

***Perspectives on Play in an International School Kindergarten; a  
Case Study***

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## CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>THE INVESTIGATION</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>CONCLUSIONS</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>REFERENCE LIST</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
Appendix 1 - Letter of consent	<b>69</b>
Appendix 2 - Letter for permission to access	<b>70</b>
Appendix 3 - Copy of questionnaire	<b>71</b>
Appendix 4 - Semi-structured interview schedule	<b>77</b>
Appendix 5 - Prepared Script for Semi-structured interviews	<b>78</b>

## **Tables**

Table 1 - Stages of data collection	<b>30</b>
Table 2 - Research timetable	<b>32</b>
Table 3 - Coding Frame	<b>37</b>
Table 4 - General themes from semi-structured interviews	<b>41</b>

## **Figures**

Figure 1 - Graph from questionnaire	<b>42</b>
Figure 2 - Continuum of play-based learning	<b>44</b>

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## **ABSTRACT**

Since returning to the Kindergarten classroom as a homeroom teacher, I have noticed a lot of changes. More expectations are trickling down to Kindergarten, where there is less emphasis on play-based learning and more direct teaching of specific concepts and knowledge. The research was small in scale and took place in a single setting. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perspectives on play in an International School setting. The meaning of play has such a broad landscape, and colleagues, parents, and administrators all interpret play differently depending on their cultural backgrounds and upbringing. This is especially relevant in international schools. This piece of research investigated the current knowledge on play as a medium for learning and development in the early years as well as explored policy documents on play-based learning that exist internationally and within the school. It also uncovered the perspectives of the staff around play-based pedagogy and the adult's role during children's play. An online questionnaire was emailed to potential participants in the Early Childhood setting, including teachers, teaching assistants, parents and administrators. Willing participants then took part in semi-structured interviews. A limitation to the research was the lack of a range of different groups within the school taking part in the semi-structured interviews. The study indicated a clear gap in parent and teacher views about the Kindergarten programme, which could prompt further research into the reasons why. The main findings suggested a lack of knowledge and understanding around play-based pedagogy and identified barriers preventing a play-based programme. In addition, it was found that there was a top-down model approach within the school, where teachers felt pressured and accountable. The research results also highlighted a variance between classes that influenced play-based learning. Although the school's Early Childhood philosophy states that play is at its core, there is no explanation around the different types of play. Further research is needed to understand the purpose of Kindergarten within the context of the school. This case study could be transferable to other international early childhood programs that face similar 'play-based' issues.

**Key Words:** play, play-based learning, free flow play, kindergarten, adult's role

## **INTRODUCTION**

In a rapidly changing world, I believe play is as vital as ever. The reality for many children is a hurried schedule managed by adults with little time to pursue and explore their own interests. When children have the time to play in their own way, it protects them from the stresses and pressures of a hurried life and provides them with the opportunity to discover their own passions and abilities (Alcock and Stobbs, 2019).

The Kindergarten environment has dramatically changed in recent years, and children are being confronted with increased expectations (Bassok et al., 2016). The emphasis on standards and testing has led to a focus on assessing children rather than meeting their developmental needs. Increased academic demands have led to the loss of play and meaningful hands-on experiences that young children need to acquire a love for learning and future success in school. I have been teaching in the Early Years in the International School sector for over 20 years and have recently returned to Kindergarten as the homeroom teacher. I have observed these changes where there is less emphasis on play-based learning and more direct teaching. Kindergarten seems more about delivering a curriculum to children through teacher instruction.

In 2017, our Early Childhood team initiated conversations about our values and beliefs around our work with young children. As new teachers joined the team from various cultural and educational backgrounds, questions emerged about our programme and prompted deep reflection about who we were. Parents also voiced concerns about the children not receiving similar opportunities in each class and the amount of time they had to play was dependent on the teacher. Therefore, our team decided to collectively read current books, attend workshops and participate in conferences around play in the Early Years. We then developed our own Early

Childhood philosophy with guiding principles to learn and improve our practice and for the children to have equal opportunities regardless of class assignments. The philosophy declares that play is at the heart of our approach and values time and space, the environment and materials, and relationships. We believed that living our values held us together as a team and would guide us in our interactions and work with children. Over two years had passed since the Early Childhood philosophy was published; however, play was rarely discussed in meetings or planning times. I observed a disconnect between our philosophy and daily practice, and it was my sincere interest to learn about the nature of our Kindergarten setting and play-based learning.

Although Kindergarten was considered part of the Early Childhood programme, there were exceedingly more expectations than PreKindergarten and Preschool. Kindergarten meetings were separate and revolved around the planning for literacy and mathematical activities. I observed many children expressing angst when they were asked to stop playing to come and participate in an adult-led activity. Christakis (2017) explains how we seem to smother young children with attention and resources without offering them what they need. As I grappled with finding time for the children to follow their interests, I became increasingly aware that living our values was more complex in the Kindergarten setting.

Throughout the research process, I reflected on my beliefs about childhood, my own experience of being a child, and my passion for play. Growing up in the suburbs of a Canadian city, playing with my friends are some of my fondest memories. I can clearly remember my Kindergarten classroom with a dress-up corner, sand table, piano and art centre. School recess times were longer and more frequent, and the norm was to meet friends after school to play until our parents called us for dinner. It is no wonder that I have a strong interest and love for play.

This research aims to explore the different perspectives on play and learning in a Kindergarten of an International School and if any obstacles prevent children from a sufficient amount of time to play, which is developmentally appropriate. The meaning of play has such a broad landscape that colleagues, parents, and administrators all interpret play differently depending on their cultural backgrounds and upbringing. Therefore, I am interested in how play is perceived in our setting and if we have a common understanding of its role in our classes and if any barriers are preventing us from living out our play-based philosophy. As a Kindergarten homeroom teacher and Team Leader, I want to inquire into play-based learning to improve my knowledge. By developing an understanding, I will be better able to provide guidance during meetings or offer advice to colleagues. Although this research takes place in one unique setting, the findings could be transferable to other International Early Childhood programs that face similar 'play-based' issues.

This paper is based on in-depth interviews of parents, teachers, staff and administrators.

Therefore, I framed my research questions as:

What are the perspectives on play in our Kindergarten setting?

1. What is the current knowledge on play as a medium for learning and development in the early years?
2. What are the perspectives of our staff?
  - Is our Kindergarten play-based?
  - Do we have a shared common understanding of play in Kindergarten?
  - Do the children have enough time to play, which is developmentally appropriate for their age?
  - Which type of play is most valued in Kindergarten? Why are some forms of play prioritised more than others? Is free play seen as less important than other forms of play?

- What is the adult's role during children's free play?

I have structured this paper into the following sections:

1. Literature Review
2. Research Design and Methodology
3. The Investigation
4. Discussion and Interpretation of Results
5. Conclusions

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

For this literature review, I will critically analyse research about the contested space of play in Kindergarten around the world today. The term 'play-based' is used widely and describes a



broad spectrum of meanings and practice. Play-based learning versus explicit instruction is an ongoing topic of debate in early childhood education (Peterson and Riehl; 2016 Sahlberg and Doyle; Katz; 2015). Many theorists such as Rousseau, Froebel, Piaget, Vygotsky, Montessori, and Steiner have studied play and learning. Research across the disciplines shows that play should be an integral part of a child's social, cognitive, and physical development (Sahlberg and Doyle; 2019, Gray; 2013). Despite the research, the amount and type of play remain an issue for Kindergarten settings.

Play is a social construct of human beings where play can vary depending on cultural contexts (Alcock and Stobbs, 2019). Through reading the field of literature, I am aware that the spectrum of play is vast and that play encompasses numerous definitions. It is not my aim to summarise or account for all the different types of play, but rather identify the kind of play I am concerned with for this research. Although it is complex to define play, there are key universal features that many theorists have identified (Arnold, 2015). I am interested in the type of play that is spontaneous, intrinsically motivated, child-led, and where children are in charge, creating their own rules (Bruce, 2012). It is this kind that I refer to when I use the term 'play' throughout this paper. This is the type of play I see disappearing in my experience working as a Kindergarten teacher in International School settings.

This review concentrates mainly on peer-reviewed articles and books that have been written in the last five years. I will first briefly outline the current knowledge on play as a medium for learning and development and the theory underpinning the practice. I will also look at what is considered an appropriate amount of time for young children to play. Then I will examine the decline of play in many Kindergartens worldwide to situate the current context where it is believed that formally teaching children earlier provides increased academic achievement and

success in later years (Bassok et al., 2016). Lastly, I will look at the contentious issue of adults' role in young children's play in early childhood education.

### **Play as a medium for learning and development**

This section will explore the current knowledge on play-based learning and development in the Early Years.

Educational theorists that advocate for children's play date as far back as Rousseau in the 1700s. Rousseau (1712 - 1778) believed children should have the freedom to run, play and be happy. Froebel (1782 - 1852), the founder of the first Kindergarten, viewed play as the primary form of learning (Bruce, 2012). Piaget (1896 - 1980) acknowledged that play was needed for children and was a complex phenomenon to comprehend. Vygotsky (1896 - 1934) also saw play as crucial in children's development in relation to how they construct knowledge by doing. There is no dispute that children's play does not strongly impact their learning and development (Elkind, 2007; Christakis, 2016).

A play-based learning classroom can be described as child-centred, where learning and development occur by following the child's interest and curiosity (Hunter, 2016). In a play-based environment, children are seen as natural inquirers with a born curiosity to explore the world around them (Hunter, 2016). Learning occurs through child-directed exploration through the method of play. Therefore, children must connect to their learning environment and feel secure in their abilities. Pyle and Daniels (2017: 285) offer the following definition of play-based learning, "the purpose of play-based learning is inherent in the name: to learn while at play".

A play-based learning environment involves child-led exploration and rejects the notion of children as empty vessels waiting to be filled with adults' knowledge. Christakis (2017) argues

that this is a commonly held notion that persists today. Building on the work of Piaget and Vygotsky on constructivism, children are motivated to discover and make sense of the world around them (Arnold, 2015). Constructivism in early childhood education involves children being actively involved and learning from hands-on experiences. The state of understanding comes from within the children and not something that can be passed down from someone of higher knowing. In play-based learning environments, children learn from the environment and interact with people in the environment (Hunter, 2016). This way of thinking about children and their approach to learning involves a level of freedom, an innate drive, and self-discovery to learn.

Many theorists have paved the way for studying play in early childhood education. Froebel believed children learn through hands-on activities, communication, and play (Bruce 2012). Steiner (1861 - 1935) was another pioneer of play-based learning, and like Froebel, he championed children's play in the realm of education (Bruce, 2012). Montessori's (1870 - 1952) approach to play differed, as she believed play should involve real-life situations, such as cooking or shopping. There is an element of freedom to choose in Montessori schools but based on the teacher prepared environment. In contrast, Froebel and Steiner viewed play as more than just real-life situations. They believed play could transcend the here and now and enable abstract thinking, creativity, and innovation (Tovey, 2017).

Thinking of play as a mental attitude involving all the senses links to Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) theory on 'flow', which describes the higher state of awareness that humans experience when absorbed in something of interest or care deeply for. When in a flow state, one can lose both track of time and space (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Sahlberg and Doyle (2020) suggest that when children are playing, they can enter into a state of flow and are curious and open to new ideas. Bruce coined the term 'free flow play,' which encompasses Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow.

Bruce (2012) illuminates 12 key features essential in play which are summarised in the following list where children:

1. Use first-hand experiences
2. Take charge and create their own rules
3. Use open-ended props
4. Cannot be forced to play
5. Can escape the here and now
6. Pretend
7. Gain self-awareness
8. Mimic one another
9. Play independently or cooperatively in a group
10. Get engrossed
11. Apply their learning
12. Reach the highest form of learning (Bruce, 2012)

Free-flow play involves the freedom to choose and the unpredictable like Froebel and Steiner advocated for. Bruce believes that practitioners or any adult working with children should observe play, which Froebel also saw as crucial. By observing and studying play, adults can change and modify their ideas around play and learning (Bruce, 2012).

The social-emotional well-being of children is increasingly being recognised by educators (Christakis, 2016). Through play, children can plan their own activities and investigations to acquire social skills such as working in groups, cooperating, sharing, negotiating and resolving conflicts. According to Resnick (2017), the development of social skills is vital for future jobs where people will require the skills to work with others such as conflict resolution,

self-regulation, self-advocacy, stress management and empathy. It is crucial that Early Years settings lay the foundation for developing children's social skills through play (Botrill, 2018).

Sahlberg and Doyle (2019) remind us that play is part of human nature and points to several scientific studies that prove play is critical in developing the whole child and helps children's brains and bodies to develop. For example, the American Academy of Pediatrics (2007) reported that play was vital in promoting healthy child development and an integral part of the academic environment. However, as parents and educators have been more preoccupied with teaching basic mathematical and literacy skills, the value of play has been forgotten (Catalona, 2018). Recent studies in neuroscience show that tactile play is crucial for children's healthy development, including executive functioning skills, controlling impulses, and creative thinking and judgement (Conkayabir, 2017). Conkayabir (2020) argues that the most crucial thing we can offer young children is the opportunity to be free and explore through play.

Twenty-first-century research on children's cognition reveals their powerful learning methods comparable to scientists (Resnick, 2017, Christakis, 2017). Unfortunately, research showing the powerful capabilities of children's brains causes parents and policymakers to try to get schools to do academics earlier (Elkind, 2007). The notion that children's brains are like sponges that soak everything up around them is still prevalent today (Elkind, 2007). Elkind warns that although children's brain growth is rapid in the first few years of life, it does not mean that children should try to master many academic skills during this growth spurt. This widespread belief reduces children to passive agents that absorb knowledge and exacerbates starting academics too early.

Resnick (2017) suggests that the current direction of education should change course. He argues that the opposite should happen where all school years should resemble Kindergarten,

where children can take risks and play with new things and ideas. Innovative and creative thinkers are needed as the world is changing rapidly, and the jobs and skills of the future are unknown (Resnick, 2017).

### **The amount of time children need for play**

In this section, I will look at what is considered enough time for children to play that is developmentally appropriate.

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989: 3) states: “the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child”. However, the amount of time and type of play children need, which is developmentally appropriate, varies considering different contexts worldwide. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010) in the USA recommend that young children need regularly scheduled periods for unstructured and physical activity and play. However, the duration and kind of play in a Kindergarten classroom depend on the balance between adult-led and child-led activities. Fisher (2016) claims this balance has become an issue for practitioners in the UK. She points to governmental studies suggesting that earlier learning improves success later, which could be seen as devaluing child-initiated and self-directed play. Fisher argues that young children should set their own targets instead of having external targets placed on them.

Fisher offers some helpful indicators for educators in planning for early childhood settings. From birth to age seven, it is beneficial for children to experience a mix of adult-led and child-led learning but leaning more toward child-led learning (Fisher, 2016). Bredekamp (2004) also supports the idea that children under seven have an innate desire to explore. When they have the time to follow their own interests, the more ready they will be to participate in adult-led activities.

## **The decline of play in kindergarten**

This section will examine why the amount of time for children in Kindergarten has decreased in the last two decades.

The term Kindergarten can also have different meanings depending on geographical and pedagogical contexts. When I refer to Kindergarten, I describe the one that caters to five to six-year-old children, equivalent to Key Stage 1 in the United Kingdom. The changes in the US Kindergarten classroom over the last two decades have been well documented in many studies. The main difference is increased expectations for children to read and write at a loss for play (Repko-Erwin, 2017). Play has either been eliminated or substituted for educational games due to the perceived top-down 'earlier is better' approach, which values overall academic achievement as the product of teaching and learning processes (Katz, 2015).

A study of public school Kindergartens in the USA attributed the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) to cause a rise of pressure on teachers' levels of accountability, which has seeped down to many Kindergartens outside the USA. Teachers were accountable to push children to certain academic levels by the end of each school year. The study mapped the changes over 10 years which found that Kindergarten and First Grade classrooms had become almost identical, whereas before, there were significant differences (Bassok et al., 2016).

Lynch's (2015) netnographic study examined the decline of play in American Kindergartens through social media blog posts, online forums, and feeds. Lynch discussed how standardised curriculums were the cause for less time for play and mandates that specified the number of minutes to spend on subjects like math or literacy. It was found that teachers also felt pressured by other teachers and principals to focus on academic goals, limiting playtime. Teachers posted

their thoughts on how increased standardised testing had heightened competition around the world. Such external pressures forced teachers to dedicate more time to academics to reach grade-level standards.

Having returned to Kindergarten, I have observed and felt similar pressures regarding accountability from teachers in the upper grades. There is now more emphasis on mastering academic skills earlier for children to be more prepared to move to First and Second Grade. It is not uncommon to hear teachers discussing how children from Kindergarten should know the alphabet and all the letter sounds. This type of language highlights the pressure on Early Years' teachers to develop children's literacy skills that could be perceived as developmentally inappropriate, thus reducing time and value for play.

Bassok et al. (2016) also found that there were higher teacher expectations for children in Kindergarten. Teachers reported less open-ended areas in their classrooms, such as dress-up corners, art areas, and sand/water tables, because more time was dedicated to the direct instruction of basic academic skills (Bassok et al., 2016). This decreased the time dedicated so that children could play. Today, this is the case in many international schools where crammed schedules include lessons for reading, writing, phonics, math, science, social studies units, and specialist classes that take up the time left for the children to play. Although they found existing research conflicting in terms of the benefits or detriments of starting children too young, it was clear that children had less time to play. Bassok et al. (2016) warn that this change could be stressful for children and influence their attitude toward school and learning. Fisher (2016) also claims that starting children too young can negatively impact their attitude toward school and learning.



Project Zero's work around the Pedagogy of Play (2016) explains the dichotomy between play and school, which may explain the disappearance of play in many Kindergartens. They reveal several distinct divisions, such as how play is timeless, but schools are timetabled, how play can be messy and chaotic, but schools are traditionally supposed to be places of order, how play can be risky, but schools should be safe, how play is where children are in charge and where schools typically have agendas set by adults in charge (Mardell et al., 2016).

Another contributing factor to the decline of play in Kindergarten is that children are entering with increased preschool experience than in the past due to changing home environments and parents' desire to invest more in their children's preschool experience (Bassok et al., 2016).

Depending on the setting, children could have attended school for three years before Kindergarten, which might explain why higher teacher expectations exist for children as they are seen as more experienced. Teachers may hold beliefs that children with pre-school experiences are more advanced and academically ready. Sahlberg and Doyle (2019) consider that play is also low on the agenda due to parental urgency to introduce academics earlier. Many parents today want their children to achieve high grades to equip them for the demands of their academic futures (Gray, 2013).

Catalona's (2018) study in Romania found that of all types of play, child-initiated and child-led play is the least used in Kindergartens and primary schools' daily programs in most European countries. The study highlights the benefits of play and asks teachers to reconsider and implement it back into their programmes. Hildebrandt and Weißhaupt (2018) found similar pressures on teachers in a study of public Swiss Kindergartens and where there has been a shift toward getting children ready for school. The emphasis is on learning how to sit for long periods and participate in explicit and direct instruction (Hildebrandt and Weißhaupt, 2018). Traditionally, the Swiss Kindergarten was a protected realm for children from the adult world

where adults should not interfere unless invited by the children. Hildebrandt and Weißhaupt (2018) point out how policy-makers express ambivalent views on play in curriculum documents, emphasising getting children more familiar with direct instruction instead of following their interests.

Botrill (2018) asks educators and policymakers to view early childhood education and practice differently by rejecting the idea that the Early Years is for the preparation for primary school. The widespread belief that children come to school to learn through direct instruction by the teacher is problematic. It ignores the reality that children already come to school with a wealth of knowledge, skills, and understanding (Botrill, 2018).

### **The adult's role in play**

This section will examine the adult's role in children's play within the early childhood setting.

How much adults lead in children's play is a contentious issue for parents and educators today (Graves and Bodensteiner, 2017). While the purpose and benefits of play-based learning have been well researched, the role of the teacher is less documented. Pyle and Danniels (2017) claim that this has led to uncertainty where adults adopt varying roles in children's play. Some teachers will remove themselves entirely, while others may dominate the play situation.

Adulteration or hijacking play describes situations where adults manipulate children to play with their agendas (Pyle and Danniels, 2017). Hijacking children's play is a prevalent situation in my experience of teaching Kindergarten. I have observed that when some teachers or assistants join children in their play they will often change the direction of the play to monitor grade-level standards achievement.

In Norway, play is valued above adult-led activities in Kindergarten, and children spend much of the day in play (Karlsen and Lekhal, 2019). It is believed that children benefit from the support of adults as long as it is not considered interference (Karlsen and Lekhal, 2019). Therefore, how teachers observe, interact, or encourage children while at play is unclear. Karlsen and Lekhal suggest this is problematic, as teachers might be so far removed that they do not support learning. Fisher (2016) reminds us that the foundation for learning starts in the Early Years, and teachers have a crucial role in children's play. However, she highlights a common misconception in education today: children are not considered learning without an adult's presence. Fisher argues that children can learn and do indeed learn on their own. It is a matter of realising when a teacher facilitates or inhibits learning (Fisher, 2016).

Brodie (2014) coined the term Sustained Shared Thinking (SST), which also emphasises the adult's role in children's play. SST involves the adult playing alongside a child to support the learning. The adult can help children explore ideas and make links to existing knowledge (Brodie, 2014). It also recognises children's ability to think deeply and critically. Adults think out loud as a model for children to be exposed to and try themselves. The teacher does not assume a traditional role of instructing where the information presented is absorbed by the child. Instead, it is a reciprocal process where both the adult and the child are learning alongside each other, and knowledge is co-constructed (Brodie, 2014).

Pyle and Danniels (2017) created a helpful continuum that described five approaches to play-based learning. The role of the adult changes depending on the positioning of the play approach on the continuum. At one end, children are in charge of their play without the participation or involvement of any adults. At the opposite end, play is directed by adults who hold specific intentions for the children, such as developing specific skills. The middle area is described as adult-guided play, which is situated between free play and direct instruction. They

argue that all types benefit children, but there is a tendency for parents and practitioners to take over children's play in favour of their adult agendas (Pyle and Danniels, 2017).

Pascal & Bertram (2019) offer a more mixed hybrid approach where adult-led and child-led activities are not seen separately. The lead can flow back and forth from the adult to the child within a single teaching and learning activity. However, Fisher (2019) argues that the two types of activities must be seen distinctly, as KS1 classes, the equivalent to Kindergarten, have become regulated. Fisher explains that in adult-led activities, the adult has increasingly insisted on their agenda, which counters the traditional role of the adult-initiated and inspired activity. The increased expectations on children in Kindergarten puts pressure on teachers, and they might insist or coerce their agendas on children to master curriculum standards. Fisher (2019) claims that this clear distinction is crucial for teachers to understand that it is the child that the adult is following.

Sahlberg and Doyle (2019) also discuss the importance of a balanced approach. However, they argue that the play that matters the most is a mental attitude involving the senses. The child freely chooses this play, characterised as being imaginative, physical, mental, and negotiated rules come from the child. The child makes decisions about what happens and designates roles. This type of play allows for new neural connections and strengthens existing pathways, leading to a more functional adult brain (Christakis, 2016). Botrill (2018) suggests that play requires no planning and has, at its core, what he describes as a wild element, which cannot be constrained. He warns that if children do not have access to this type of play, they are not learning but simply mimicking and being shaped into what adults think they should be.

Over the years, much time has been dedicated to labelling, defining, and ordering play (Lester, 2020). This is evident in school settings where play is used to learn specific information or

master skills. For example, the term 'purposeful play' is widespread in Kindergartens where adults continue to impose an outcome or benefit of some kind. Lester and Russel (2020) remind us that such justifications for play suggest seriousness without the value of joy and spontaneous qualities. Rather than trying to confine and define and make play into a serious thing with benefits, adults should instead focus on understanding when playfulness can flourish, as play takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise (Lester and Russel, 2020).

This literature review has aimed to highlight the current knowledge around play and learning and its vital importance for children in Kindergarten. It has illuminated how increased expectations threaten the amount of time children have to play, which is a concerning trend in countries around the world. There are many complexities involved, such as policymakers, parents, and teachers. In addition, there seems to be a paradox in knowing what children need and what we are giving them.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

In this section, I will:

- Describe the context of the setting and provide details about the participants.
- Justify the paradigm, methodology, strategy, and methods adopted.
- Explain how the approach enabled me to explore my research questions.
- Outline possibilities and limitations of my research methodology, strategy, and data collection instruments.
- Show how the research design enhanced the trustworthiness of my project.
- Provide a table of the stages gathering data.
- Address ethical issues.
- Show the research timetable.

## **Context of setting**

The research was conducted in a Kindergarten of an international school. The school is a well-established institution on the outskirts of the city centre. It was formed in 2001 with the merger of two schools which were founded in 1963 and 1970. There are three campuses with over 1,200 students aged 3 to 18. The original Early Childhood Campus was closed in 2018 due to a decline in enrollment of younger children, and the remaining Early Childhood classes moved to the Lower School Campus. Changes in governmental and company policy were contributing factors to the decreased enrollment.

The study is based on six years of teaching experience in various Early Childhood classes for three to six-year-olds at the school, including the team leader position for the last two years. There are currently six Early Childhood classes, with each having a homeroom teacher and assistant. A principal and vice-principal oversee both the Lower School and Early Childhood. The school once implemented the Primary Years Programme (2009) but now adopted Concept-based Curriculum and Instruction (2017). The curriculum incorporates Common Core Standards for Literacy and Mathematics (2010) and Next Generation Science Standards (2013).

Kindergarten has been part of the K to 12 programme and housed in the Lower School but simultaneously considered part of the Early Childhood. In my view, this has contributed to a confused purpose of Kindergarten and its identity. Depending on the issue, Kindergarten can be pulled in opposite directions. The Early Childhood team created a philosophy and a set of guiding principles in 2018. The aim was to understand our beliefs and values in working with young children and produce a document to share with the school and prospective families. However, after two years of Early Childhood and Kindergarten on one campus, the idea of 'play' at our core was ambiguous. I questioned if our philosophy was merely a laminated poster on the wall. I wondered what barriers were standing in our way, which was the impetus for my

research. The Kindergarten and Pre-K/Preschool teams met separately weekly for housekeeping issues with assistants and curriculum planning with homeroom teachers and the principal. A curriculum leader ran extended planning sessions for new units.

## **Participants**

When selecting participants, I used an exploratory sample to seek information concerning an issue within our Early Childhood. Individuals were chosen based on their connection to Early Childhood, such as the teachers and assistants, parents and administrators, and the curriculum leaders. Contact details and email addresses were accessible, which enabled me to send out initial questionnaires to all potential participants. Sixty-nine people answered the questionnaire, and some agreed to talk further and participate in a short interview. I interviewed eight teachers, and four parents were also interviewed.

## **Paradigm and methodology**

I adopted an interpretivist paradigm and used a qualitative methodological approach for my research. An interpretivist approach aims to gather different viewpoints around an issue, which is usually small in scale (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). Interpretivism considers that there is no universal truth and is not concerned with making generalisations to the broader world (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). What is regarded as the truth depends on a person's perspective, shaped by their social and cultural background (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). As an interpretivist researcher, I was aware that my view is one of many. I intended to listen to participants' thoughts and opinions on 'play,' specifically within our Kindergarten context. Working within this paradigm influenced my choice of methodological approach. Qualitative research is often used in Early Childhood research where the aim is to interpret or understand the participants' experiences and has more to do with narratives and words (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). Qualitative research occurs in a naturalistic setting, which differs from quantitative work involving predictions and

experiments in controlled environments (Denscombe, 2017). Therefore, the qualitative approach was the most appropriate for uncovering participants' perspectives and enabled me to gain rich details about the data (Denscombe, 2017).

### **Limitations of methodology**

A disadvantage of qualitative research is that more problems can emerge than solutions and may require a long time to understand (Stake, 1995). Nancy et al. (2016) warn that qualitative researchers must always address and deal with bias. Therefore, I needed to remind myself of the participants' viewpoints and avoid my preferences. Denscombe (2017) argues that the researcher always influences research. At first, I thought that my total immersion in the setting and passion for play might interfere with my thinking.

### **Strategy**

The concept of play in our Early Childhood setting likely varies among the people working within the context as play is considered a social construct (Elkind, 2007). To uncover these different social perspectives, I chose to undertake a case study approach. I wanted to investigate the variety of opinions, desires, and intentions within one setting over a short space of time (Stake, 1995). I felt this was the most conducive strategy and to explore perspectives on play of the different participants through the use of questionnaires and interviews. My main aim was to understand the system and uncover its features rather than trying to implement a change. Stake (1995) refers to this type of case study as 'intrinsic,' as it is about its uniqueness and what it does.

### **Possibilities and limitations of the strategy**

According to Denscombe (2017), the case study approach is advantageous in small-scale research and naturally occurring settings. One criticism of the case study approach is that the



focus is on processes rather than measurable results like quantitative research. The purpose of a case is to dig deep and know it well and understand how different people view the same issue or phenomena (Stake, 1995). It is common to see contradictory views about what is happening. Rather than looking at the failure, the researcher has an empathetic attitude and understands that all the people involved in a particular system are under stress and deal with it differently, affecting the system (Horowitz, 2014). A disadvantage to case study design is the credibility of the generalisation, where the researcher needs to be careful in drawing comparisons (Denscombe, 2018). Stake (1995) claims that case studies may not produce an entirely new understanding but can refine understanding.

## **Methods**

Denscombe (2017) reminds us that the literature review is part of the research process. The researcher aims to put the research into the context of the already existing knowledge on the issue (Denscombe, 2017). I have been rigorous and systematic in my search for literature. The concept of play is extensive, so I set parameters to my inquiry by deciding which works and theories to include to acknowledge the contributions of others. To do this, I used keywords and phrases with the type of play I was focusing on, for example, 'deep play,' 'free play,' and 'real play.' I found CERUK and ERIC the most efficient in locating up-to-date, peer-reviewed journal articles, recent books and the reference lists of previous research also enabled me to discover other relevant literature as well as seminal works. Reading abstracts helped me decide what to focus on, which reduced the reading volume on subject matter unrelated to my specific focus on play. Planning systematically and organising my papers by my research questions kept me on track.

## **Document analysis**

I analysed three documents around play in the Early Years, including the IBO's Inquiry Through Play: Supporting PYP Parents (2020), British Columbia's Play Today Handbook for Educators (2019). I also investigated our school website link about the Early Childhood programme. The credibility of sources can be a concern, and researchers must be discerning about the documents they attain (Denscombe, 2017). To evaluate the authenticity and authority of the above documents, I used current highly recognised and governmental records that are easy for others to verify. The plethora of writing around the Early Years and play made it easily accessible, and it was free of charge.

## **Questionnaire**

An anonymous questionnaire was distributed electronically using Google Forms to 246 potential participants, including consent form information (See Appendix 3). I used a Likert Scale asking how far they agree or disagree with statements on the purpose of Kindergarten, beliefs about play, and the adult's role in play, which were rooted in my research questions. The questionnaire enabled me to reach many participants and collect initial information from different school groups. Knowing the characteristics of potential participants prompted careful construction of the questions that I would ask (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). I assumed that teachers would have more knowledge about play, but I did not want to use educational jargon that parents might not understand. Geertz (1974) refers to the qualitative element of 'thick, rich data,' so I provided space after each section for illustrative anecdotes and examples to explain their choice of rating.

The questions were formulated not to sound contentious by targeting particular people or measuring individuals against one another (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007). I also did not want colleagues to interpret any sense of blame or fault in the wording of the questions. Clough and Nutbrown (2007) suggest that instead of focusing on who does what, infer what people can do

to develop collective wisdom and improve practice. I piloted my questionnaire by sending it to people unrelated to my research. I wanted to ensure that the questions were straightforward as well as not sounding leading or biased. Feedback suggested changing the layout and adjusting sections, which would be less time-consuming for participants and therefore be less likely to be not filled in.

### **Possibilities and limitations of data collection instruments**

An advantage to the questionnaire method was collecting ample information in a short amount of time. Google Forms automatically created pie charts and bar graphs with the results.

Administering the questionnaire was free, but constructing quality questions was difficult to elicit the information I wanted to explore. I was unsure if I could capture what I needed in answering my research questions. Mukherji and Albon (2018) suggest that information obtained from questionnaires can be superficial, so I added a section for participants to write their reasoning in, as I felt I would gain deeper insight.

I chose to do semi-structured interviews with open and closed questions. The questionnaire provided me with data that facilitated the development of questions for the discussions. Mukherji and Albon (2018) suggest interviews to gain more in-depth knowledge from participants and probe deeper into the thoughts, ideas, and opinions. I asked the participants the same questions, but they could also speak freely and elaborate when needed. Semi-structured interviews also allowed me to modify questions when participants sought clarity or did not understand (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). I piloted one interview to ensure I elicited the expected information and checked the time needed to respect people's schedules. I also wanted to ensure that the environment was suitable and comfortable with little distraction. It was beneficial to prepare the tripod for filming in advance, so there were no technical glitches during the actual

interviews. I chose to video participants to see expressions and emotions that a voice recording would not capture. I also asked each participant if they were comfortable being recorded.

### **Professional journal**

Mukherji and Albon (2018) consider journaling as a method of data collection. My professional journal kept a trail of my journey and helped me develop themes, ideas and reflect on problems. Thinking about oneself in the context of the research process is becoming increasingly more legitimate (Denscombe, 2017). The researcher always has their background and set of experiences that can lead to the construction of biases that inevitably impact the research design and analysis (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). On the other hand, carrying out research can also change or influence the researcher, known as 'reflexivity' (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). I used a traditional journal, which travelled with me to school and home. It included small notes and longer entries depending on the topic. Denscombe (2017) reminds us that revisiting our journal allows us to see where we have been, where we are, and where we are going. The most significant advantage in journaling was helping me sort out the initial focus of my research and questions, as I could look back on crucial incidents that intrigued or puzzled me.

Due to the research taking place during the Covid-12 global pandemic of 2020-2021 and at the time of writing still ongoing, this research was mostly a desk-based case study for ethical reasons. Although our setting was still in practice and face-to-face teaching every day, the ongoing situation with the restrictions of the Coronavirus was stressful for everyone in the school community. The combination of working in masks, testing, lockdowns, and not being able to visit family all contributed to a stressful environment. I did not want to add any additional stress to the lives of the participants. Therefore, most communication was done through Google Meet from my desk remotely or one-on-one interviews with social distancing. School closure

and remote learning were always looming. Consequently, I chose not to do participant observation.

### **Trustworthiness of project**

Denscombe (2017) reminds us that we cannot verify qualitative research in the same way as quantitative research. Therefore, I decided to use Guba and Lincoln's four criteria to ensure my research was trustworthy. I will now discuss the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of my research.

Lincoln and Guba (1989) believe that credibility is crucial in ensuring trustworthiness. To ensure that my data was accurate, I adopted methods that are well established in qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). Being familiar with the setting and the participants is also a key provision in establishing relationships and gaining trust in the setting (Shenton, 2004). Having worked in the environment for six years, I had already gained familiarity. I also increased 'trustworthiness' by triangulating methods and participants, as I used multiple methods to collect data and involved different groups such as teachers, administrators, and parents. However, being the team leader, I needed to be aware that participants might give responses to appease my beliefs around play. Shenton (2004) suggests that participants should be encouraged to be frank from the outset of each session. Therefore, I reminded participants that there are no correct answers. After the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, I also implemented 'member checks to clarify the participants' information and ensure they agreed with my understanding. I shared emerging themes with my team through informal conversations and during meetings.

Although each case is unique, Stake (1994) suggests that 'transferability' should not be rejected. Lincoln and Guba (1989) emphasise that a detailed account of the research design

and context of the setting are essential. I provided sufficient details for other researchers to see how far my case study shares with similar types of schools.

To address the 'dependability' of my project, I recorded the decisions I made throughout my project, which was crucial so that other researchers could check my research process.

### **Stages of data collection**

The following table lists the stages of collection (See Table 1).

1.	Initial conversation with colleagues and parents
2.	Formulating questions and designing the questionnaire
3.	Piloting questionnaire and revisions
4.	Email questionnaire via Google Forms
5.	Read and familiarise myself with responses
6.	Contact participants who agreed to talk further and organise interviews
7.	Design semi-structured interviews
8.	Find a suitable location for face-to-face interviews
9.	Conduct interviews

10.	Data collation
11.	Analysis
12.	Findings
13.	Conclusions

Table 1

**Ethics**

It is expected that research is carried out in an ethical manner (Denscombe, 2018). I submitted a research proposal and ethics approval form, which Birmingham City University granted on 3 February 2021. I used [EECERA ethical guidelines](#), and I will identify ones that are particularly relevant to my research.

I designed the questionnaire also intending to recruit participants. I explained what my research was about and how I would go about it (Appendix 1). I also gained the consent of my principal for the study (Appendix 2). I ensured all the participants’ privacy and confidentiality by not using their names or the institution’s name. All the data collected was stored securely on a password-protected computer, and I will not use data beyond the time of the study.

The issue of power between myself as the researcher and the participants needed to be taken into consideration. As the Kindergarten team leader, I did not want colleagues to feel pressured to participate, as they might feel the need to show their commitment. Parents whose children I have taught in the past may have found it difficult to decline out of politeness. Therefore, I made it explicit that this was an entirely voluntary process and informed them that they could drop out

at any time. I also explained that they could access information about the project before, during, and after the data collection. The risk factor was also minimised because it was desk-based research.

I made it clear that I was not collecting data and using it for my sole purpose but that I aimed to improve our setting’s understanding of play and the quality of interactions during children’s play. I believe the parents and colleagues in my setting can all benefit from the research. Working together with the parents to learn their perspectives will also improve our setting and their children’s lives. My colleagues have all expressed interest in how we approach play and acknowledge still having many questions to resolve. There are many potential benefits for the wider population, including Early Childhood settings at other international schools worldwide that face similar issues around defining and acting on play-based programs.

**Research timetable**

The following is a timetable for the research project (See Table 2).

January	February	March	April	May	June	July/August
- Research Proposal	-Contact participants	-Send out the questionnaire and analyse	-Conduct interviews	-Analyze data from interviews and identify areas for a more in-depth discussion	-Write and submit a draft of data analysis and discussion sections	-Write conclusion section
-Discuss my research with the team	-Design questionnaire	-Decide on focus group or groups	-Read literature and make links to data collected			-Revise
-Identify ethical issues	-Design schedule for interviews	-Write and submit literature review March 1	-Write and submit a draft of the research design and methodology	-Write the introduction section	*** Busy time with the end of the school year	Add contents page, abstract, appendix
-Read up on chosen	-Read literature					



research methods	-Work on literature review		section on April 12			
-Read literature						

Table 2

**THE INVESTIGATION**

This section describes the research conducted and discusses the approach taken to analyse the data, including the problems encountered and the modifications made to improve the trustworthiness of the results.

Examining multiple perspectives around play required me to employ various methods while gathering the data and enhancing the research’s validity. The mix of electronic questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and document analysis provided sufficient data to search for recurring themes or patterns on the different perspectives around play in Kindergarten. Lincoln and Guba (2000) discuss the importance of a ‘fluid self’ rather than a ‘fixed self’ in qualitative research. Therefore reflexivity was the main approach, and new ways of thinking were explored.

Firstly, I will discuss the processing and analysis of the data, such as field notes, videos, and transcriptions. Data collection commenced in February 2021 and finished in June 2021. The organisation of data was carried out as the research progressed.

Denscombe (2017) reminds us that it is not the aim to cover all the collected data but to reduce it to a manageable amount by focusing on the key issues and the case. Therefore, I captured the themes that continued reemerging and related to my research questions. Stake (1995)

stresses the importance of spending the most time on the best data, which in my research were semi-structured interviews. In my analysis, I was not concerned with making generalisations that extended outside the case. I aimed to examine and think deeply about this particular case.

Stake (1995) acknowledges that there is no one way to analyse data; it depends on what is suitable for the researcher. This resonated with me, as I had an abundance of data to sift through, analyse and interpret. Stake (1995) argues that spending too much time on aggregating data can detract from understanding relationships. Considering the amount of time allocated for analysis, I used a coding framework for the semi-structured interviews that contained rich data I was looking for and primarily used direct interpretation for the other data.

Stake (1995) claims that the primary goal of an intrinsic case study is to strive to understand the case. Although I was very familiar with the setting, the case was complex, and the time was short to unravel the complexities. A short period of time was used to aggregate the categorical data. I rejected data analysis software and opted for a manual approach to organise the data in colour-coded file folders, which was an efficient approach to retrieving data. Denscombe's (2017) following suggestions were beneficial in preparing the data for analysis:

1. Transcribe and put all data onto A4 size paper
2. Leave space to write memos on the side
3. Give all data reference numbers
4. Keep originals stored safely, as they are irreplaceable

The data collected included:

- 69 completed questionnaires
- 11 transcripts from the semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents

- Document analysis of the Early Childhood Philosophy from the school website, IBO's Inquiry through Play: Supporting PYP Parents (2020), and British Columbia's Ministry of Education, Play Today Handbook for Educators (2020)

### Questionnaire

According to Mukherji and Albon (2018), people are motivated to complete questionnaires related to work or feel a personal or professional commitment to them. From the 246 questionnaires sent out, 69 participants filled in the questionnaire and returned it, making the response rate 27.2%. The participants came from 26 different countries.

The questionnaire had three sections, which were divided into two parts. The first set of questions was a quantitative research strategy with 4-6 questions using a Likert scale to rate statements from 1 (strongly disagree) - 5 (strongly agree). At the end of each section, I used a qualitative strategy by providing space for participants to leave comments or share experiences. This is where keywords or phrases were captured and then grouped into emerging themes related to the research questions. The data from the questionnaire was printed onto A4 size paper and numbered 1-69 for reference. According to Stake (1995), re-reading the accounts involves deep thinking to understand underlying meanings. The following theme seemed to evolve and dominate, which influenced the formulation of questions for the semi-structured interviews:

### **Uncertainty about the kindergarten being play-based**

It is important to note that there was an apparent disparity in responses between parents and teachers. There was a significant perception among the parent community that the Kindergarten was play-based, whereas, among teachers, there was an increased uncertainty. This was something I did not foresee yet found interesting. Therefore, I decided to invest more time in

analysing the data from the teachers and using this emergent theme to structure and formulate questions for the semi-structured interviews.

#### Problems encountered and modifications made to the questionnaire

On reflection, the pilot of the questionnaire should have been filled in, rather than have it only proofread. There were two sections where participants could not add additional comments. These sections could have provided me with more of the 'rich data' that Gertz (1973) discusses in qualitative studies. Participants were also asked to describe their personal experience with play in Kindergarten, which produced a significant amount of data but was not particularly helpful in answering my research questions.

There were also no participants from the administration, such as principals or the director of curriculum. Therefore, my data was not as robust as it could have been. It made me wonder if the questionnaire could have been viewed as extraneous, which is the reason why members of the administration did not complete it. They might not have seen the questionnaire relating to or helping in their job and role.

#### Semi-structured interviews

Stake (1995) highlights that the interview is a way to uncover multiple realities of the same case. The semi-structured interviews allowed me to hear descriptions of experiences and feelings around play and learning where I could probe further if needed. I reflected on whether I should have included the arising themes from the questionnaire in my interview invitation email so that participants would feel more informed coming into the interview. It was important that the participants felt comfortable during the interviews so they could talk openly. Perhaps providing them beforehand with the discussion points would have been beneficial.

I used inductive coding, which is rooted in Glaser and Strauss's (1967) concept of 'Grounded Theory' to read through the transcriptions of semi-structured interviews to identify similarities in ideas or attitudes recurring and used these as codes, which were used as a coding frame. The coding frame helped me find connections between the codes, finding patterns that emerged (See Table 3).

Code	Idea
1	Uncertainty expressed if Kindergarten was play-based
2	Roles of Assistants
3	Training Needs

Code	Idea
4	Scheduling Issues
5	Teacher Assignment
6	Collaboration with Colleagues

Code	Idea
7	Pushdown Effect on Early Years
8	Standards Driven Curriculum
9	Accountability of Teachers

Table 3

While examining the codes, the following three broad themes were identified, which will be unpacked in the Discussion and Interpretation of Results section:

- A link to knowledge and understanding of play-based pedagogy
- Barriers preventing a play-based setting
- Teachers feeling pressured

#### Problems encountered and modifications made to the semi-structured interviews

Mukherji and Albon (2018) write about the 'brought self' during the research process. I associated my cultural background in this area, having worked in the Early Childhood sector for over twenty years. My personal and professional experience shaped a sense of familiarity while conducting the interviews, facilitating the process and enriching the conversations. However, I sensed that not all of the teachers felt they could be open while being filmed. I planned to film the interviews so I could study facial expressions and gestures. Perhaps, on reflection, a voice recording may have been less confronting in this aspect, as the tripod and the act of filming could have been seen in a more interrogative stance. Instead of asking participants' permission to be filmed, I should have provided them with a choice of either audio recording or video. In the end, noting facial expressions and body language did not help to answer my research questions.

In addition, none of the teaching assistants agreed to be interviewed, which made me wonder if they felt their opinion was unimportant or did not feel the need since they are not usually part of the meetings or planning. Not having the assistants' voices left a critical perspective missing from the data, as they are involved in the daily interactions of the children's play.

Stake (1995) states that it is essential to listen to interviews again within a few hours, which was a helpful approach in catching meanings that were not initially apparent. For example, when I listened to the interviews again, I could hear certain words repeated by the participants, which I believe highlighted what was important to them.

Mukherji and Albon (2018) caution researchers about the 'interviewer effect' where participants may try to fulfil the perceived expectations of the researcher. My excitement was evident, which participants could have interpreted as a prompt to formulate an answer that I might want to hear. I also needed to avoid finishing the participants' sentences when they paused, which I recognised in myself. By the third interview, I stated up front that I would remain neutral throughout to best obtain the open and honest answers of participants I sought that otherwise could have affected the reliability and validity of the data collected. As Denscombe (2017) advocates, the role of the interviewer is to listen and learn and not to preach.

The timings of the interviews were conducted at break times, which on reflection proved stressful for some participants who had their own schedules to plan for and were denied the opportunity to relax and take a break. One interview was lost due to a technical issue where the video stopped because the iPad was not fully charged.

I set time aside soon after each interview to listen and take notes from all the interviews made. It was crucial to transcribe the dialogue and make notes while it was still fresh in my mind.

Transcribing and making notes as the research progressed relieved me of having to do a mass of transcribing when all the interviews were finished.

In any future research, I would ensure that the semi-structured interviews would be done earlier in the process than I did in this study to enable me to plan for focus groups based on emergent

themes from the interviews. Furthermore, a more realistic timeframe for the interviews and the data processing should be implemented as I felt it took significant time to listen and scribe notes in this research.

### Document analysis

Analysing the documents obtained from the school website, such as the Early Childhood Philosophy, helped triangulate my research. I aimed to see how many documents there were around play to analyse the school's approach to play. According to Denscombe (2017), websites can be treated as documents in their own right. A qualitative methodological approach such as discourse analysis can examine the use of words and their underlying meanings (Mukerji and Albon, 2019). I examined British Columbia's, Ministry of Education, Play Today Handbook for Educators (2019) and the IBO's Inquiry Through Play: Supporting PYP Parents (2020) and then identified what was similar and/or missing from our school documents.

## **DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS**

The question of my research project, "What are the perspectives on play in our Kindergarten setting?" required me to view the case as its own entity and understand its own system and complexities (Stake, 1995). I will summarise the findings in relation to the research questions and provide details to support my view. According to Mukerji and Albon (2019), unlike quantitative research that is linear, qualitative research is more cyclical. Denscombe (2017) uses the phrase 'data analysis spiral' where the researcher collects, analyses and continues data collection. The discussion of findings is therefore structured around the three key themes identified during the investigation. As the research progressed and the three themes emerged, my understanding deepened, and more questions surfaced. As themes were generated, I contemplated how they could be considered across all the different types of data. I will now



share those themes, which flow from one concept to another. I recognised that my identity, beliefs and values inevitably affected how the data was interpreted.

The following table displays the three general themes that emerged and their sub-headings (See Table 4).

<p>Theme 1</p> <p>A link to knowledge and understanding of play-based pedagogy</p>	<p>Theme 2</p> <p>Barriers preventing a play-based setting</p>	<p>Theme 3</p> <p>Teachers feeling pressured</p>
<p>Sub-themes</p> <p>Emerged from interviews</p> <p>1. Uncertainty if Kindergarten is play-based</p> <p>2. Role of Assistants</p> <p>3. Teacher Training</p> <p>4. Balance of adult-led and child-led</p>	<p>Sub-themes</p> <p>Emerged from interviews</p> <p>1. Schedule</p> <p>2. Teacher Dependent</p> <p>3. Team Collaboration</p>	<p>Sub-themes</p> <p>Emerged from interviews</p> <p>1. Push down effect</p> <p>2. Accountability</p>

Table 4

At this stage, I will present data that seem to fit into these themes. For each section, I will:

1. Present the finding
2. Provide evidence from the data
3. Discuss the findings and link back to relevant literature

## **Theme 1: A link to knowledge and understanding of play-based pedagogy**

### 1.1 Finding

This section highlights the findings that suggest a lack of knowledge and understanding of play-based pedagogy among Kindergarten staff.

### 1.2 Evidence

#### a) Data obtained from the questionnaire:

At first glance, the responses suggested that Kindergarten was play-based, with 78.8% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing (See Figure 1).

The Kindergarten Programme at our school is play-based.

66 responses

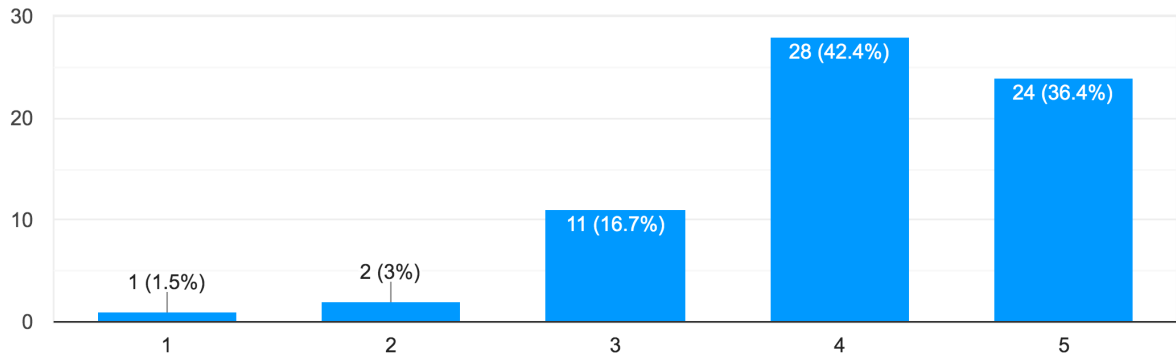


Figure 1

However, there did not seem to be a consensus in the comments section. The following examples were ambiguous, which made me wonder if the Kindergarten programme was indeed considered play-based.

- *“There is a play-based element to Kindergarten but not to the point where it mirrors Montessori.”*
- *“The Pre-K/Preschool seems to be play-based.”*
- *“I believe the philosophy is, and the hope from many is for a play-based Kindergarten.”*
- *“I was fortunate to attend KG at a time before it became ‘the new 1st grade’. It was play-based and hands-on, and fun! Instead of academics, we did lots of art, music, lots of time for creative play of our choosing, lots of time outdoors.”*

b) Data obtained from the online school documents and other play-based documents published internationally:

The school's Early Childhood Philosophy and Guiding Principles document could also be interpreted in multiple ways. For example, the following excerpt mentions the word 'play' but does not explain what kinds of play are valued and integrated into the programme. The school does not have any other documents about play-based learning.

The first line of the document states:

*Play is at the heart of our Early Childhood approach, allowing children to discover the world around them and supporting the development of the whole child. Through play, children develop an essential set of skills and dispositions, including language acquisition and self-regulation.*

British Columbia's Play Today Handbook for Educators (2019) explains the importance of play in children's development and defines five different approaches to play-based learning (See Figure 2).

CONTINUUM OF PLAY-BASED LEARNING

CHILD DIRECTED	EDUCATOR GUIDED			EDUCATOR DIRECTED
<b>FREE PLAY</b>	<b>INQUIRY PLAY</b>	<b>COLLABORATIVE PLAY</b>	<b>PLAYFUL LEARNING</b>	<b>LEARNING GAMES</b>
Children initiate and direct their own play. Educators observe and facilitate the environment.	Children ask questions and explore ideas. Educators offer resources and nudge children to go deeper.	Educators co-design play with children and may join their play.	Educators set up experiences that children explore to meet specific learning objectives.	Children follow the rules of prescribed learning activities designed by educators to promote specific skills.
↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
Running, jumping, make-believe, drawing, building with materials, reading	Making instruments with elastic bands, investigating how worms move and simple machines work	Playing restaurant or grocery store with pretend money	Rehearsing and performing a scripted play, doing a scavenger hunt, baking cookies with a large illustrated recipe poster	Matching and number line games, word bingo, rhyming word games, Simon Says, games using dice

Adapted Pyle & Dannielis, 2017

## Figure 2

The IBO's *Inquiry Through Play: Supporting PYP Parents* (2020) document explains that while play is vital for developing cognitive and self-management skills, it is also important for children's social, emotional, physical, and mental well-being. The document provides a similar play continuum that defines four play experiences ranging from free play (child-led) to direct (adult-designed/controlled) and illuminates key characteristics of play. In addition, the document offers suggestions on how to support children in their play in several ways, such as:

- The use of materials
- Space - Indoors and outdoors
- Uninterrupted time to play
- Being open to mess
- Join in play without trying to lead (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2020)

Although the school's Early Childhood philosophy includes the word play, it does not explain the different types of play or the various benefits of play in the development of young children like other internationally recognised documents.

### c) Data obtained from my professional journal:

The lack of information about play within the school documents brought me back to my journal on January 1, 2020, where I asked myself, "*What defines a play-based setting?*" I wondered if our team had a collective understanding of the difference between playful activities and play. I also questioned if the Kindergarten children were getting enough play and what kind of play matters the most to them in their day.

d) Data obtained from interviews:

Sub-themes

1. The following examples illuminated the uncertainty around the play-based nature of Kindergarten:

- *“For me, it doesn’t feel like a real play-based Kindergarten because we do not talk about play. We are not observing play and not planning for play as a group or using the play to drive any planning.”*
- *“I’m not sure what the definition is of play-based.”*
- *“I don’t think we are play-based. There are elements.”*

2. The following data revealed examples of a lack of or desire for increased teacher training:

- *“The KG programme/philosophy is play-based, but I am not sure how that translates to practice when teachers have to meet certain academic requirements.”*
- *“To be a better play-based teacher, I feel I need more training and more experience in planning for play and discussing play-based stuff and how it’s used to drive documentation.”*

3. These excerpts suggest that the assistants do not know or understand play-based pedagogy because they are not included in meetings.

- *“No, assistants were not involved in the creation of the philosophy of the book club about play. The assistants were not invited.”*
- *“Assistants don’t know why we want it this way. They are often not invited to meetings.”*

4. The following examples suggested mixed opinions about the balance of adult-led/child-led.

- *“Maybe 70% child-led, 30% adult-led”*
- *“Hard to put a number to it. It is fluid, and back and forth is ideal organically.”*
- *“There is not enough balance. There is not enough student-initiated play.”*
- *“It’s not one or the other.”*

### 1.3 Discussion of findings

Overall, these findings signify the uncertainty around the play-based nature of the Kindergarten programme and suggest a lack of common understanding around the different types of play. These findings are congruent with other studies around play-based Kindergartens such as Hunter’s (2017) study, *Supporting Teachers to Implement a Play-based Learning Approach*, in New Zealand, where she identifies the enablers and barriers to implementing a play-based learning approach (Hunter, 2019). The research found a disparity between play-based learning and current teaching practice. Teachers were working in various directions involving play. For example, their findings showed that some teachers stood back and were not involved with children’s play while others used play as a reward. Young children learning through play dates back to Froebel’s first Kindergarten in 1837. Still, the debate over what is deemed

developmentally appropriate for Kindergarten and primary school children remains unclear in many schools, which could also apply to our setting.

Further research into the purpose of Kindergarten and its relationship to the rest of school needs to be addressed; is Kindergarten seen as being separate from or as a strong foundation for future learning? Another possibility could look at if potential students' families prefer an academic focus rather than play as a modality of learning.

The online school document explicitly states that 'play is at the heart' of the programme but does not explain all the different types of play or the balance of play opportunities. Therefore, the word 'play' remains vague and is open to multiple interpretations, which could explain the lack of a common understanding among staff and parents. Further professional development in education around a play continuum involving teachers, assistants and parents would be beneficial.

Botrill (2018) argues that all team members must understand the why and how to create an effective play-based environment. He advocates for including assistants in meetings and professional development, as they have a crucial role in the daily interactions of children playing.

Lester (2020) advocates for gathering a 'collective wisdom' in which playfulness can thrive. Early childhood education is not so much about gaining skills required in the adult world but about life itself (Lester, 2020). Lester argues that we have made play a serious thing over the years of study, but the true value of play is the opposite of serious. He cautions adults who work with children to pay attention to the environment's possibilities for play (Lester, 2020). Lester's



work encourages adults to think about play and planning for play differently, which links to the participants' responses about the need for teacher training in the setting.

The adult's role in children's play is a contentious issue in early childhood education, dating back as early as the first Kindergartens. The risks centre on adult interference and taking over the child's play with their own agenda or the opposite, where they remove themselves entirely and do not offer any provision or interaction with the children. Froebel saw the benefits of both adult-led and child-led play (Bruce, 2012). He created toys known as the 'gifts and occupations' such as wooden blocks, which he believed had the potential to teach children mathematics with the guidance of an adult. However, Froebel later observed teachers interfering and dominating the children's learning. Therefore, he advocated for a less dominant adult-led approach (Bruce, 2012). The data revealed how this issue existed within our setting, but further investigation was needed to develop a clear understanding of teachers' understanding of play-based pedagogy and the adult's role. I wondered, however, if a prevailing belief among certain members could be that a child playing without an adult alongside them is somehow not learning. Fisher (2016) argues that nothing could be further from the truth and justifies the importance of both adult-led and child-led learning experiences. Fisher claims that it would be the absence of one without the other that would be detrimental.

## **Theme 2: Barriers preventing a play-based setting**

### **2.1 Finding**

This section of data suggests practical barriers are preventing a play-based pedagogy in the Kindergarten setting.

## 2.2. Evidence

### a) Data obtained from the questionnaire

Responses suggested that the daily schedule prohibited a play-based Kindergarten, which was a factor I had not considered and wanted to explore more in-depth. Therefore, I extracted the following comment from the questionnaire and asked participants to respond to it in the semi-structured interviews.

- *“The structured daily schedule prevents the existence of a true self-directed, play-based philosophy.”*

### b) Data obtained from interviews

Sub-themes: The three main barriers which reemerged throughout the semi-structured interviews were the following:

#### 1. Schedule

The following data revealed that participants viewed the schedule as a potential obstacle to a play-based programme.

- *“We should not be separating subjects. Math and literacy should come within play.”*
- *“The schedule hinders play because it is too choppy.”*
- *“The Kindergarten schedule should not be about starting and stopping with an adult agenda.”*
- *“It’s a go, go, go schedule.”*

- *“It’s a crammed schedule.”*

Denscombe (2017) explains the importance of including data that might not coincide with an emerging theme to ensure the trustworthiness of the research. Therefore, I have included the following excerpts from the semi-structured interviews where the participants believed a play-based programme could coincide with the current schedule.

- *“No, a play-based approach can thrive with some structure. It’s like a garden. If there is no structure, it will grow everywhere and with weeds. If there is no control, the garden will suffer. There needs to be something to fall back on. You can’t have just a day of all play. There needs to be a structure to recalibrate.”*
- *“The schedule is not so structured. You still have a lot of time to create open space.”*

## 2. Teacher

The following examples from the data suggested that a play-based class was dependent on the teacher.

- *“Ok, I will be completely honest. From what I know, one class is more play-based. Other KG classes from previous years depended on the teacher. Some teachers are more strict and prepare them for First Grade.”*
- *“The feedback I get from other parents is that there are different perceptions. That it is particular to the teacher and their knowledge of what play-based is.”*

## 3. Team Collaboration

The following data suggested that there is a lack of collaboration among the team:

- *“We have done a lot of things together as a team, but then we go back to our classroom, and there is no follow-up.”*
- *“I think there is a lack of true collaboration and cooperation. I don’t have a clue what the EC teachers are doing. It seems to be a free-for-all!*
- *“We can’t be our own little islands. We need to have more conversations and get everybody on board.”*

### 2.3 Discussion of findings

Botrill (2018) argues that there is no educational benefit for the children to have certain subjects at particular times of the day. Instead, he believes that children need time and space to engage in their play and become fully engrossed in their own learning. Botrill (2018) suggests that teachers remove existing timetables and start over, as the timetable is from the ‘adult world’ and is usually more for the adult than the child. This connects to Csikszentmihalyi theory of ‘Flow’ (1990), where time and space are significant factors that enable ‘flow’. It is difficult for children to become engrossed in their play and learning if they need to pack up what they are doing every 45-minute block to do something else.

The findings were similar to Peterson and Riehl’s (2016) research on implementing the new Kindergarten programme in Ontario classrooms. They found that many teachers were apprehensive about play-based learning and were uncertain about implementing a play-based approach. Some teachers used play as a reward or vehicle to specific learning outcomes, while others stood back and let the children play more freely (Peterson and Riehl, 2016).

Ghaye (2011: 220) claims that “The prime task for teachers as professionals is to work out their educational values, not in isolation and abstraction but in collaboration with colleagues and amid the complexities of school life”. This links to the participants suggesting that one barrier to a play-based programme could possibly be the lack of team collaboration in planning and ensuring that our educational values about play are mutually shared and at the heart of what we all do.

### **Theme 3: Pressure on the teachers**

#### 3.1 Finding

The following results revealed that teachers might feel pressured by a pushdown effect from upper grades and the curriculum standards. This could suggest a possible influence on the amount of time children have to play and which types of play are valued and are prioritised in Kindergarten.

#### 3.2 Evidence

##### a) Data obtained from the questionnaire

The following excerpts prompted the formulation of questions for the semi-structured interview. I wanted to dig deeper into this issue to see if participants believed there was a pushdown effect in the school and how it could impact the children's play in Kindergarten.

- *“I believe we have a pushdown effect at our school where if the children are not achieving in something at a particular Grade level it is thought that the Grade before did not do their job.”*

- *“Although play and relationship skills are important, I feel the school focuses too much on those areas over academics. In comparison to our school in Oklahoma, kindergartens’ were expected to know to read sight words and level 1/2 books and have a solid foundation of math skills such as addition and subtraction.”*

## b) Data obtained from interviews

Sub-themes: The three factors which reemerged throughout the semi-structured interviews which could impact children’s time to play were the following:

### 1. Push down effect

The following excerpts reveal that there is a sense of a pushdown effect at the school:

- *“There is a pushdown effect, but it’s not well acknowledged. It is just talked about informally.*
- *“There is a pushdown effect at our school, especially since we have a high school with IB and exams.”*

### 2. Standards

The following excerpts suggest that standards might act as an obstacle to a play-based programme:

- *“Teachers are constantly thinking about standards, and maybe we are getting too far away from listening.”*
- *“There are so many expectations in Kindergarten.”*
- *“There is a pressure to teach explicitly, to get things done.”*

### 3. Accountability

The participants' accounts revealed that there was a feeling of accountability.

- *“Every year, at the beginning of the year, we get criticism from Grade 2 that the kids are not where they should be. I feel there is a pressure to push them further, so Grade 2 doesn't get upset.”*
- *I think teachers understand how play is important. That is a bold statement. But we have this curriculum, pushdown effect, external pressures and accountability.”*

### 3.3 Discussion of findings

These findings all involve the feeling of pressure and accountability on teachers within the school, which are consistent with other studies such as Bassok et al.'s (2016) research in the USA on accountability pressures trickling down into Kindergarten. Their research revealed an increased emphasis on academic content and decreased time for children to play (Bassok et al., 2016). Although this research was conducted in the USA, it is relevant because the school adopted the Common Core Standards (2010) and the Next Generation Science Standards (2013). Christakis (2016) argues that having so many standards placed on young children implies that children's brains are seen as empty vessels waiting to be filled with the knowledge and understanding of adults. To set so many expectations on young children can be disorienting if the setting claims to be play-based (Christakis, 2016).

As the findings revealed, there was not a common understanding of play or around the different types of play, which made it more challenging to explore the following research questions:

*3.3 Do the children have enough time to play, which is developmentally appropriate for their age?*

*3.4 Which type of play is most valued in Kindergarten? Why are some forms of play prioritised more than others? Is free play seen as less important than other forms of play?*

I did not consider the magnitude of these questions and the knowledge required of the participants to answer them. These questions that relate to types of play that are prioritised more were almost unanswerable by the team. This showed a lack of understanding that play-based can mean very different things and the difference between playful activities and play.

In retrospect, I think I had too many sub-questions, which held a vast scope for potential discussion. If I were to restructure my methodology, I would have reserved time to arrange follow up focus groups, which would have enabled me to explore these areas further.

### Summary of findings

This case study has cast a new light on the Kindergarten setting where the perspectives of mainly teachers and parents were illuminated. The research has given voice to their personal experiences, understanding and feelings around play and learning that have led to some new areas for professional development that could help strengthen the programme. The participants implied that there were several elements involved which affected the children's play in Kindergarten. Phrases such as, 'a lot of pieces to the puzzle' and 'a few factors hindering us' reminded me of Stake's (1995) description of a case, which is a system of interrelated parts that each affect one another. Although it is not part of my original research question, it is worth



highlighting that Kindergarten could be viewed as a human system with synergistic forces. Horowitz (2014) describes synergy as a key element of a human system, and blaming others is a way to avoid accountability. Members are responsible for being aware of issues arising within the system and reflecting on their values. More importantly, thinking with a 'systems lens' does not require a single cause to place fault (Horowitz, 2014). Horowitz reminds us that the members of a human system can learn together and agree on what they value and question whether they are being pressured by the forces of the whole system, which goes against their values and principles.

It is important to reiterate that this is just my personal encounter with a complex case. Practical considerations such as the short time and submission date brought this research to an end. Many more questions were raised than answered, but the identified themes can enable others to relate to their settings. Much can be learned from this single case study that can also be applied to other educational settings. This could be a springboard for future research into the purpose of Kindergarten within schools and if it is meant to prepare children for Grade 1 or to enable children time to develop social-emotional intelligence and the dispositions and skills needed for the future in the context of play.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This research project enabled me to explore the perspectives around play in an International School Kindergarten. I gathered evidence that showed if participants view play as a medium for learning and if our Early Childhood team had a shared understanding of play-based pedagogy. As the case study involved my Kindergarten setting, I was able to go in-depth and unravel some of the complexities around the issues of play in early childhood education.

The case study methodology was the optimal choice to illuminate the multiple perspectives in a single setting. The methods used to collect data, such as the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, allowed teachers and parents to share their experiences, beliefs, and values around play. I aimed to capture the 'thick description' that Geertz (1973) describes, and I felt fortunate that so many participants took part in the study. While talking to the participants and hearing their stories, I gained invaluable insight from various cultural backgrounds. Although more questions than answers arose during the research, I found effective ways of studying an early childhood setting. While case study methodology has many possibilities, it is also essential to also recognise the limitations. Mukherji and Albon (2018) warn that case study researchers may bring bias in what and how they collect and analyse data. As a teacher in the setting, I continually questioned whether I only saw what I wanted to see, which initially was the decrease in the children's time for play. However, throughout the research, I recognised that there were numerous factors involved that prohibited play-based learning.

In this final section, I will:

- Re-state the key findings
- Look at how I could have carried out the research differently
- Discuss the implications on early childhood practice
- Offer recommendations
- Share personal learning
- Suggest possible future research

## **Key findings**

Through this research, I discovered a gap in how the parents and teachers view the Kindergarten programme. Most parent participants viewed the Kindergarten programme as play-based, whereas the teachers expressed uncertainty and no consensus. Although it would have been interesting to investigate such a disparity, it would not have helped answer the initial research questions. Therefore, the focus was mainly on the teacher perspectives, which highlighted the following:

- A lack of knowledge and understanding around play-based learning within the setting
  - The evidence suggested a need for teacher training and the role of assistants to be clearly established. Teachers were also unsure about the balance of adult-led and child-led activities.
  
- Barriers that prevented a play-based programme
  - The evidence showed obstacles such as scheduling, teacher allocation and team collaboration, possibly prohibiting a play-based programme.
  
- Teachers felt accountable to have young children reach specific academic targets.
  - The evidence suggested a pushdown effect in the school where teachers felt pressured.

### **Changes to research**

As a new researcher in early childhood, I see how I could have made improvements. The research could have gone more in-depth by facilitating focus groups around particular themes from the semi-structured interviews. Including focus groups would have added to the triangulation of methods and increased the reliability of the research. On reflection, I could have

also contacted other international schools in the area to investigate if similar issues exist within their Kindergarten settings.

The research was unable to gain a broad range of perspectives, as the assistants and members from the administration did not take part in the semi-structured interviews. Considering that the assistants work with the children every day, I felt this was a crucial piece missing from the data. I believe further investigation is needed into the reasons why assistants did not feel compelled to participate.

### **Implications of the study on Early Childhood practice**

The research was small in scale and took place within a short duration of time, and because it was a single setting, the findings were contextual. However, other Kindergartens within the International School sector might be confronted with similar issues and look to this study to consider areas for improvement or future research.

### **Recommendations**

The study was undertaken to understand how and why things are done the way they are in the Kindergarten setting. There was also the intention to improve the daily lives of the children and early childhood practice. Therefore, the participants needed to know that the research was not for my independent purpose, and they were working alongside me in the data collection process. I will share my findings with the early childhood team to inspire more collaboration among the group and learning around play-based pedagogy.

The following recommendations are suggested:

- To live out the school's Early Childhood philosophy where 'play is at the heart' of the programme, training in play-based pedagogy for teachers and assistants is crucial in developing a shared understanding and becoming more of a focus of the child's day.
- There needs to be a schoolwide discussion about the purpose of Kindergarten and its place within Early Childhood.
- It would be beneficial for teachers to be familiar with current brain research and even be provided with professional development opportunities around the neurobiological benefits of play in the early years, which can then be shared with parents.

### **Personal Learning**

This study was the first time I saw myself as a researcher. I gained an understanding of the approaches I value and the theories that underpin my practice. I had to situate myself within the different research paradigms and select appropriate methods to carry out the research. By adopting an interpretivist paradigm, I realised that 'truths' depended on individuals' social and cultural backgrounds (Hughs, 2010). I also learned how to go about the processes of research design and methodology.

Before starting the research study, I realised that I had a fixed mindset when discussing play and early childhood education. I am passionate about play and early childhood education and have strong beliefs and values around these topics. However, during this study, I became aware that having such strong opinions could also prohibit my ability to be open to listening to different points of view. I was influenced by the notion of reflexivity in qualitative research. My professional journal illuminated the 'fluid self' that Lincoln and Guba (2000) describe in the

research setting. They define 'reflexivity' as getting to know oneself better throughout the research, and my professional journal notes reflected my thoughts on a personal and professional level. By re-reading my journal, it became apparent that I was asking myself more questions to uncover the participants' realities and truths. It also became clear that the Kindergarten setting was a human system with interrelated parts. I became more aware that I am just one of these parts and need to try and understand others' attitudes and points of view. Most importantly for me was the notion that nobody is to blame and that a team must revisit the values and principles that guide their work with young children.

The research was conducted during the worldwide COVID epidemic and was partially desk-based for ethical reasons. The semi-structured interviews with parents were done remotely from my desk. I believe this was the right choice in the end, as it was little risk to participants and myself and more convenient for working parents.

### **Future research**

Any of the themes identified in the findings could be a springboard for future research in the broader population of Kindergartens within the International School sector. This research could also instigate a further investigation into the nature of Kindergarten and play-based philosophy and practice at other international schools. The pressure placed on teachers to have children master basic academics earlier has placed play lower on the priority list.

This research will hopefully prompt further discussion around the decrease in the time children have to play Kindergarten. Ghaye (2011) describes education as a value-loaded practice. Values are what we care about, guide our decisions and make us the educators we are. In the words of Kouzes (2008, cited in Ghaye, 2011):

If you walk the talk, practice what you preach, stand up for your beliefs, put your money where your mouth is, follow through on your promises, do what you say you will do,... You will be more trusted, more powerful and more personally successful; have more loyal and committed people; be more at peace with yourself.

This study has brought voice to the teachers and parents within the setting and has named and identified what prevents play from being at the heart of everything we do. If the following statement, "Play is at the heart of the Early Childhood approach..." is to remain in the Early Childhood Philosophy, it needs to be challenged at all levels.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1 - Letter of consent

Dear Colleague/Parent,

I am currently undertaking an MA in Education (Early Years) at CREC (in conjunction with Birmingham City University) and I am working on my dissertation in which I am looking at the perspectives on play in an international Kindergarten. For this study I will be gathering views of parents, practitioners and administrators at the school using questionnaires, interviews and focus groups through Google Meet and email. I am hoping you will agree to be included in this study. Throughout the write up of the study I will ensure that the setting and all participants remain anonymous. Your contribution will not include your name or other information through which you could be identified. You will be able to withdraw your consent at any time. Any refusal of consent (or later withdrawal of consent) will not have an impact on the way in which I maintain my professional relationships; there is no detriment to not taking part. I will be sharing the findings of my project through a narrative summary of my conclusions. Should you wish to ask any questions or gain further information, please contact me at \*\*\*\*\*. Should you wish to validate any information I have provided or have any concerns about this research you may contact my supervisor, Dr. Tony Bertram, at CREC, St Thomas Children's Centre, Birmingham B15 2AF, [enquiries@crec.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@crec.co.uk)

[Click here to complete - Questionnaire](#)

Many thanks for reading this and I do hope you can help me with my studies.

Yours sincerely,

Allan Dee

## Appendix 2 - Permission of access

Dear ... ,

As part of my studies with CREC I am undertaking a module with Birmingham City University in which I am looking at the perspectives on play in an international Kindergarten. I would therefore like to inform you about my assignment and gain permission to undertake data collection in the setting.

For this study I am gathering data through various methods. This year, due to Covid restrictions, I will ensure these data collection methods sit within Covid-secure guidelines and plan to use Google Meet/Zoom to conduct interviews.

The setting will not be identifiable in the write up of the research and all data collected will be stored securely on the server and password protected. Consent will be sought separately from all those who are asked to participate and this consent will outline the anonymity I am able to provide to participants and the level of confidentiality. Any refusal of consent (or later withdrawal of consent or assent) will not have an impact on my professional relationships with any of the participants. The data I collect will be retained until the successful completion of the academic module and then permanently deleted.

Once the research is complete I will provide a narrative summary of my findings and conclusions. The final research will be submitted to BCU and marked by tutors from CREC.

Should you wish to ask any questions or gain further information, please contact me at \*\*\*\*.  
My research supervisor at CREC is Dr. Tony Bertram (DrTonyBertram@crec.co.uk) should you have any concerns regarding the progress of the research. Many thanks for reading this and I do hope you can help me with my studies.

Yours sincerely, Allan Dee

Permission of Access Letter and Consent Form

I confirm that I have read and understood the information letter above regarding the practitioner research project being undertaken by Allan Dee and hereby give permission of access for \*\*\*\*\*.

I reserve the right to withdraw this permission at any stage during the course of the study.

Name:.....

Signed: Date:

## Questionnaire - Perspectives on Play in an International Kindergarten

There are many different kinds of play, but for the purpose of my research I am focusing on play that is "...freely chosen by the child and is under the control of the child. The child decides how to play, how long to sustain the play, what the play is about and who to play with. It can be described as highly creative, open-ended and imaginative. It requires active engagement of players, and can be deeply satisfying."

1. What is your role at school?

*Mark only one oval.*

- Teacher
- Teaching Assistant
- Administrator/Curriculum Leader
- Parent

2. What is your nationality and/or where were you brought up?

\_\_\_\_\_

### Thoughts Around Kindergarten

Use the linear scale to rate the following statements about Kindergarten.

3. If children do not master a set of mathematical and literacy skills in Kindergarten, it will have a detrimental affect on their future years of schooling.

*Mark only one oval.*

1      2      3      4      5

Strongly Disagree      Strongly Agree



4. Play is the main motivator for learning and development in Kindergarten.

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree

5. Building relationships and getting along with others through play is a key outcome in Kindergarten.

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree

6. The primary purpose of Kindergarten is to prepare children for First Grade.

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree

7. Children's brains are like little sponges and they need to absorb as much as possible. The more academic instruction in Kindergarten, the better.

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree

8. The Kindergarten Programme at our school is play-based.

Mark only one oval.

1      2      3      4      5

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Strongly Disagree                  Strongly Agree

9. Comments and/or Anecdotes

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**Beliefs and Values Around Play**

Use the linear scale to rate the following statements about around play.

10. Five and six-year-old children need a portion of their school day where they can direct their own play in the classroom.

Mark only one oval.

1      2      3      4      5

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Strongly Disagree                  Strongly Agree

11. Children in Kindergarten should only play at recess time.

Mark only one oval.

1      2      3      4      5

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Strongly Disagree                  Strongly Agree

12. Play is a vital part of a child's cognitive, social and physical development.

Mark only one oval.

1      2      3      4      5

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Strongly Disagree                  Strongly Agree

13. Children go to school to learn, not play.

Mark only one oval.

1      2      3      4      5

---

Strongly Disagree                  Strongly Agree

14. Children learn through self-directed play.

Mark only one oval.

1      2      3      4      5

---

Strongly Disagree                  Strongly Agree

**Additional Comments and/or Anecdotes**

**Adult's Role in Play**

Use the linear scale to rate the following statements about around play.

15. It is important for teachers and parents to play with children.

Mark only one oval.

1      2      3      4      5

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Strongly Disagree                  Strongly Agree

16. Adults often try to overtake children's play with their own agendas.

Mark only one oval.

1      2      3      4      5

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Strongly Disagree                  Strongly Agree

17. There should be a balance of adult-led and child-led play in Kindergarten.

Mark only one oval.

1      2      3      4      5

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Strongly Disagree                  Strongly Agree

18. The teacher's role in Kindergarten is to introduce playful learning or to respond to or extend the possibilities that children see in their play.

Mark only one oval.

1      2      3      4      5

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Strongly Disagree                  Strongly Agree

19. Please describe your experience of playing when you were in Kindergarten:

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20. If you would be willing to participate further with a short interview (10-15 min), please write your full name and email below.

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Appendix 4 - Interview schedule

Date	Interview	Duration
May 10, 2021	Interview #1 - Teacher Ref. (I.1.T)	16.08 min
May 10, 2021	Interview # 2- Teacher Ref. (I.2.T)	13.08 min
May 10, 2021	Interview #3 - Teacher Ref. (I.3.T)	40.02 min
May 11, 2021	Interview #4 - Teacher Ref. (I.4.T)	21.04 min
May 12, 2021	Interview #5 - Teacher Ref. (I.5.T)	11.33 min
May 12, 2021	Interview #6 - Teacher Ref. (I.6.T)	16.36 min
May 19, 2021	Interview #7 - Teacher Ref. (I.7.T)	12.36 min
June 9, 2021	Interview #8- Parent Ref. (I.8.P)	15.29 min
June 10, 2021	Interview #9- Parent Ref. (I.9.P)	14.04 min
June 14, 2021	Interview #10- Parent Ref. (I.10.P)	13.05 min
June 14, 2021	Interview #11- Parent Ref. (I.11.P)	13.32 min

## Appendix 5 - Prepared script for semi-structured interviews

### Prepared script for semi-structured interviews

1. Do you think our Kindergarten is play-based?
2. Do we have a shared common understanding of play in Kindergarten?
3. Do the children have enough time to play, which is developmentally appropriate for their age?
4. Which type of play is most valued in Kindergarten? Why are some forms of play prioritized more than others? Is free play seen as less important than other forms of play?
5. What is the adult's role during children's free play?
6. There was language in the responses referring to a 'real' or 'true play-based', which made me wonder **What do people consider true or real play-based programme?**
7. Do you think there is still the idea that play is a break from learning?
8. Do teachers and parents have a common understanding of different types of play?
9. Do teachers plan for play or discuss play meetings?
10. Respond to this quote, "Teacher still has a lot of control over how play is built into classroom pedagogy?"
11. Do you believe learning and play are seen as separate in Kindergarten?
12. How well do we show parents how children learn through their play?
13. Is something preventing us from being play-based? How far do you agree/disagree with the following statements?
  - "There is a push-down effect at our school."
  - "The structured daily schedule prevents the existence of a true self-directed, play-based philosophy."
  - "We need more collaboration between K to Grade 2 to understand that children are ready for skills at their own rate."
  - "We need better parent education"

14. How far do you agree/disagree with the following statement?

“When adults are interacting with children in Kindergarten, you can see the thought process being shut off or channelled into the way the adult thinks or the way the should be thinking. There does not seem to be enough listening to a child’s experience and respecting that.”

15. What would be an appropriate amount of adult-led play and child-led play in Kindergarten?

16. How can we do it better?

17. Any other points you want to cover?

