

## Practitioners' Perceptions of Play-Based Pedagogy on the Holistic Development of Young Children

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<p><i>play-based pedagogy;</i></p> <p><i>play-based teaching and learning;</i></p> <p><i>holistic development;</i></p> <p><i>young children;</i></p> <p><i>early childhood development</i></p>	<p><i>South Africa has made remarkable progress in trying to improve early childhood education by introducing the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) in 2015. The NCF encourages practitioners to engage young children in play-based activities to improve their physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development, as core developmental skills. The main objective of this study was to explore practitioners' perceptions of play-based pedagogy on the holistic development of young children. The qualitative approach was used to collect information through semi-structured interviews and lesson observations from five participants in the Mpumalanga Province. This study found that despite the Department of Basic Education mandating the implementation of play-based pedagogy in early childhood centers through the National Curriculum Framework challenges are experienced by practitioners. Practitioners had a good understanding of play-based pedagogy and play-based teaching and learning, but they needed continuous professional development and support to implement it in classrooms.</i></p>

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background of the Study

In 2015 the South Africa Department of Basic Education (DBE), Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector introduced the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (DBE, 2015). The framework aimed to streamline and focus on early childhood development by promoting play-based pedagogy and play-

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based teaching and learning in all centers. This framework envisaged promoting the development of young children through the implementation of various activities through play, discovery, exploration, investigation, and meaningful involvement in teaching and learning. The framework further encouraged practitioners to engage and inspire young children to become active participants in the learning process. Despite the emphasis on play-based pedagogy in early childhood education, anecdotal evidence shows a minimal implementation of play-based teaching and learning in most South African ECD centers (Solis, et al. 2019).

Practitioners were allowed to implement various strategies to enhance the holistic development of young children through play-based pedagogy. In the NCF, theme 2 emphasizes the importance of learning and development through play-based activities, and it further emphasizes that activities should be child-centered (DBE, 2015). The NCF encourages practitioners to engage young children in play-based activities to improve their physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development, as core developmental skills. The study comprised five practitioners from five different centers, (four school-based and one community-based centers), who had more than ten (10) years of teaching experience in a grade R class, and all were very experienced and had rich knowledge and experience in teaching young children. The other participants in the study were 360 grade R children whose ages ranged between 5 and 6 years old. For this reason, the researchers aimed to investigate practitioners' perceptions of the implementation of play-based pedagogy for the holistic development of young children.

Play-based pedagogy and play-based teaching and learning will be used interchangeably for this study.

### **Play-based pedagogy**

According to Pyle and Danniels (2016), play-based pedagogy means learning through play. Play-based activities respect young children's culture, creativity, and spontaneity to promote all domains of development (Baumer, 2013). Play-based pedagogy encompasses all methods and necessities considered to initiate learning processes. Aubrey (2017) states that play-based pedagogy depends on a complementary environment, including resources that allow for exploration, engagement, and access to information and knowledge to enhance young children's learning and development. Edwards (2017) believes that young children's engagement with play-based activities enhances their understanding of basic social and physical skills, such as sharing resources, playing together (team spirit), developing gross and fine motor skills. The authors opine that conducive play-based environments should provide maximized learning.

Play-based pedagogy offer practitioners an opportunity to engage meaningfully and educationally with young children in classrooms. Ellison (2012) agrees that for children's optimal social and physical development, both parents and practitioners need to provide a supportive environment to encourage them to participate in play-based activities. It is, therefore, pertinent that the learning environment is appropriately resourced to encourage play-based teaching and learning; however, most South African early childhood development centers in rural areas are poorly resourced (Ekeh & Venketsamy, 2020).

Fleer (2015) confirms that play generates joy and fun that amplifies children's interest and motivation. Therefore, play-based pedagogy can be perceived as an approach that allows young children to grow and develop in totality. The availability of educational resources enhances developmental domains such as social, physical, emotional, and cognitive (Baker, et al. 2016). Practitioners must involve playful activities for young children to become engaged under their guidance in a safe environment (Weisberg, et al. 2013). UNICEF (2018) confirms that play-based

teaching and learning allow children to take the initiative, help in decision-making, and promote self-choice activity that controls their experience. Whitebread, et al. (2017) articulate that play-based pedagogy is a concept that emphasizes the importance of tactile stimulation and the use of resources for young children’s perpetual development. Baumer (2013) states that play-based pedagogy is a cooperative play that promotes the holistic development of children. Solis et al. (2019) state that play-based pedagogy allows young children to develop holistically by exploring through curiosity, ownership, and enjoyment, using stimulating resources.

### **Play-based Pedagogy and Holistic child development**

Wall et al. (2015) state that play-based pedagogy is a method of teaching and learning that enhances the holistic development of young children within an educational learning environment. The learning environment plays a significant role in ensuring that young children can engage and explore through play activities freely. Pyle and Danniels (2016) argue that some education centers are hesitant to introduce and engage young children in play-based activities due to practitioners' lack of knowledge skills and competencies. Young children get involved in activities that bring fun and stimulation to their holistic development (Fleer, 2015).

Play is a defining feature of human development and learning through play is central to quality early childhood pedagogy, education, and development. Hassinger-Das et al. (2018) concur with Fleer (2015) that play-based pedagogy is crucial for the holistic development of young children. Play activities for young children have continued to be an integral part of an educative-developmental program (Wright, 2011). Humankind’s concerns have always been to provide education, skills, and competencies from birth to adulthood, and in the absence of formal schooling, play remained the primary vehicle of thrust (UNICEF, 2018). Gastrow and Oppelt (2018) state that science and technology increasingly benefit the human understanding of play and argue for implementing play-based pedagogy in early grades. Kelly et al. (2019) believe that play ideas are exchanged among a broader population with improved communication channels, research, and publications.

According to the DBE (2015), play is placed under a regulated framework defined by time, place, nature, and resources. This perspective focuses on each child and their progress. The researchers believe that play activities are an integral part of teaching and learning in early-grade classes, which resonates with the National Curriculum Framework (DBE, 2015). Fleer (2015) recommends that teaching and learning activities incorporate free-choice, open-ended spontaneous activities that would be fun and enjoyable to young children. However, she argues that these activities must be planned, controlled and directed by the practitioner; otherwise, the activity becomes meaningless.

Pellegrini et al. (2012) believe that an educational or pragmatic perspective of play-based teaching and learning has far-future development of the child’s social, educational, and economic goals. Therefore, Early Childhood Development Centers (ECDCs) are pioneers in ensuring the holistic development of young children through their planned teaching and learning activities focused on play-based pedagogy. In South Africa, the researchers believe that majority of the ECD centers operate within the educational-pragmatic perspective and are more curriculum-orientated rather than employing play-based pedagogy in their teaching and learning. Zosh et al. (2017) state that the capacity to engage in play activities and the play itself positively impact the child’s holistic development. Wolfgang et al. (2010) state that as children become involved in the play activity, they become engaged, that their moods and spirits are uplifted.

In contrast, the scientific approach and its rules and regulations suggest that play should be conducted using the practitioner's knowledge (Isaacs et al. 2019). Wolfgang et al. (2010) state that a

practitioner's primary responsibility is to organize the environment; plan play activities and resources; plan alongside children; and observe play and assess play. Kelly et al. (2019) argue that a more embracing strategy would be to adopt play as liberal, one that should be anchored in the pedagogy of play that fosters play-based and results in the child's spontaneous development.

### **The benefit of Play-based Pedagogy in Child Development**

Through play-based activities, young children discover and develop their interests and abilities, learn new skills, and build their vocabulary. Therefore, the process of holistic child development cannot supersede the rapport between play and play-based learning (Mardell et al. 2016). The researchers believe that young children can develop much-needed life skills through play-based activities when given enough opportunities, especially access to a conducive environment and resources that support their holistic development. Vogt et al. (2018) believe that the environment should allow young children to initiate and embrace play as engagement and self-actualization. The play-based approach to teaching and learning should create a greater space where young children develop holistic skills, such as sensory-motor, symbolic and construction, communication, sharing, and critical thinking, fostering creativity (Duci et al. 2014). These skills make play-based pedagogy essential for young children's development since they learn to solve problems, get along with others, and develop their fine and gross motor skills (Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013).

The rationale for employing play-based pedagogy in ECD is that early learning needs to be based on playful activities even though the understanding of play itself varies (Zosh, 2017). Play-based pedagogy holds great value in developing young children early by encouraging pre-literacy and language skills, creativity, and imagination (Weisberg et al. 2013). Learning while playing emphasizes the practitioner's role as the one who ensures that play-based learning is appropriately facilitated for the holistic development of children (Gasteiger, 2015). The development of young children requires this critical methodology, supported by pedagogical resources, during play-based learning from an early age (Smidt, 2011). Implementing play-based pedagogy for young children's holistic development becomes a necessity, especially for the differentiation of learning (Nilsen, 2021). Play pedagogy teaches young children how to behave and constitutes social preparation for formal schooling (Mardell et al. 2017). Therefore play-based pedagogy is regarded as an approach that enhances a child's holistic development through a range of play-based activities, which promotes areas like numeracy and literacy (Sarkar, 2020). Young children voluntarily engage in purposeful play-based activities, such as imaginative, constructive, creative, physical, solitary, and cooperative, to name a few, for their development (Ali et al. 2018). From an overall perspective, play is viewed as a child-centered, directed activity with minimal adult interference for young children's maximum and holistic development.

### **Practitioner's views and play-based pedagogy on child development**

Play-based pedagogy or play-based teaching and learning is an approach where a practitioner and a child become actively involved in various play-based activities. It is essential to know that maintaining a good relationship with a child creates a conducive environment for holistic child development as they freely participate in activities. According to Voko et al. (2014), holistic development is an approach to learning that emphasizes the importance of children's physical, emotional, social, and psychological well-being in early childhood. The holistic approach requires practitioners to be well-informed of the content knowledge and the pedagogy to scaffold and direct learning on specific aspects of the environment (Siraj-Blatchford, 2019). Pyle and Danniels (2016) state that practitioners understand play-based pedagogy as an approach that encourages the facilitation of child-centered teaching and learning. A study by Voko et al. (2014) revealed that practitioners in education centers are faced with

immense pressure to achieve academic excellence; thus, implementing play-based teaching and learning is a challenge.

Nicolopoulou (2010) states that some parents compel practitioners to disregard play-based pedagogy in education centers and focus primarily on academic achievement compared to the effectiveness of self-exploration, skills, and values. Asharai and Baharuddin (2018) found that parents were more focused on academic achievements than their children's holistic development. These researchers also found that practitioners preferred books and other activities over play-based teaching and learning.

Although some practitioners are aware of the advantages of play-based teaching and learning, implementing the approach in the classroom can be challenging due to the demands for completing content (syllabus) and the lack of play resources (Ashari & Hushairi, 2019). Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) argue that play-based pedagogy has a significant role in the holistic development of young children. For this reason, play-based teaching and learning should be mandated in early childhood centers. The DBE (2015) agrees with Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) and has incorporated play-based pedagogy in the National Curriculum Framework for all early childhood education centers. Pyle and Danniels (2016) support play-based pedagogy that benefits the child and a practitioner that understands the role to play while facilitating teaching and learning through play. Therefore, it is necessary to set up centers with relevant and age-appropriate resources to inspire children to interact, engage, and explore the available resources for their learning and holistic development.

Practitioners must use play-based pedagogy to connect a child's development with their expected developmental domains. Whitebread et al. (2017) state that holistic development views effective learning as experimental and explorational. Practical and explorational development involves studying growth and development patterns to draw guidelines for each step and typical development (Varun and Pandey, 2018; Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2019). According to Voko et al. (2014) and Morrow (2011), holistic child development refers to a dynamic process that focuses on physical, emotional, social, and cognitive changes from birth to adulthood. Each child develops uniquely; hence Goldstein (2012) argues that providing an environment that will give young children an opportunity to imagine, explore things, and socialise is essential.

Despite numerous research and agreement on play-based teaching and learning, it may be challenging to implement this approach in some centers. The reason is that some practitioners may have a negative attitude towards implementing play-based teaching and learning. Furthermore, they may lack knowledge or experience of play-based pedagogy and lack the necessary resources. According to DBE (2015), for ECD centers to implement play-based teaching and learning, they should create an engaging, creative, and beneficial environment for the holistic development of children. Wolfgang et al. (2010) state that the safer the environment, the greater the space within which young children will develop their sensory-motor, symbolic and construction innovation of play and play activities.

### **Problem of study**

Play-based pedagogy is an integral approach to the holistic development of young children. It aids in encouraging children to construct knowledge of the world by interacting with objects and people through play activities (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). The introduction of NCF in 2015 in South Africa envisaged enhancing and reinforcing the implementation of play-based pedagogy in centers for the holistic development of young children. The introduction of NCF brought hope to the centers that learning through play will finally be well implemented for child's social, emotional, physical, and

cognitive development. Aubrey (2017) confirms that learning through play constitutes social, emotional, cognitive, and physical preparation for formal schooling. This is articulated by Hassinger-Das et al. (2018), who revealed that learning by young children could be informal and coincidental, which makes play a fundamental methodology in their development.

However, according to Solis et al. (2019), the problem is that many young children in South Africa are still not fully exposed to play-based teaching and learning. There are numerous reasons for the lack of play-based teaching and learning implementation within the South African context. Reasons cited for the non-implementation of play-based pedagogy are lack of knowledge and understanding of policy imperatives on play-based teaching and learning, understanding of what play-based pedagogy entails, limited resources and lack of support to implement play-based teaching and learning from departmental officials. Ellison (2012) argues that play contributes significantly to the development of young children. It reinforces various skills, namely creativity, communication, sharing, teamwork, individual conduct in their community, and behavior within society. These skills are strengthened, reinforced, and enhanced through appropriately planned, designed, and timed play activities (Ekeh & Venketsamy, 2020).

### State of the art

Numerous studies were undertaken on the value and importance of play-based teaching and learning. Weisberg, et al. (2013) viewed play-based pedagogy as an approach that involves playful and child-directed activities with a degree of adult guidance and scaffolded learning assistance. Baumer (2013) reports that play-based pedagogy promotes the holistic development of children. Baker et al. (2016), who researched play-based teaching and learning, state that learning through play activities is an integral part of teaching and learning for early childhood development.

Play reinforces a variety of skills that significantly contributes to young children's holistic development (Ellison, 2012). Play-based teaching and learning activities strengthen, reinforce, and enhance these skills. The DBE's view on play-based pedagogy is supported by Solis et al. (2019) as an approach that allows young children to develop by exploring, taking ownership of their learning, and enjoying by utilizing stimulating resources. Solis et al. (2019) solidify that the DBE (2015) initiated and encouraged using play for the holistic development of young children in centers.

### Gap Study and Objective

Based on the explanation, it can be agreed that play-based pedagogy is integral to the holistic development of young children. Children learn through play since they are actively engaged in their learning. The DBE (2015) has developed a policy emphasizing the importance of play-based teaching and learning. Despite this being mandated, there are pockets of non-implementation of play-based teaching and learning. The objective of this study was to elicit the views of practitioners on play-based pedagogy and their challenges in providing support and intervention.

## METHOD

### Type and Design

This is a descriptive qualitative study that adopted a case study design. The study focused on practitioners in the Mpumalanga Province in South Africa. Since Mpumalanga has four major districts, the researcher chose Nkangala District. The researcher works as a subject advisor in the district and has access to the research sites. The researchers chose five centers from this district. These were

purposively selected since each had an early childhood development center attached to the primary school. These centers are managed and supported by the Mpumalanga Department of Education.

### Data and Data Source

The data in this study consist of transcripts of in-depth interviews and classroom observations. The data sources in this study included five (5) practitioners and 100 children between the ages 5-6 years in the respective practitioner’s classes (see Tables 1). In this study, the researchers applied the following ethical principles: informed consent obtained from each participant; confidentiality – protecting the participant's information and the right to withdraw from the study without explanation.

### Participants

**Table 1.** Biographical data of the sample

Full description	Code	Gender /Race	Age range	Qualification	Teaching experience	Grade teaching	Center description	Number of children
Practitioner A	PA	F-B	45	Level 5	18 years	R	Community -based	20
Practitioner B	PB	F-B	36	Diploma in ECD	12 years	R	School-based	25
Practitioner C	PC	F-B	31	Diploma in ECD	11 years	R	School-based	15
Practitioner D	PD	F-B	46	Diploma in ECD	20 years	R	School-based	20
Practitioner E	PE	F-W	43	B.Ed. in Pre-Primary Ed.	20 years	R	School-based	20

### Observation

The observation used in this study was straightforward observation. The authors observed the participants during their teaching and learning. The observation included individual child and group observation (guided by the lesson and child choices and preferences of the play activities) and exploration and engagement with resources within their classroom (indoor). During the indoor activities, children were observed on how they manipulate, explore, and construct resources to develop their cognitive, emotional, and social domains. Outdoor activities were also observed to understand the physical domain, including social and emotional aspects, how they communicate (socialise), and demonstrate their emotional maturity when playing with others.

### Interviews

The study used semi-structured interviews to encourage participants to communicate their views, perceptions, roles, and knowledge of the curriculum, and play pedagogy in developing young children holistically. This data collection method indicates that the researchers followed an open-ended structured questionnaire. The open-ended format allowed probing and discussion of participants' views of the phenomenon (Owen, 2014). The interviews ranged from 30-45 minutes with each participant. The questions were as follows:

### Data Validity

Validity relates to trustworthiness, dependability, credibility, transferability, and conformability (Creswell, 2013). To ensure the validity of the questions, the authors presented the questions to the Early Childhood Education Department academics. The purpose was to ensure that the questions were clearly articulated, elicited responses appropriately, and were unambiguous. Once this process was completed, the questions were piloted with two educators who were not part of the sampled schools. Regarding the validity of the data and to authenticate the dependability of this research, questions, transcripts, and voice audio recordings were analyzed and checked. Trustworthiness was highly considered in this study to the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used in the research to ensure the quality of the study (Polit & Beck, 2014).

### Data Analysis

The collected data was prepared and organized by transcribing the interviews verbatim, reviewed, and explored by identifying emerging themes or ideas (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). All the data collected were analyzed and organized in themes, coded, and then interpreted (Maher et al. 2018). The data coding system was established into categories, and codes were assigned to the data by going through all five participants' responses and tagging them with codes. The researcher systematically worked through each theme and sub-theme. The main and sub-themes were linked to analyzed data (Azungah, 2018). The findings and recommendations were finally drawn from the themes informed by the data collected, which concluded the research study.

### Results

The following three themes emanated from the transcribed data:

Theme 1: Practitioner's understanding of play-based pedagogy.

Theme 2: Implementation of play-based activities for the holistic development of children.

Theme 3: Need for support to implement play-based pedagogy

#### **Theme 1: Practitioner's understanding of play-based pedagogy**

To elicit the participant's understanding of play-based pedagogy, the researchers asked: "what is your understanding of the term play-based pedagogy about teaching and learning in early grade centers?". The responses varied among the participants. Below are verbatim quotes from the participants regarding their understanding of play-based pedagogy.

According to PA, she indicated, "Play-based pedagogy refers to teaching and learning through playful activities. These activities should include games that young children like." PB agreed with PA's view that play-based pedagogy has to do with teaching and learning through play. However, she further stated that the play activity must have some educational purpose and should not be just a random game. In response to the same question, PC said, "Play-based activities must be designed to ensure children are learning something educational. There is value in what they are learning through play, and this must be of benefit to their development." Both PD and PE agreed that play-based pedagogy is about using fun, age-appropriate games with educational value to the child. They further stated that play-based activities must be carefully planned and should be part of the learning program in their centers. Play-based pedagogy (teaching and learning) cannot be time-fillers to keep young children occupied.

To ensure that practitioners understood the concept of play-based pedagogy, the researchers probed further. They asked the participants about the difference between play-based pedagogy and



play-based teaching and learning. To this question, all participants, PA, PB, PC, PD, and PE, agreed that play-based pedagogy refers to using play in teaching and learning, while play-based teaching and learning are using games and playful activities to strengthen children's understanding of concepts taught. An example cited by PB was, "Using the rhyming song to teach counting through play – one-two, buckle my shoe, three four, knock at the door, five six, pick up stick..."

According to PC she stated,

*Play-based pedagogy refers to the methodologies used to implement play activities. When referring to play-based teaching and learning, the focus is on the activities used to teach young children and what they learn from play-activity. One example of play-based teaching and learning that I use in my class is 'Shopping'. The children are given play money to buy and sell products from their shops. I try to teach my young children more and less in this lesson. When you purchase something and pay for it, your money decreases (less). Through play activities, my young children can understand the mathematical concept of more and less.*

The researchers noted that the participants had a fair understanding of play-based pedagogy and play-based teaching and learning from the responses above.

### **Theme 2: Implementation of play-based activities for the holistic development of children.**

Since the NCF emphasises the importance of play-based activities, the researchers posed the question of the implementation of play-based activities for the holistic development of children. All the participants agreed that play-based teaching and learning are valuable to the holistic development of children.

PB stated, "Every day, we go outside to the jungle gym and I allow my young children to climb, hang onto the beams, crawl, hop and run about. The various activities help them to develop their muscles and coordination skills."

According to PC, she said,

"At my school, we must spend half an hour on play equipment, which happens towards the end of the day. Most of the activities that engage our children are sand-play, water-play and jungle gym. Our activities are very coordinated and prescribed."

PD's response to the implementation of play-based activities for the holistic development of young children was

Children must develop holistically, and we must also remember that it is not only cognitive or intellectual development. The play activities must also encourage social development. I include play activities where children must learn to trust and depend on each other. Some of the activities that I give them are team activities where they are in groups and have to rely on each other to win games. Through my activities, I can pick out those children who want to share and be part of a team and those who like to play independently. Simple games like 'egg hunt; pass the ball, rings games, etc.' are helpful to identify children and their social development.

### **Theme 3: Need for support to implement play-based pedagogy**

To elicit participants' views regarding how they were supported and their need for help to implement play-based pedagogy, the authors asked participants the following question, "What kind of support do you require to implement play-based teaching and learning?"

To this question, the responses varied amongst the participants. All participants, PA; PB; PC; PD, and PE, concurred that there is a need for support to implement play-based pedagogy into their teaching and learning activities. When the researchers probed further, PB stated, "We have the NCF given to all ECD centers, and this framework was not discussed with us as practitioners. We need the

department officials to explain what is expected of us as practitioners to implement play-based pedagogy." According to PD, she said, "There is a need for training and development of ECD practitioners on how to implement play-based pedagogy in our classrooms." PE's response to this question was, "I know what play is and how to integrate play into my teaching and learning – what I like to know are the kinds of educational play activities I can use." PA also shared a similar view of PE, and she too had little knowledge of educational play.

In response to training and development, there was a consensus amongst all participants that

*The department should plan ongoing training and development workshops for all practitioners. These workshops should be continuous, and the training should be practical and participatory so that they can engage in the activities.*

Another major concern of most participants was the lack of resources. Although they had outdoor resources for play-based teaching and learning, many of the centers had limited or no indoor resources. All the participants indicated that their schools did not have financial support to purchase educational games. According to PA, she said, "I ask my parents to donate games for our class. Very few parents can buy a game and send it to school." According to PB and PD, their children come from disadvantaged communities and most of their parents are unemployed. It is challenging for the parents to support the school. PE stated,

*I make games for my children. I sometimes get help from primary school, making a few board games and puzzles from magazines. These games help my children develop socially, cognitively, and physically*

in the class.

The authors observed that practitioners were taking their children outside to play on the jungle gym during the classroom observation. This was evident in all centers since they all had access to the jungle gym. Although these activities were enjoyable and exciting to the children, the teacher's knowledge of the importance of these activities was limited to physical and social development.

The authors asked PC, "What is the value of the 'swinging activity?'" She could state that it was for the development of the finger muscles. She further indicated that the activity would strengthen the child's finger muscles, which will help in pencil grip and handwriting. There was no explanation of the benefits of swinging activity to coordination and balance.

During another observation of participant PE, the authors noticed that children were playing together in groups. They passed the ball to each other as the practitioner called out their names. When asked about the value of this game, the participant indicated that this was to develop social interaction, children getting to know each other's names and perception skills. It was interesting to note the benefits of a simple game such as 'passing the ball' had so many benefits to the learner's holistic development.

## DISCUSSION

### Theme 1: Practitioner's understanding of play-based pedagogy

The findings revealed that participants had a good understanding of play-based teaching and learning. They were able to explain the differences between play-based pedagogy and play-based teaching and learning. The participants' responses concur with Pyle and Danniels (2016), who articulate that play-based pedagogy means applying different teaching and learning methods using play-based activities. Whitebread et al. (2017) state that play-based pedagogy encompasses all methods and necessities considered to initiate the learning process.

## **Theme 2: Implementation of play-based activities for the holistic development of children**

The participants also agreed that play activities are essential for young children to develop holistically. They agreed that play helps young children develop emergent literacy and numeracy skills. Their views agree with Solis et al. (2019), who state that play activities allow young children to develop language and mathematical skills. In their response, the participants also indicated that play is a natural learning mode. Young children engage and explore the environment to enhance their learning. This statement aligns with Fler (2015), who acknowledges that play is a powerful medium through which children develop and actively engage with the world around them (immediate environment). All participants opined that the environment significantly contributes to the young child's ability to explore and engage in a safe, conducive and stress-free environment. Aronstam and Braund (2016) agree that daily interaction, exploration and engagement with activities in their learning environment stimulate young children to explore and enhance their learning. According to PC, she indicated that play-based activities must be carefully planned and should make educational sense. Play-based activities should not be unplanned, on-the-spot activities or time-fillers in the early grades. PC's views align with Fler (2015), who also maintains that play-based teaching and learning must be carefully planned and have educational value to the young child.

All participants shared a common view that play-based activities are essential for the holistic development of young children. They agreed that educational play adds value to a child's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. Hassinger-Das et al. (2018) share similar views with Fler (2015) that play activities allow young children to interact socially with their peers. Fler (2015) and Ekeh and Venketsamy (2021) also opined that young children learn to understand and acknowledge different emotions through various play-based activities. He states that the learning environment can trigger mixed feelings, expressive behaviors and psychological patterning. Therefore, it is crucial that through storytelling, creative arts, and life-skill lessons. Practitioners should engage young children in activities that could stimulate these emotions. During the observation lessons, it was noted that practitioners often encouraged young children to work in social groups. Mraz et al. (2016) believe that children learn and develop empathy while also perfecting their skills in listening, sharing ideas, expressing themselves, negotiating and learning to compromise during play. These views aligned with the findings in this study and during the interview with the practitioners. According to UNICEF (2018), a child's holistic development is mainly enhanced by a well-arranged and stimulating environment that promotes learning through play to support curricular goals and objectives. All participants share this view.

## **Theme 3: Need for support to implement play-based pedagogy**

Although the Department of Basic Education has developed the NCF, this framework was not effectively communicated and advocated by all participants. The study revealed that most participants had minimal knowledge and understanding of the framework. All participants agreed that they need ongoing professional development programs to implement play-based pedagogy. According to Stirrup et al. (2017), practitioners need to be developed, supported, and visited often to ensure that policies are implemented. They state that practitioners must be guided in classroom practice.

Practitioners also indicated the lack of resources to implement play-based teaching and learning. The DBE supported centers with infrastructure for outdoor play activities; however, indoor play resources were seriously lacking in most centers. This was observed during the classroom observation. All participants stated that they need appropriate resources and teacher development programs to

implement play-based teaching and learning. They indicated that the training and development programs should be ongoing and not once-off since short once-off programs are ineffective.

## CONCLUSION

Play-based pedagogy and play-based teaching and learning are rapidly gaining recognition worldwide. The use of technological games developed for young children is becoming highly popular. Practitioners should also consider using technological games in their ECD centers apart from physical games and outdoor equipment. In South Africa, the DBE has introduced ICT, and centers are encouraged to use iPads, Laptops, and computer-aided teaching and learning. Many digital games are uploaded for young children. The success of play-based pedagogy depends on practitioners' knowledge and understanding of its implementation during the teaching and learning of young children. Practitioners perceived play-based teaching and learning as required methods for enhancing child development. Despite the NCF articulating and mandating the implementation of play-based pedagogy, there are still challenges to effective implementation at the classroom level. According to Solis et al. (2019), most practitioners in South Africa are not implementing play-based pedagogy or play-based teaching and learning effectively due to a lack of knowledge, skills and competencies. For this reason, there is a need for continuous ongoing professional development programs to capacitate practitioners on play-based pedagogy and play-based teaching and learning.

The study was limited to one province and one district in South Africa. Furthermore, the participants in this study were a small sample. Some of the participants answered questions very subjectively despite the assurance of confidentiality. Future studies about practitioners' views on play-based pedagogy should include more participants from different districts and provinces. The centers should consist of both rural and urban centers. This study has three suggestions/recommendations. For effective implementation of play-based pedagogy, (a) the DBE should develop ongoing professional teacher development programs for all practitioners. These programs must be ongoing and continuous. (b) All centers should be appropriately resourced so that practitioners can effectively plan play-based teaching and learning activities for both indoor and outdoor classrooms. (c) Both the DBE and the schools should offer support to practitioners, for example, peer or collaborative teaching, classroom observation, attending model lessons and developing a network learning community to share good practices.

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