programs implement play-based learning experiences allowing children to build and extend their prior knowledge and experiences, as they can interact with their environment (Irvin, 2017). For preschool children, however, the simpler the playthings, the more effective they are in stimulating their creative play, learning, and thinking (San et al., 2020). That is why early childhood educators have been incorporating Play activities into their curriculum to create a fun and engaging learning environment for children. These endeavors have positively promoted children's academic and holistic development.

Despite the well-documented benefits of play, Tarimo (2013) found that most trained teachers reported using play as a teaching strategy compared to untrained ones. These findings suggest that training not only results in increased efficiency and skills but also develops assertiveness to use child-friendly teaching strategies. These findings imply that increasing the number of teachers trained in ECE may increase the number of teachers using child-friendly teaching methods and hence reverse the lack of play as a teaching strategy among

pre-primary school teachers (Tarimo, 2013). On a different yet related note, the play-based learning curriculum in Indonesia's early childhood curriculum framework establishes six principles of early childhood pedagogy (Departemen Pendidikan Nasional, 2009, p. 37) which emphasize scaffolding children to guide them in reaching their holistic learning and developmental milestones.

The six principles of this framework are: 1. responsiveness: play activity should be based on children's development, needs, interests, and personality/behavior/characteristics; 2. a holistic approach: this involves paying attention to children's well-being, including good physical health, nutrition, education, protection, and services; 3. a learning-through-play approach; 4. a gradual process involves learning as a lifelong process and intellectual habit; 5. an active, creative, interactive, effective, and fun learning approach; and 6. a child-focused learning approach.

This framework highlights play-based learning as one of the key contexts of high-quality learning and care programs. Hence, Indonesia's framework recognizes the importance of play as a teaching strategy for children's education. A study by Mulia (2016) mentioned that according to the framework of Indonesia (Departemen Pendidikan Nasional, 2009) play-based learning proceeds in a neat, organized, safe, and appealing play environment. A range of objects of play ought to adhere to the rules and specifications necessary for a safe and healthy integration with the objectives of the lesson plan. Play also encompasses the environment and the natural world, adding up to and ensuring that children develop holistically.

While many teachers value play strategies incorporated in the classroom, there are still struggles that hinder them from implementing play successfully. These include the pressure coming from the academic standards and assessment requirements that they have (Bowdon, 2015, as cited in Irvin, 2017). Kindergarten classrooms experience rigorous academic goals, which makes ECEs feel pressure in preparing the students for the standardized testing at the expense of play-based experiences. Hence, the elimination of plain kindergarten classrooms is widely experienced (Lynch, 2015).

Nonetheless, some studies reveal that ECEs experience gaps in knowledge and confidence in play, a lack of resources to incorporate play, and a lack of control to intentionally and successfully use play as a teaching strategy, resulting in a free play with minimal supervision instead (Kekesi et al., 2019). Tarimo (2013) also agrees that limited availability, little to none low quality play materials, and school facilities continue to stand against the ECEs. This is particularly experienced in public schools, where

play materials serve as recreational rather than educational purposes.

Given the research gaps mentioned, it is necessary to determine the lived experiences of early childhood educators in using play strategies in their classrooms, specifically at the kindergarten level, where academic focus is more prominent. Phenomenological research is the most valid method for gathering in-depth data to achieve the aim of this study.

This study aims to unpack how early childhood educators experience play as a teaching strategy. The findings of this study provide insights into how educators experience and interpret play as a teaching strategy, which may be useful in teaching practices and early childhood education frameworks. Additionally, the results of this research may help curriculum developers for early childhood education as they enhance the curriculum to be more appropriate and effective for young learners. The parents of young learners may also benefit from the results since it will help them better understand how to help their child/ren reach their academic and holistic goals.

Thus, this study explores the experiences of early childhood educators as they utilize play as a teaching strategy. This research study explores:

1. How did early childhood educators experience play as a teaching strategy?
2. How do they describe and interpret these experiences in their teaching strategy?
3. How did the early childhood educators manage their experiences and the outcomes when using play as a teaching strategy?

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological study. Davidsen (2013) defines a phenomenological study as focusing on thorough descriptions of lived experiences. Hence, researchers often use this approach to understand and interpret people's lived experiences further. A phenomenological study is essential for analyzing experiences and gaining insights into people's actions and attitudes (Lester, 1999). In this regard, using phenomenology for this study was appropriate in terms of data gathering and data analysis of the participants' lived experiences.

The study was conducted to determine how early childhood educators experience play as a teaching strategy.

Purposive sampling and snowball sampling were used in participant selection. Purposive sampling is the deliberate selection of informants who best explain a certain subject, concept, or phenomenon (Robinson, 2014). Snowball sampling is a method that relies on referrals from initially sampled respondents to other persons believed to have the characteristic of interest.

Research Site and Participants

Eight (8) identified Kindergarten teachers were chosen as participants; 4 are Filipinos, 1 Chinese, 1 Chinese-Indonesian, and 2 Indonesians who are teaching children that range from 4-7 years old. The diversity of nationalities chosen is deemed necessary to provide an enhanced depth of insights and varied perspectives to the study. In order to be a part of this study, participants should meet the following inclusion criteria: (a) an early childhood educator at the kindergarten level, (b) uses play activities as a teaching strategy, (c) has taught early childhood pupils for at least five years or more. The eight teachers chosen are all qualified for these qualifications.

Table 1. Profile of the Participants

Participants	Ethnicity	Teaching Position	Years of Teaching Experience	Engaged in play-based activities?
A	Filipino	Head Teacher, Kindergarten	17 Years	Yes
B	Chinese	Mandarin and Kindergarten Teacher	10 years	Yes
C	Indonesian	Bahasa and Kindergarten Teacher	5 years	Yes
D	Chinese-Indonesian	Kindergarten Teacher	10 years	Yes
E	Indonesian	Kindergarten Teacher	6 years	Yes
F	Filipino	Kindergarten Teacher	10 years	Yes
G	Filipino	Kindergarten Teacher	6 years	Yes
H	Filipino	Kindergarten Teacher	8 years	Yes

Morse (1994) suggests that at least six participants are sufficient for phenomenological studies. Ellis (2016) also agrees that a sample size of between 6 and 20 individuals for phenomenological research is sufficient and will already result in better data. The study site is a private international school in Indonesia. A purposive sampling was used to select participants. This method is particularly useful for ensuring that information-rich cases are gathered and for

making the most of limited resources, as the selected participants are best suited to the study's aims and qualifications.

Data Gathering Procedure

A letter seeking permission was given to the school head. With the granted permission, the participants were also given letters with informed consent stating that they would participate in the study voluntarily. The letter included important information such as the purpose of the study, the methods used, and the data collection period. One semi-structured interview session was administered to collect data for this qualitative study. The researcher ensured that the interview guide developed was based on the aim of the study and the research questions. Then, a panel of experts in the field validated the interview guide. This instrument was employed to examine the participants' lived experiences as preschool teachers.

The interview started with a clear explanation of the informed consent. The participants then introduced themselves and shared their teaching background. Afterward, they responded to several questions posed by the researcher. The questions were divided into two categories: Teaching Strategies and Play as a Teaching Strategy, consisting of seven questions with follow-up questions to fully capture the participants' experience. With the participants' consent, the face-to-face interviews were voice-recorded. The interview lasted from one and a half hours, with longer sessions for participants who needed translation support. Then, the data from the FGD was also collected. Just like what was done with the interview data, it was transcribed verbatim and analyzed for themes. All data gathered was treated with the utmost confidentiality.

Data Analysis

After the data gathering, the researcher used the voice recording to transcribe the interview responses verbatim. All data was then stored in Google Drive, which participants could access to ensure transparency and confidentiality. Cool and warm analyses (De Guzman & Tan, 2007) were performed to interpret the transcribed data. In the cool analysis, the transcribed data were read repeatedly to extract meanings as lived by the participants. The meanings in the form of statements were then further

analyzed by clustering into categories that will reflect the participants' common experiences.

In the warm analysis, the initial categories were subjected to thematic analysis by examining similarities and relationships to extract themes that collectively describe the participants' views and experiences. Plausibility was utilized in the data analysis to validate the consistency and trustworthiness of the analysis.

Ethical considerations

The researcher ensured the privacy and ethical treatment of all participants in this study. Participants were assured that their privacy was rigorously safeguarded throughout the research process. All research procedures and processes were conducted with full transparency, and participants received comprehensive explanations. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, and a consent form containing essential study details was provided. The flexibility of interview scheduling accommodated participants' convenience and allowed them to choose a date and time that suited them.

The interviews were conducted in a language that participants found most comfortable for effective communication. Participants were firmly committed that all information collected is exclusively for academic purposes and handled with the utmost confidentiality. Additionally, participants retained the right to withdraw from the research at any point should they decide to do so. These stringent measures are in place to uphold the study's ethical standards and protect each participant's rights and privacy. Lastly, the research specifically reviewed and followed Law No. 27 of 2022 on Personal Data Protection (PDP Law) of Indonesia.

Results and Discussion

The findings uncovered the different facets of how ECEs have utilized play as a teaching strategy in this study. These facets encompass ways on how ECEs utilize play as a teaching strategy, the benefits they perceive, the drawbacks they experience, and the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. Given all these, it is emphasized that if the participants consider and understand these facets completely, a higher success rate will be achieved using play as a teaching strategy.

Table 2. Play Activities used by Early Childhood Educators

Participant	Name of Play Activity	Description	Interpretation (benefits/challenges)	Time Allotment	Grade Level/ Subject
A	Pretend Play	"I can do it through pretend play let's say like with the money when we are adding money, we did it with them pretending to be in a supermarket buying things and then they have to add what they already bought, they have to add how much money they need to give to the cashier, and then sometimes also when they give their money, they need to subtract how much change they're going to get."	The participant used this type of play to increase students' engagement and participation. It also helps build their problem-solving skills in the real-world context. However, the participant experienced time constraints, as they had only a limited number of sessions for each topic. Hence, more in-depth discussion and active experience would have been made if they had more time and sessions.	30-40 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kindergarten Math Time
B	Sorting Activity	"To include a play and learn activity in the lesson. What I do is for example I am teaching the hanyu pinyin tones, instead of just reading and writing, I pasted the four tones on the floor and said the tone. Children have to guess the tone and jump to the tone that I have pasted on the floor."	Through this interactive play, the participant observed progress in the students' language development. It enhanced their vocabulary and comprehension development. The participant mentioned that the game would be better if they had more resources and materials to use during the activity.	40 minutes to 1 hour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kindergarten Mandarin Time
C	Role Play Activities	"I invite children to role play activities they usually do at home, for example: cooking, shopping at the mall or restaurant"	The participant chose to use this play activity in the class as it provides space for children to use their creativity and imagination. They can also express themselves freely.	40-50 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kindergarten Bahasa Time
D	Group Game Activities	"I usually prepare group games that involve their 5 senses as much as possible and done together without coercion, children are given the freedom to try and work together."	In this particular play, the participant focuses on students' social development. The play promotes open communication, collaboration, and social interaction among their peers. It also builds their sense of working as a team.	20-30 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kindergarten Language and Literacy Time Math Time
E	Interactive Play Discussion	"After that, to further their comprehension, I use play strategy to convey the lesson. I used the letters hunt and memory game"	To increase participation and sustain students' attention, the participant uses interactive play. However, the participant still experiences challenges, such as students who have a hard time waiting for their turn or students who don't want to join at first because it's hard for them. The good thing about this kind of play is that it also encourages active, experiential learning rather than passive listening, which helps change the minds of those who find the topic hard.	30-40 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kindergarten English
F	Pretend Play Activities	"Halimbawa, ang topic naming is "Family", so maglalabas ako don ng for example from toddlers to K1, pano sila magppretend kung paano maging mommy, paano nila aalagaan yung ganito. Kung ang topic naman namin community helpers, yung drama area naming gagawin kong hospital, maglalabas ako don ng mga real thing. Maglalabas ako dun kunwari ng stethoscope tapos di ko sila binibigyan actually ng scenarios. So for example there's Large group, so from large group to our small field trips na gagawin namin,	The participant uses Pretend Play as a scaffolding. The learning objectives are embedded within play to gradually guide children toward understanding the topics. This also creates an enjoyable environment that promotes a positive attitude toward learning without making it feel rigid. Despite these positive outcomes of play, the challenge for the participant is how to help parents change their misconceptions about play. Participant F wanted the parents to see that play is not just play but that students are learning varied skills through it.	20-30 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Toddlers to K1 Homeroom Time Language and Literacy Time

doon mo makikita kung may understanding ba yung children, yung the way nila maa-apply yun or kung makaka-create sila ng scenarios sa drama area naming.”

G	Interactive and hands-on Play Exploration	“For example, we are talking and learning about different animals. My aim for the learners would be for them to engage actively by participating in activities like sorting animal pictures based on where they live (land, water, or air). They would learn new concepts about different habitats and animal characteristics through interactive discussions and hands-on exploration of animal models.”	Like the other participants, Participant G also used play to increase engagement and student participation. It makes the learning more enjoyable and interactive. It also helps students grasp ideas through hands-on, meaningful experiences. The challenge that participant G experienced is the misconception of parents about play. Although it is clear that when play is administered properly and with the right purpose, the goals for each child are reached, some parents still have a hard time believing otherwise.	20-30 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Kindergarten ● Large Group Time
H	Games and Hands-on Activities	“I use pop its for segmenting and blending sounds in cvc words. I provide them with a Pop It with a letter written on each circle and a Pop the Word mat where they’ll be placing their pop its. The children pick a word card from a jar and place it on their own Pop the Word mat. The students try to read the word they picked and pop each sound on the pop it. As they pop the letters, I make sure that they sound out each letter. After they’ve popped the letters, they use a dry erase marker to write the word. For bigger groups and if I want to practice other skills aside from reading, we play a simple board game where children have to roll a dice, pick an action like hop, walk, jump, or skip to the number they picked on the dice. Once they land on the number, they will get a question card according to the color they’re stepping on. Each question card has a question they need to answer before they can move to the next step. The question card can have a question related to phonics or simple math.”	The participant used varied play activities that aimed to integrate multiple skills. It targets language development, creativity, and imagination. The play was also used as an informal assessment, which helped the participant gauge students’ understanding, skills, and behavior. Nevertheless, it is still hard for Participant H to sustain this aim, as there is a time constraint challenge. Since they have limited time per session, it is hard for participants to follow through with these activities, which leads to lower retention among some students.	20-30 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Kindergarten ● Language and Literacy Time ● Math Time

Early Childhood Educators’ Utilization of Play as a Teaching Strategy

Play as a Participative Strategy

This highlights the importance of teacher participation in play. Participant F shared, *“In my previous school, since it is play-based, I am involved in their play. I was able to facilitate and scaffold things for them so they could learn more because I was really with them. So, if you, the teacher, are more involved, the chance that the play will be successful is higher. Because if we just let them play, they play by themselves. That is why more of my success stories are when I was more involved with the children’s play.”* This emphasis was one of the most prevalent experiences of the participants who agreed that teacher participation is

essential to make play more successful and beneficial for the children. Teacher involvement was often expressed through asking guiding and encouraging questions, such as “Can you tell me what you are doing?”, “Wow, what is that?” “How many blocks did you use to make the tower?” “Why did you make a car?” “How much did you buy in all?” “Do you have enough money (paper money) left?” “Where do you think we can see doctors and nurses?” “Who will you call in case of fire?” and many more. These questions help children analyze and understand their play more profoundly and connect it to real-life situations.

Several researchers support this perspective. Samuelsson & Johansson (2006) note that teachers can confirm and challenge children’s senses and thoughts through play interactions, allowing them to focus on

awareness, interactions, and intentions. Tai et al. (2021) emphasized that the role of the teacher in facilitating children's learning through play while Johnson et al., (1999) and Anning & Edwards, (2006) highlight that the teacher's participation in classroom play activities encourages children's involvement in such activities. (Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot, 2011, as cited in Tsai, 2015) content not participating in children's play means missing a key opportunity to promote the development of essential skills amongst preschoolers. Certainly, play is not merely an act of fun. It strengthens the holistic development of children, and teachers play a crucial role in making play more meaningful and successful for them.

Play as a Scaffolding Strategy

Participant A shared, *"So, for example, I can do it through Play. Let us say that when we add money, we do it with them pretending to be in a supermarket buying things, and then they have to add what they already bought. They have to add how much money they need to give to the cashier, and sometimes when they give their money, they need to subtract how much change they will get."* Participant D described two approaches: "First, I use Letters Hunt in large groups: The children and their friends will get the letters (spread around the class) based on the letter sound the teacher made... Second, I use memory games in small groups: The memory games are used to practice their knowledge. It helps the learners nurture their attention to detail and can improve their visual recognition."

Similarly, participant E said, *"I use a song to introduce the lesson to them, as the song could attract their interest more. I prepared some objects and pictures related to the lesson and the children. The object that they like usually makes them interested and meaningful for them. For example, I use their own picture or their friends' picture to find the initial sound of the alphabet. As they look at their own picture, they will be happy and pay attention to the lesson we introduce. After that, to further their comprehension, I use the play strategy to convey the lesson. I used the letters hunt and memory game."*

Participant B, who teaches Mandarin most children have difficulty with since it is not their first language, emphasized the value of kinesthetic and physical way of learning in the classroom. Participant B shared, *"For example, I am teaching the hanyu pinyin tones; instead of just reading and writing, I pasted the four tones on the floor and said the tone. Children have to guess the tone and jump to the tone that I have pasted on the floor. I observed that when the children move and play, it helps them remember the tones easier than when doing the traditional way."*

These accounts align with studies, showing that symbolic/pretend play enhances children's conversational skills, emotional understanding, problem-solving, and divergent thinking (Vygotsky, 1978; Spodek & Saracho, 2006; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Tsao, 2002). This analysis relates to what Participant A shared about teaching addition through pretend Play. The more children engage in hands-on activities—such as being in a pretend grocery store where they can buy something and then add the total price themselves—the more they experience and explore mathematical concepts in meaningful ways.

Participant B was able to test and prove that even physical play, such as jumping on the right tone, or any symbolic play, like using the tone card that they got to construct a sentence regarding their classmate, has a significant impact on the children's mastery skills. Similar research by McGinn (2017) also revealed Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development. It states that scaffolding allows children to build on what they already know, deepen their existing knowledge, and extend their skills. Vygotsky also believed that children could scaffold themselves through pretend play. Pretend play can cause a change in representational abilities by creating a context in which a word represents a thing (McGinn, 2017).

Play as Role-Playing and Pretend Play Strategy

Participant C added, *"Invite children to role-play activities they usually do at home, such as cooking and shopping at the mall or restaurant."* Then, Participant C enumerated, *"What I do in my Bahasa class that works well is I start with singing and telling stories. After that, I let them role-play the topic, such as community helpers, so they will pretend to be community helpers. Then, I let them play with word cards and board games, or they can choose to draw or color once they finish the record sheet."* Participant F also mentioned, *"In my previous school, what I do is more on intentional Play. For example, if the topic is family, I will let them pretend to be a mommy or a daddy. Then, I will give them different scenarios, like how they will take care of the baby. Then, for example, the topic is community helpers. I will arrange my drama area into a hospital, then put real hospital things like a stethoscope, and then I will give them scenarios like what they will do if there is a patient that needs a check-up. Our school also lets the children experience it firsthand so that we will go on field trips. With this activity, you will see if they understood something, how they will apply what they learned, or if they can bring their experience to creatively make scenarios in the drama area. So, the intentional part there is how I will use my language to extend their play and make it more meaningful."* Participant C would also attest to this for the belief that, when role-playing is a specific topic about

community helpers, they will act like police or doctors, which can be done in school and at home. It makes learning more fun and remarkable since they can apply what they learn through role-playing. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, play can take many forms, including physical play, such as running, jumping, and climbing, and symbolic play, such as pretending to be someone else or engaging in make-believe scenarios. Vygotsky (1978, as cited in Tai et al., 2021) would agree with this, as he addressed the significance of play in developing symbolic thinking as a cornerstone of cognition.

Another play strategy by Participant D is allowing the children to work with their friends in games done in both large and small groups. These games can be like a letter hunt game where they will work together as a team to look for the given letter and a memory game where they have to remember the picture of the card they already flipped to look for its partner. Myck-Wayne (2010) (as stated by Andrade, 2019) also agrees about the power of play and found that "within the dramatic play center, children are learning social skills, such as cooperation, turn taking, and following directions" (Myck-Wayne, 2010, p. 18). With this, Andrade (2019) agrees that the research by Myck-Wayne (2010) is important because it shows how play in kindergarten relates to social and emotional development. Skills such as cooperation and following directions are all skills that children need to learn that will benefit them throughout schooling and their lives (Andrade, 2019).

Play as a Strategy for Meaningful Social Interaction

Moreover, participant G explained, *"To develop socially, we might have a group activity where they work together to create a collage of animals found in a particular habitat... we could incorporate a song or a game related to animals, making the learning experience fun and memorable... I would make sure to include books and materials featuring a diverse range of animals and habitats... Finally, for meaningful connections, we might have a "partner" where children pair up and present information about a specific animal, encouraging teamwork and building friendships."* Similarly, participant G engages and encourages children to work together in partners or groups during activities to develop their social skills. The sample games that encourage social interaction between children are like creating a collage of animals per habitat and sharing a specific animal they like with their pair/partner. Irvin (2017) also cited that Ginsburg (2007) would agree that through play, children begin to engage and interact with the world around them while being able to create and explore the world so they can master and conquer their fears. In relation to this, a study by Andrade (2019) states that the importance of play for a child's social

and emotional development is critical to understand how crucial it is for Play to be brought back into kindergarten classrooms. The social and emotional skills children learn through Play help them be successful learners. Without these skills, children will be academically disadvantaged (Andrade, 2019).

Play as a Beneficial Teaching Strategy

Increasing Learner Engagement

Participant E stated, *"Play strategies are useful also because when playing, they can learn something from there... They have fun, but they are still learning. They become more interested."* Participant D added, *"Yes, play is important. They become more focused because, at preschool age, they need something to hold, touch, experience, and see. So, if we use play strategies, it is better and more attractive for them."* This signifies that play is more than a mere act of playing but rather an activity that helps children have fun while learning. The teachers can easily catch their attention and interest through play, increasing participation and engagement. In support of this, Whitebread et al. (2017) noted that using play strategies addresses every fundamental factor that makes up the foundation of the children's learning process.

These claims are consistent with Fleer (2015) assertion that play is an effective method through which children learn and actively engage with the world around them. Ali et al. (2018) believe that children look forward to opportunities to play and explore their settings with their peers and educators. Students who engage in play-based practices are given the opportunity to work with their educators and families within their academic setting and often display reduced behavior issues (Ali et al., 2018).

Supporting Learning Activities

Participant B underlined, *"For me, it depends on the subject. In English, here in Indonesia, we have a lot of resources. For Mandarin, what we focus more on is recognizing the Chinese character. Meanwhile, here in Indonesia, we cannot see these Chinese characters everywhere, on the streets or places. So, what we need to do here in school is we cannot keep playing. We have to push them to recognize it. Although sometimes play helps them with writing, they really have to do it stroke by stroke, and they cannot really play."* Just like Participant D's point, *"It depends on the topic. Not all will have the same results. For example, we cannot play with disasters when we teach about natural phenomena or disasters. So, you have to discuss or maybe show pictures or videos that are not playing."*

Participant D underscored that play makes learning fun as it helps them apply their prior and new knowledge to the world around them and in different situations. Although play is not entirely done during the times the participants mentioned, like during discussion of a certain theme/topic and during Mandarin typing, the participants clarified that in most situations, play is what usually works for the children as it allows them to express themselves in ways that they cannot in a traditional setting of teaching. In the same way, Irvin (2017) stated that play is most often associated with an educational setting, fostering the development of cognition and social development. Allowing children to play encourages students to gain communication skills that will enable them to communicate their needs and emotions and share knowledge of the world around them while gaining new experiences. Play is motivating and free of expectations (Irvin, 2017). Relatively, Andrade (2019) stressed that children gain the abilities required for success in the twenty-first century through play. Play has proven valuable to a child's development, particularly in developing social and emotional skills

Creating Fun-filled, Meaningful Learning

Despite some cases in which play as a teaching strategy seems ineffective, more successful outcomes have been proven by the participants since it is apparent that play is essential in children's learning process, as it becomes the bridge for them to develop holistically. This is more evident as Participant A said, *"Play makes learning fun and interesting for the children. When children have fun, they learn how to focus and remember. They apply what they have previously learned or skills developed in different situations."* Participant F also mentioned, *"Play is really helpful, especially because we deal with young children and how they learn. Well, I really believe in the philosophy of Play. That's my experience for the longest time, so I really see how important it is in the school setup. It is really helpful for me because play is the work of the child."* These statements reveal that most ECEs believe that using play as a teaching strategy is vital to teaching, as it benefits the children in more ways than one. It helps the ECE attain their goals and helps them guide their children to have fun while learning through play.

This analysis found evidence that ECEs perceive play as a teaching strategy vital in teaching and, most significantly, in the holistic development of young children. Ntshangase & Venketsamy (2022) stated that play contributes significantly to the development of young children. It reinforces various skills, namely creativity, communication, sharing, teamwork, individual conduct in their community, and behavior within society. Freud and Erikson also agree that play is a tool for emotional

development and a medium for children to cope with difficult experiences and solve their problems.

Enhancing Holistic Development

Participant H shared that *"play is important because it is not only the cognitive side that's developed, also the creative side, problem-solving, and more... It targets different areas and different types of learners."* In a classroom where play is used as a teaching strategy, the teachers can observe how it greatly impacts children's learning areas. Instead of just achieving the activity's goal, they also make a meaningful play that targets their holistic development. Moreover, according to Ntshangase & Venketsamy (2022), a child's holistic development is mainly enhanced by a well-arranged and stimulating environment that promotes learning through play to support curricular goals and objectives.

Play creates a zone of proximal development in a child. During play, children behave above their average age and in their daily behaviors. When children are given opportunities to play, the child improves in every developmental aspect (Irvin, 2017). Participant H shared the same perspective that during play, the cognitive side is developed and targets different areas. All participants agreed upon and shared all these remarks. Thus, play as a teaching strategy is essential for young children's holistic development.

Challenges experienced in play-based teaching

Situations of Learners

We are expected to encounter challenges in every aspect of life. One common thing with children is that "They have a hard time waiting for their turn, especially when sometimes we play in small groups first, right?" Participant E shared. Another challenge is, *"But of course, in Mandarin, some kids prefer not to join because it is hard for them, so they do not want to try. That is really the challenge for me."* The common challenge that most ECEs experience is the children's turn-taking skills. The participants shared a common struggle wherein most of their children had difficulty waiting for their turn during play. As a result, this affects the implementation of play in the classroom. This struggle is also evident in the scenario where some students want to avoid joining and wait for the teacher's instructions anymore because the activity is too difficult for them. On the other hand, Graue (2009 as cited in Kekesi et al., 2019) expounds that today, kindergarten students and teachers are under constant pressure to succeed and complete milestones; however, in the process, Play is being excluded from the classroom so that students

can hasten the acquisition of skills or knowledge without taking into account how the learning process itself can lead to more critical outcomes in addition to the targeted skills or knowledge (Graue, 2009). It is evident that other aspects, if experienced together, can hinder children from achieving meaningful play.

Limitations of Time, Resources, and Management Support

In addition, there are more limitations that ECEs experience, as Participant H stated, *“Lack of time is also one of the challenges since we have minimal time in class.”* Just like the experience of Participant D, *“Insufficient time to carry out all the activities/learning plans that have been made.”* Participant A also said, *“Sometimes, the administration is not very supportive of what you are trying to do. If you ask for specific resources, they cannot provide them or do not want to because they do not understand what we are trying to do.”* Lack of resources is clearly another limitation that ECEs experience.

Since the teachers do not have enough resources, they reconsider using other play-based activities, especially those that do not require the unavailable materials. This also implies that educators cannot maximize the use of play as a teaching strategy with insufficient play materials. Since the learners require real, concrete materials to facilitate learning, the lack of these means play activities become impossible to implement. This is supported by research by Ali et al. (2018), which reiterates that teachers are reluctant to use play as a teaching strategy because they need more adequate resources and materials for play teaching strategies. It is also highlighted in the study that the increase in support and utilization of play as a teaching strategy includes guaranteeing that classrooms are provided with developmentally appropriate toys and resources that encourage play.

McGinn (2017) claimed that play quality among preschoolers is deteriorating due to a lack of support for play in early childhood programs, making it difficult to witness mature and high-quality play situations in the classroom. If this tendency continues, young children will be less able to play collaboratively and regulate themselves. In addition, a study by Tarimo (2013) recommended that school management consider their prime role in improvising teaching and learning materials from their immediate environments by ensuring that the equipment/tools teachers can use for improvising play materials are within teachers' reach. Hence, one way of making play a more successful teaching strategy is for the school management to be supportive. As part of the

education team, their collaboration and support play a pivotal role in this success.

Misconceptions of Parents

Moreover, the main limitation that the ECE confirmed was the parents' awareness and beliefs about play, as stated by Participant A, *“The common misconception about learning through play is that children are not learning but merely playing. Most parents are alarmed when their child's usual response to “What did you do in school today?” is “play.”* Participant F also mentioned, *“Another thing for the teachers is not really with the learners but with the parents, like how will I tell the parents. In my previous school, all that I heard from the Kakak, the ate's or nannies were like, “Oh, they just played in school.” Even the parents also think that they just played. So how do we explain to them that we are not just playing, we are doing something, and we are learning something through play? That is one of the biggest misconceptions of play.”* Participant G expressed that *“not all parents agree with a play strategy of teaching right because for them it is just “playing.” They have questions like, “Is my child really learning?”*

During the FGD, the participants also agreed upon this: *“Because, of course, most of the parents are more academic. Like us before, more traditional schooling.”* That is when everyone agreed with, *“That is why we need to educate the PARENTS.”* Participant E wanted the parents to be aware that *“we only not learn from the books because in our school we have a progressive approach wherein the children will not only learn from books but will learn from their environment as well.”* Indeed, it was revealed that the parents' lack of awareness and faith in the important role of play in their children's learning development are huge obstacles, making it one of the most significant barriers ECE has experienced for quite a long time. That is why the main limitation that the participants encountered was the parents' perceptions of play.

The parents' lack of awareness of the goal and benefits of using play as a teaching strategy reveals that they need clarification about its importance to their child's learning and development since the parents are the partners of the teachers in the education of the children. In a study conducted by Ali et al. (2018), the findings convey that although most of the parents who participated in the study had a positive attitude towards play, it is still apparent that they lack clear and specific knowledge about the benefits of play for their children's development. The study further stipulates that most parents are occupied with work every day, making them unavailable to play with their children. This significantly impacts why the parents need

more knowledge about the benefits of Play. Another reason why parents tend to dislike the idea of learning through play is noted by Tekyi-Arhin (2023), saying that a lot of parents and guardians find academic skills more essential than learning through play, which, as a result, leads to failure to support this type of learning. Varied factors manifest during the utilization of play. Hence, these factors affect the results and experiences of both the teacher and mostly the learners.

Remediations Early Childhood Educators Adopt to Overcome Drawbacks

Deliberation and Collaboration

Participant H stated, *“Reflecting and assessing after the activity helps in overcoming challenges... Doing a self-check and always going back to the goals of the activity keeps me on track.”* Moreover, participant F stated, *“Usually, I really repeat from the start of what we did, with the intent of reaching the goal so I can see if the children really understood and see what else they need to grasp the concept better. Also, whenever I experience drawbacks, I rely on Google and search for what else I can do. Usually, that’s the first thing I do. I will google and search for other ideas, and then I will think of other fun ways to incorporate them.”*

Participant B mentioned the practice that usually works for her, *“Discuss with my head teacher and fellow Mandarin teacher to use other strategies to make the learning fun and also meaningful for the children.”* Likewise, participant E stated, *“I set a target to make the learning materials and ask help from my partner.”* Indeed, collaboration is important to assess what play strategies will work best for the children.

In addition, Participant H stated that reflecting and assessing after the activity and going back to the activity’s goals helps overcome the challenges. Using play as a teaching strategy does not imply having success stories at all times. It is a trial and error strategy since each child reacts, learns, and behaves differently. Thus, it is necessary for teachers to self-reflect, have pre- and post-assessment of each play activity done in the classroom, and collaborate with other teachers or education teams to better strategize in creating a more conducive learning environment for the children with play as the main teaching strategy. The educators’ collaboration is a way to learn from one another’s creative ways of utilizing play as a teaching strategy. Ntumi (2016) agrees that this is important because since implementation takes place through the interaction of the learner and the planned learning opportunities, the role and influence of the teacher in the process is indisputable (Ntumi, 2016).

Provision of Differentiated Support

Participant G elaborated, *“Additionally, I offer verbal reminders and gentle prompts to help children prepare mentally for the transition. During the transition period, I provide individualized support and encouragement to help children adjust to the new task and regain focus.”* Participant D shared, *“With the use of technology, all audio resources, videos, games, and interesting presentation slides have to be done as interestingly as possible.”* Participant G mentioned that giving verbal reminders, gentle prompts, and individualized support works in the classroom to help overcome the drawbacks experienced. As we all know, children have different learning styles and learning curves. This implies that a differentiated approach is essential in supporting each learner. This is significant in helping each learner achieve their own learning goals while strengthening their varied developmental milestones. As cited by Tsai (2015), it is also desirable to flexibly employ various scaffolds based on the situation, including verbal cues, examples, and collaboration.

Furthermore, Participant G mentioned that giving verbal reminders, gentle prompts, and individualized support works in the classroom to help overcome the drawbacks experienced. In this regard, the findings of research conducted by Sjoerdsma (2016) showed that a large number of preschool classrooms are specifically designed with play-based learning in mind, emphasizing play. Children can learn collaboratively with their peers using this teaching method; the teacher facilitates and guides individualized learning while letting the students take an active role in their learning (Sjoerdsma, 2016). On the other hand, Participant D mentioned how using technology in making presentations, videos, games, and other resources helped overcome the challenges since this can be achieved faster and more conveniently through technology for the teachers’ busy schedules. In support of this, a study by Chou & Lee (2012) stated that with the touchable PC and internet-based learning and exercise, children’s learning is substantially changing because of the multiple and various kinds of education content, the broadening teaching methods and skills, the elevation of education quality, and the efficiency in teaching and learning for different age learners. Indeed, it is a revolutionary change that accommodates children’s creative learning.

Education for Stakeholders

On another note, participant A discussed how to overcome the drawbacks experienced by the parents of the students, *“Actually, educating the parents because they are*

not familiar and their training is also traditional right so it is very hard to convince them that play is the best option for their child... So, really educating the parents, educating non-educators in the school like the administration, educating the community. Because for me, if the community supports the school, it is much better for the kids." To educate the parents, Participant A also shared how the school provides events such as a training/seminar for parents to discuss the school curriculum and teaching strategies that are employed and will be employed throughout the school year. Also, they make sure that the participants of the parents are a must during school-wide events.

Furthermore, Participant A highlights the importance of educating the community, especially the parents, about how play is the best option for their child. All participants agreed to this during the FGD. The participants agree that it is beneficial for the children if the parents fully grasp that letting their children play and participating in their play significantly impacts their development and progress. A study by Ginsburg (2007) agree with this, stating that when parents observe their children in play or join them in child-driven play, they are given a unique opportunity to see the world from their child's vantage point as the child navigates a world perfectly created just to fit his or her needs. The interactions through play tell children that parents are fully paying attention to them and help build enduring relationships. Parents who have the opportunity to glimpse into their children's world learn to communicate more effectively with their children and are given another setting to offer gentle, nurturing guidance (Ginsburg, 2007).

Participant A's step is an excellent example of remedying this significant drawback. Therefore, this implies that schools must provide parents with avenues to participate with their children. These events could give opportunities for parents to experience first-hand how play as a teaching strategy is utilized in school and establish that it is more than just an act of play. This will, therefore, become an open window to allow the parents, as the partners of the teachers in education, to experience fun while learning with their children. In relation to this, a study by Tarimo (2013) also recommended that school management should arrange teachers – 'meetings or activities to let them know that early childhood education teaching and learning ought to be as child-centered as possible and that the use of play as a teaching strategy is crucial as it enhances smooth academic progress for children (Tarimo, 2013). Hence, it is evident that besides the teachers, parents are a significant component that makes play strategies work better for children. Also, it is a beautiful avenue to engage fully with children as teachers

and parents guide them in their learning process. Play as a teaching strategy will be a success if all people involved in the education of each child work as a team and have one goal: to guide them in developing holistically and reaching their fullest potential.

By all counts and with proven results, this study confirms that play is essential for children's overall learning development. The results also indicate that although teachers design activities with specific aims, play extends those objectives to foster other skills necessary for the children to learn. Additionally, the study manifests effective classroom play teaching strategies, such as pretend play, sensory play, physical play, role play, field trips, and more. It also reveals that, before implementing these strategies, several factors should be considered to make it more appropriate for each type of learner. These factors include children's learning style, level of learning, interests, and skills. Aside from these, there is a need to examine the factors that challenge them to attain their play's goals successfully.

The study discloses the varied challenges some ECEs experience as they utilize play as a teaching strategy they can learn to manage. Although the significance of play is already well-known, some ECEs still fail to address the challenges at times with the urgency it merits because of their inability to remediate these drawbacks in the most efficient way possible. These drawbacks involve the need for more resources and time, turn-taking skills of the children, difficulty with the subject, unsupportive school administration, and dominantly the misconception of parents about the effectiveness of using play as a teaching strategy. From this result, the study articulates that the community should first support the children's education, starting with their families. It is also vital that the school and its personnel have a primary goal: to provide the children with the education they deserve. Thus, they should support ECEs' endeavors, such as sufficient material resources and time.

With these provided, educators can foster a more conducive learning environment for the children. Most importantly, educating the parents and making them fully aware of play's role in children's overall development is urgent, as this will significantly impact the success rate of the play strategies implemented in the classroom. Their awareness regarding this matter will also guide them in better understanding what they can do to support this play at home.

In a nutshell, play is how children learn. Children explore, take initiative, use their imaginations, and solve challenges while they play. They acquire advantageous

abilities that promote their cognitive, physical, and social development. Play as a teaching strategy is “a context for learning through which children organize and make sense of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects, and representations,” according to the Early Years Learning Framework. As children make sense of the world, learning through play appeals to their innate curiosity and desire to participate in activities based on their unique interests. Teachers using play strategies adjust their lesson plans to match the play the children join in. Indeed, play is vital in children’s education as it impacts varied aspects of their lives. With all these said, it is apparent that the following is revealed: First, all those involved in the children’s education, the home, and the school, must synergize to make play a successful teaching strategy. Secondly, using play as a teaching strategy benefits everyone: the teachers, the parents, and, more importantly, the learners.

Conclusion

This research concludes that early childhood educators can creatively and meaningfully utilize play as a beneficial teaching strategy while considering its premium, significant impact on the holistic development of kindergarten learners. While anchoring in the play world of the learners, early childhood educators inevitably enrich all other developmental areas of the learners: physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively. This research further concludes that these educators believe in play’s essential and beneficial roles for the kindergarten learners, for themselves as the educators, and for the parents.

With the wide range of benefits, early childhood educators may benefit from exploring all possible ways within their means to address the obstacles they encounter. They should utilize play as a teaching strategy, aiming for fun-filled, engaging, and meaningful learning experiences for the kindergarten pupils. Moreover, the findings of this study can also be beneficial to curriculum developers, who should consider giving play as a teaching strategy a significant part of the curriculum, as it would greatly help guide young children to reach their optimum potential and holistic development.

Recommendations

One of the recommendations for future research is to include a bigger sample size of early childhood educators that would represent a diverse population. It might also take a significant turn if parents participate in the study. The combined responses of the teachers and parents will help the researcher understand the perceptions and views of both sides. Future research may also include the insights and expectations of parents about play to understand their

perspective on it. Additionally, it will be beneficial to include in future research how the findings of the study can significantly help in making a guideline on how to use play as a teaching strategy successfully. These results, in return, will help the study obtain pivotal information that would reinforce a more conducive learning environment with Play as a primary teaching strategy, with a high chance of effectiveness to help children reach their optimum potential successfully.

Ethical Statement

The researcher ensured participants’ privacy and ethical treatment by maintaining confidentiality, being transparent about the study, obtaining informed consent, and allowing flexible interview scheduling for participants’ convenience.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest related to the conduct and publication of this research. All procedures followed were in accordance with institutional and ethical standards, and there were no financial or personal relationships that could have influenced the outcomes of this study.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

This work was prepared entirely by the author without the use of generative AI or AI-assisted technologies.

Data Availability

All data supporting the findings of this study are available within the paper.

Author Contributions

RKCA: Conceptualization; Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Validation, Resources, Writing — Original Draft, Writing — Review and Editing, Visualization, Supervision, and Project Administration.

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