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THE IMPACT OF THE PLAY TO LEARN ACT IN 1st, 2nd, AND 3rd GRADE CLASSROOMS: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY

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THE IMPACT OF THE PLAY TO LEARN ACT IN 1st, 2nd, AND 3rd GRADE CLASSROOMS: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY

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Abstract

In the field of early childhood education, child-centered pedagogies have significantly decreased in favor of greater use of adult-directed learning as the high-stakes testing era has proliferated (Miller & Almon, 2009). The National Association for the Education of Young Children posits the need for children in early childhood, defined as birth to age eight (or roughly third grade), to learn and develop through play (NAEYC, 2020). Children naturally engage in play and playful behaviors without direction to explore the world around them (Brown, 2009), yet many of the learning activities offered in schools enforce rote memorization and repetition as a means of learning (Miller & Almon, 2009). While many educators espouse deeply held beliefs about play as a means for children to learn, there is a disconnect between their beliefs and current classroom practices. There is an abundance of research centering around the beliefs of preschool and kindergarten teachers, but very little explores the beliefs of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd-grade teachers. Legislation titled the *Oklahoma Play to Learn Act (PTLA)* was passed into law in 2021 to empower educators to utilize play-based learning in the state. It is unclear what effect the law has had thus far. To understand the current impact of the *PTLA* and the possibilities for future effects it may have, this research study will explore the beliefs about play held by primary grade educators and identify the types of support that might increase educators' use of play in classrooms using a mixed-methods research design.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Play is powerful in the lives of children. Children naturally seek out and engage in play as they grow from infancy to adulthood (Brown, 2009; International Play Association [IPA], 2016). Play involves joy, personal choice, spontaneity, calm, socialization, and imagination and has positive outcomes such as increased mental health, the creation of new neural connections, self-fulfillment, and increased abilities (Brown, 2009). During the early childhood years (from birth to age eight), playing leads to the development of children's physical, cognitive, social, emotional, self-regulatory, and creative skills (NAEYC, 2020; Yogman et al., 2018). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the largest organization of early childhood professionals in the United States (US), positions play as a primary mode of learning for the holistic development of young children (2020). In their position statement titled "Developmentally Appropriate Practice," the NAEYC posits that play creates joyful learning, fosters development and competency in multiple areas, and clearly asserts that "play is essential for all children, birth through age 8." (2020, p. 9).

The benefits of play are most prominent during periods when the brain is most rapidly developing (during childhood) (Brown, 2009), thus access to play in children's learning environments is crucial (Saracho, 2021). Educational researchers advocate for the use of play-based pedagogies in their publications, suggesting that teachers should offer play-based learning opportunities in their classrooms (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2020; Nell et al., 2013; Grindheim, 2020; Riley & Jones, 2010; Weisberg et al., 2013; Zosh et al., 2018), yet it is unclear if teachers of young children feel prepared to support children's learning through play in the current educational climate.

Researchers note decreases in accessibility to play in early childhood classrooms (serving children from birth to age 8) in favor of more direct, adult-driven instructional methods that focus heavily on measurable academic proficiency (Bassok et al., 2016; Miller & Almon, 2009; NAEYC 2020; Nilsson et al., 2018). The increased focus on standardized learning outcomes is the result of increased accountability measures from large-scale, national educational reform programs as part of the accountability movement. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provided grants to low-income schools with the goal of creating equitable learning opportunities for all students (Sharp, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). In 2001, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) reauthorized and replaced the ESEA and placed greater accountability pressures on schools nationwide (Lee & Reeves, 2012). NCLB aimed to address and close the perceived student achievement gap in both math and reading to ensure all students reached proficiency in both subject areas (Lee & Reeves, 2012; Wei, 2010). To achieve these goals, NCLB (ended in 2015) required all public schools in the US to test students in math and reading in 3rd through 8th grade to receive Title 1 funding (Lee & Reeves, 2012; Sharp, 2016; Wei, 2010). Schools were mandated to establish yearly achievement goals for students in reading and math, placing even greater responsibility on teachers to show evidence of student progress in these two subjects during early childhood education. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Wei, 2010). Consequently, this has resulted in a reduction of learning time in other subject areas and increased demands on the standardization of teaching of these subjects (Wei, 2010). As prescribed by NCLB, student success is measured by testing data, thus teachers were expected to prioritize tested subject matter and deliver prescriptive instruction to ensure students met 100% proficiency (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006).

Though NCLB was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which gave states greater flexibility to dictate academic standards and teacher assessment models, educational practices in early childhood remain heavily influenced by testing (Sharp, 2016). In the state where this research was conducted, the third-grade reading proficiency test places additional pressure on teachers to prepare students to pass or be retained in 3rd grade (Fuhrman et al., 2013). As a result, caregivers and administrators place a higher value on heavily tested subjects rather than valuing holistic development. Accountability measures have effectively decreased trust in educators to meet the needs of their students (Nell et al., 2018). Since teachers heavily influence and determine the delivery of content and method of classroom learning (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), they have the most prominent role in creating access to varied types of instruction for their students. However, teachers may feel a lack of autonomy in curricular decision-making.

Over the previous decades, teachers have been devalued within the profession through the reduction and removal of autonomy in curricular decision-making that reflects the needs of their students while also remaining accountable for student success. Henry Giroux described this dissonant practice, explaining that teachers have been disempowered by being required to deliver a pre-set curriculum and transfer knowledge without the ability to reflect on the diverse needs, communities, and interests of the students. Examining the educational climate then and now reveals the diminishing trust in teachers to make decisions that are embedded in educational reforms intending to "routinize the nature of learning" (Giroux, 1985, p. 37). Giroux (1985) further posits that forces within the bureaucracy have caused a "proletarianization of teacher work" (p. 37), causing teachers to be seen as classroom managers who deliver predetermined

content. This has been exacerbated by the accountability movement and resulted in fewer teachers offering play-based learning in schools.

Research points to the continual occurrence of some play offerings, such as dramatic, constructive, and creative play in preschool and kindergarten settings (see Costantino-Lane, 2019; McInnes et al., 2011; Pyle & Danniels, 2017), yet few studies indicate consistent use of play-based learning in first, second, or third grade, despite the assertion that play is developmentally appropriate and essential. In these primary grades, the benefits of play do not diminish; therefore, play remains necessary and useful. When children enter formal education settings, their access to play becomes dependent on educators' beliefs and enactments of play within their own classroom spaces. While many stakeholders determine curricular decisions in early childhood classrooms, teachers ultimately implement practices based on their perceptions of what should be taught or what they confidently believe will benefit their students (Brown et al., 2020; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Yin et al., 2021). The prevalence of play-based classroom practices depends upon the educator's beliefs, abilities, and efforts toward implementation. Thus, understanding teachers' beliefs about play is necessary to advance these practices in early childhood classrooms.

Research Problem

In 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) laid out inalienable rights for children. The document is a "legally-binding international agreement setting out the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of every child, regardless of their race, religion or abilities" (International Play Association [IPA], n.d., para. 1) and consists of recommendations for governments to meet the needs of children. The resolution includes 54 articles with the goal of improving the lives of children globally. Article 31 posits "the right of

the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child" (United Nations, 1989, p.9). Every child's right to play was secured in countries where this treaty was ratified. Though a US representative under President Clinton did sign the treaty in 1995, it has yet to be ratified in the United States (Blanchfield, 2015). Opponents of ratification in the US cited concerns over parental rights, US sovereignty, and the potential impact on state and national laws (Blanchfield, 2015). While the act of playing is not cited as a direct opposition to ratification, non-ratification in the US leaves our youngest citizens without this international protection.

Instead of creating US-based legislation to protect play and play-based learning, the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and subsequent laws passed during the standards-based movement forced greater academic pressure into early elementary classrooms, leading to a shift in educational practices and minimized playful learning opportunities (Miller & Almon, 2009; Yogman et al., 2018). Standardized testing and academic performance expectations have significantly impacted how teachers plan for and approach student learning. Educators feel that they must force a one-size-fits-all model of learning based on universally measurable goals within their classrooms (Brown et al., 2020).

Teachers of early childhood students make pedagogical decisions based on their beliefs about learning and education. Research indicates that there is a disconnect between educators' beliefs about teaching and the practices they enact in their classrooms, especially regarding play pedagogies (Bautista et al., 2019; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Nilsen, 2021). Teachers may believe in and support play theoretically but rely on adult-directed classroom learning tasks to meet academic goals. Despite the NAEYC (2020) defining early childhood as birth to age eight and advocating for play throughout these schooling years, few research studies

examine teacher perceptions of play past the initial year of formal schooling (most often kindergarten). There is ample research showing that preschool and kindergarten teachers believe that play should be offered to their students (see Brown et al., 2020; Costantino-Lane, 2019; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Stipek, 2017), yet research in later early childhood grades is lacking. There is a clear and present need for research to explore teachers' beliefs about play in grades 1, 2, and 3 to better understand how teachers enact play in these grades.

Some studies have been conducted regarding play or teacher beliefs in these grade levels, but only some report findings from the United States. In areas outside the US where the UNCRC has been ratified, play is expected during early education (before age 7). In countries and large, heavily populated areas such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia, and Ontario, research shows that teachers need external support and professional development to enact play in conjunction with other academic expectations resulting from new educational policies (Barblett et al., 2016; Bautista et al., 2019; Becker & Mastrangelo, 2017; Fung & Cheng, 2012). Since the United States does not have a national expectation for instruction regarding play, different states and districts include it at their discretion. Global educational policies indicate recurrent interest in increasing play-based learning, but researchers acknowledge the challenges for policy to alter classroom practices regarding play (Parker et al., 2022).

In the state where this proposed research will be conducted, a piece of legislation titled *The Play to Learn Act (PTLA)* was passed into law in 2021. This act was created to protect educators' right to teach and early childhood students' right to learn through play in educational settings. The act states that "play shall not be denied to any early childhood student and may be used by educators to develop physical, social, emotional, cognitive and academic learning opportunities in all curricular domains, which may include unstructured time for the discovery of

each child's individual needs, abilities and talents" through "movement, creative expression, exploration, socialization, reading for pleasure, art, music, and dramatic play" (Oklahoma Play to Learn Act, 2021, p. 3).

The law advocates for play as the most developmentally appropriate way for early childhood students to learn. As a native Oklahoma citizen, an educator of young children and preservice teachers, and a mother of three children, the passage of the *PTLA* gave me hope. Early in the legislative process, I participated in the working group that created the initial language of the bill. Later, I was invited to speak at the interim study at the state capitol and to help moderate a social media advocacy page for the bill. I believe that the *PTLA* can empower educators to utilize a powerful, playful pedagogy that will meet the holistic needs of all children.

The Oklahoma *Play to Learn Act* states that "school districts may provide ongoing early childhood professional development for early childhood educators and administrators which may include existing early childhood professional development programs from the State Department of Education" (Oklahoma Play to Learn Act, 2021, p. 3). After reviewing the state department website, I found professional development opportunities for educators in core subject areas, STEM, fine arts, Indian education, and health and physical education (Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE), 2023) but no professional developments that centered on play or exploration. The *PTLA* also states that "The State Board of Education shall promulgate rules, subject to approval by the Legislature, establishing guidelines for professional development programs for early childhood educators and administrators" (Oklahoma Play to Learn Act, 2021, p. 3), yet no guidelines have been established to date.

To enact a new pedagogical practice, teachers need support from those in their community and at the state level (Barblett et al., 2016; Yin et al., 2021). Without professional

development opportunities and other support, educators are left to independently approach play-based learning using their current ability and knowledge level. It is unclear if educators in Oklahoma are aware of the *PTLA* and the possibilities it creates for implementing play-based teaching in their classrooms. Thus, it is necessary to gain insight into the current effect of the *PTLA* and the beliefs and needs of early childhood educators in the state of Oklahoma for a quality professional development program to be created.

Policy initiatives regarding play center teachers as agents of change (Martin et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2022). However, Hochberg and Desimone (2010) argue that for professional development to succeed as a mechanism for improving student learning, it must be able to bridge divides among teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practices. Educators' professional needs (their beliefs and practices) should be considered in decisions regarding policy implementation. Therefore, professional development programs should be responsive to the people who will attend them to sustain learning long-term (Lee, 2004). Mezirow (2003), a researcher who focuses on change, suggests that to transform habits and perspectives, people must be reflective, problem-solve, and work collaboratively to make lasting changes. Martin et al. (2017) echo this sentiment by suggesting that all stakeholders' voices be considered when educational policy aims to alter teaching practices. A needs assessment of the teaching profession could lead to a professional development program that will best support educators in the state (Lee, 2004; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

To achieve this goal, this research aims to gain insight from teachers statewide, which will ensure varying needs from districts are accounted for in the creation of a professional development program. The data gathered from this research study could be utilized to create such a program to be disseminated at the state level, with options for individual school districts

to amend the professional development program to best meet the needs of the teachers and students in specific districts. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) reviewed 35 research studies that reported positive links between student outcomes, teaching practices, and professional development which resulted in seven identified qualities of effective professional development programs. To be effective, a professional development program

> 1. Is content focused 2. Incorporates active learning utilizing adult learning theory 3. Supports collaboration, typically in job-embedded contexts 4. Uses models and modeling of effective practice 5. Provides coaching and expert support 6. Offers opportunities for feedback and reflection 7. Is of sustained duration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p.4).

Sims and Fletcher-Wood's (2021) methodological review of professional development studies adds additional factors such as teacher buy-in and facilitation by outside expertise to support developers of professional development initiatives. If this data were utilized to create professional development, all aforementioned characteristics should be considered. This research study aimed to garner an understanding of the current effect of the *Play to Learn Act* by investigating what teachers believe about play, and what types of support and training are needed for educators in first, second, and third grade (henceforth named primary grade teachers) to increase play-based learning.

Research Purpose

This mixed-methods study examined the effects of the *PTLA* by investigating primary-grade teachers' beliefs regarding play, and teachers' needs for support and professional development to increase play-based practices. This study employed a sequential explanatory design with a case-selection variant (Creswell & Clark, 2018). In this type of mixed-methods research, basic quantitative data offered variance in initial participant responses and allowed for

a wide pool of follow-up participants to choose from to gain rich, qualitative data. In the first phase of the study, quantitative data was collected from teachers in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades using an online questionnaire. In the second phase of the study, focus group interviews were conducted with a subset of the questionnaire participants to gain a deeper understanding of the initial data. The data was used to explore the *Play to Learn Act*, illustrate the beliefs about play held by primary grade educators, and identify the types of support that could increase educators' use of play in classrooms.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How is the Play to Learn Act influencing play-based learning in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade classrooms in Oklahoma?
2. What do primary grade teachers believe about the need for and effects of play-based learning in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade?
3. What do primary grade teachers believe about their role in play and necessary support to better implement play-based learning in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade classrooms?

Conceptual Framework

This research is grounded in the theory of Teacher Beliefs to frame the study of teachers' beliefs about play in relation to their current and potential teaching practices (Pajares, 1992; Rokeach, 1968). In the last 60 years, researchers have sought to understand educators' beliefs, attitudes, and motivations and the correlations between teachers' beliefs and students' success, motivation, and well-being (Ashton, 2014). Belief is defined as "any simple proposition, conscious or unconscious, inferred from what a person says or does" (Rokeach, 1968, p.113). Beliefs are complex phenomena because they are entangled within systems, both malleable and

fixed, conscious and unconscious, and correlate to our behaviors and actions (Rokeach, 1986). Belief is a difficult and messy construct and therefore difficult to empirically study (Pajares, 1992). However, researchers who wish to increase positive outcomes for students purport a need to understand teachers' concepts about teaching through an understanding of their beliefs, knowledge, and practices (Ashton, 2014).

Educators of young children construct their pedagogical beliefs based on their own upbringing, education, life experiences, and deeply held beliefs about the world. Researchers should examine statements of beliefs, behaviors, and intentions from the educators' point of view and contextualize them within the teachers' lives and educational practices (Pajares, 1992). Kagan (1992) defines teacher beliefs as "implicit assumptions about students, learning, classrooms, and the subject matter to be taught" (p.66), but cautions researchers against focusing too heavily on specific academic content. Research regarding teachers' beliefs has revealed a significant connection between beliefs and behaviors. However, Kagan (1992) suggests that multiple mediating factors may influence the practices teachers choose to implement regardless of their beliefs. Therefore, understanding teachers' beliefs in connection with their practices provides clear holistic insights regarding the effects of their beliefs.

In consideration of studying Teachers' Beliefs, Pajares (1992) urges researchers to go beyond simply surveying teachers. Building on significant research, he posits the need to contextualize teachers' beliefs within their individual knowledge and practice (Pajares, 1992). Pajares (1992) asserts "beliefs cannot be directly observed or measured but must be inferred from what people say, intend, and do" (p. 314). He recommends utilizing open-ended interviews and observations to achieve robust results, a recommendation that is congruent with Kagan's (1992) research suggestions. For the purpose of this mixed-methods study, open-ended

questionnaire responses and semi-structured focus-group interviews were utilized to provide context and depth to participants' beliefs reported in the quantitative section of the questionnaire.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The intention of this literature review is to overview the concept of play as it relates to classroom use and learning from the perspective of educators. The standardization of learning has influenced early childhood educational practice causing a shift from the constructivist theoretical teachings that support young children to didactic teaching that is developmentally inappropriate (Miller & Almon, 2009). To best understand teachers' beliefs about play and the connections of those beliefs to classroom practices regarding play, the review explores the definition of play, historical play perspectives, benefits of play, the role of play in schools, support and barriers to using play, and current play legislation.

Defining Play

Attempts to define play have occurred throughout history, yet consensus on a single definition has yet to occur. Play researchers and theorists have refined the definition of play in various contexts to clarify specific types of interactions and outcomes that honor the nuanced nature and complexity of play, yet defining play has been a difficult endeavor for both researchers and practitioners (Brown, 2009; Zosh et al., 2018). Prominent play researcher, Brian Sutton-Smith (1997), labeled this the "ambiguity of play" (p. 5) due to the differences in types of play, approaches to play, and perceptions of players and observers of play. Researcher Stuart Brown (2009) explains that play is experienced and understood by each individual player, thus trying to define play often removes the variance inherent in engaging in and recognizing play.

Despite this assertion, Brown (2009) and other play researchers have identified criteria that they utilize to qualify play. Play criteria as outlined by Stuart Brown (2009) are: 1.

Apparently purposeless (done for its own sake), 2. Voluntary, 3. Inherent attraction, 4. Freedom from time, 5. Diminished consciousness of self, 6. Improvisational potential, and 7. Continuation desire (p. 17). Peter Gray (2009) contributes the following play criteria to the field: 1 self-chosen and self-directed; 2. intrinsically motivated; 3. structured by mental rules; 4. imaginative; and 5. produced in an active, alert, but non-stressed frame of mind (p. 480). Garvey (1977) asserts that the following are criteria for play:

> (a)Play is spontaneous and voluntary. The extent to which the child still has control over the play situation determines the activity as play. As long as the child can decide whether or not to be involved, and when to switch activities, it continues to be play. (b) Play has no extrinsic goals. The child's motivations are intrinsic and serve no other objectives. (c) Play is pleasurable, enjoyable. The child positively values the activity. (d) Play involves some active engagement on the part of the player (p. 4).

Eberle (2014) states that the definition of play must account for the player's perspectives and that play events cannot be removed from their social, psychological, and historical occurrence. Thus, Eberle (2014) defines play as "an ancient, voluntary, 'emergent' process driven by pleasure that yet strengthens our muscles, instructs our social skills, tempers and deepens our positive emotions, and enables a state of balance that leaves us poised to play some more" (p. 231). Finally, Zosh et al. (2017) offer the following five characteristics when considering play as it relates to learning experiences. Play is

> (1) is experienced as joyful, (2) helps children find meaning in what they are doing or learning, (3) involves active, engaged, minds-on thinking (4) involves iterative thinking (e.g., experimentation, hypothesis testing), and (5) involves social interaction (the most powerful resource available to humans - other people) (Zosh et al., 2017, p.16).

The UNCRC (2013) also offers criteria to consider: (1) is controlled and structured by children themselves, (2) takes place wherever and whenever the opportunity arises, and (3) is non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation and undertaken for its own sake, rather than being a means to an end.

Commonalities between these criteria include enjoyment, pleasure, or internal drive as a quality of play. In addition, most note play is chosen and continued by the player. There are differences between the criteria as well. Garvey (1977) and Gray (2013) account for child-initiated rules, active engagement, and a lack of extrinsic goals within their play. Gray's (2013) criteria specifically emerge from his belief that children are capable of directing their own learning and education without adult intervention. Eberle's (2014) definition is situated socially and culturally while Zosh et al. (2017) consider play in relation to learning. Each set of criteria aims to center the child's experience within play. A clear definition of play is needed to support a more definitive understanding of play. Historical perspectives of play in early childhood denote the evolution of play and the societal perception of the role it has played in children's lives. Examining play theories and perspectives supports this endeavor.

Historical Perspectives of Play

Play has existed for longer than the word used to name it. Research indicates that humans and animals play throughout their lives for a multitude of reasons, including joy, learning, and exercise (Brown, 2009). Over time, philosophers and theorists have suggested various motivations and benefits regarding children's play behaviors that have contributed to current understandings of play. Theories of play attempt to explain the reasons, purposes, practices, and results of play in young children.

Classical Play Theories

Classical theories of play philosophically explain reasons for play and what play means (Saracho, 2021). While these theories are based on outdated beliefs, they are notable as the foundation for modern play theories (Mellou, 1994). Classical play theories include (1) Surplus Energy, (2) Recreational or Relaxation, (3) Practice or Pre-exercise, and (4) Recapitulation.

Surplus Energy. The Surplus Energy theory, theorized by Friedrich Scholler (1759-1805), proposed that after meeting the basic needs for survival, play gets rid of any excess energy (Saracho, 2021). Rather than contributing to development, the theory suggests that an organism's energy could be balanced through play (Mellou, 1994).

Recreational or Relaxation. Moritz Lazarus (1824-1903) theorized that play was dichotomous to work. He believed that play is a recreational activity that helps humans renew the energy depleted during work (Mellou, 1994). This theory is the opposite of the Surplus Energy theory (Saracho, 2021).

Practice or Pre-exercise. Created by Karl Groos (1861-1946), the practice or pre-exercise theory explains why children reproduce adult roles in their play. The theory notes that when children act out adult behaviors, it helps them prepare for their future roles in adulthood (Saracho, 2021). Groos (1901) also developed categories for examining the forms and functions of children's play: experimental play (games with rules), socioeconomic play (rough-and-tumble), and imitative, social, and family games (dramatic play) (Mellou, 1994). Some modern cognitive theories (e.g. Piaget, Bruner, and Sutton-Smith) are supported by this theory (Mellou, 1994).

Recapitulation. The Recapitulation theory was created by G. Stanley Hall (1844-1924). Hall based his theory on the belief that the development of the individual (ontogeny) recapitulates the development of the species (phylogeny) (Mellou, 1994). The theory suggests

that during play, children work through human developmental stages to free themselves from primitive impulses, which drives them toward greater evolutionary abilities (Saracho, 2021).

Modern Play Theories

Modern theories of play are situated in empirical research and aim to explain the role of play in child development (Saracho, 2021). Modern play theories include (1) Psychoanalytic, (2) Arousal modulation, (3) Metacommunicative, and (4) Cognitive.

Psychoanalytic. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and others who followed him theorize that play assists children in emotional regulation. The psychoanalytic sect primarily considers the unconscious feelings in children. Freud believed that children used play to overcome their hidden and negative feelings (Saracho, 2021). Through play, children could reach catharsis by reenacting difficult occurrences to process the feelings associated with the event (Mellou, 1994). His understanding of children's emotional development inspired Erik Erikson (1902-1994) to create a developmental theory with eight stages that lasted from birth to the end of life (Erikson, 1950). Erikson theorized that children work through their feelings of the past, present, and future during play to gain an understanding of themselves and the world around them which aids in personality development (Mellou, 1994; Saracho, 2021).

Arousal modulation. The Arousal Modulation theory was created by Berlyne (1969) and altered by Ellis (1973). This theory is based on the association between stimuli and responses to arousal (Mellou, 1994). During play, children explore their environment and engage with materials which results in varying levels of stimulation. Berlyne (1969) suggested that when children encounter novel materials, they become overstimulated and hyper-aroused which guides them to decrease stimulation by becoming familiar with it (Saracho, 2021). Lack of stimulation leads to hyperarousal, resulting in boredom and a need to seek stimulation (called 'diverse

exploration') (Mellou, 1994). Ellis (1973) offers an alternative to Berlyne wherein play can expand both arousal and stimulation levels by gaining sensory input and searching for multiple sources of information that increase stimulation (Saracho, 2021). According to arousal theory, play is linked with exploration and the regulation of arousal motivation (Mellou, 1994).

Metacommunicative. Bateson (1955) theorizes that during play children learn to operate at two levels at the same time: 1. Make believe meaning of the objects and actions with play, and 2. Real identities and life meanings of the people, objects, and actions involved in play (Mellou, 1994). While at play, children learn about learning by interpreting reality through imagined scenarios. Thus, fantasy play has a role in cognitive development and assists children in discerning play from reality (Mellou, 1994). Bateson's theory also states that children's situations and environments shift play scripts which develop based on children's cultural experiences (Saracho, 2021).

Cognitive. Connections between play and cognitive development have been noted by multiple theorists including (1) Jean Piaget, (2) Lev Vygotsky, (3) Jerome Bruner, and (4) Brian Sutton-Smith.

Jean Piaget. Piaget (1896-1980) observed children constructing multiple types of knowledge through active participation, mentally and physically, with their environment. Piagetian theory contends that children build cognitive, moral, and social knowledge during play (Mellou, 1994; Waite-Stupiansky, 2017). Piaget's theory of cognitive development details how children develop mental structures as they age. Through assimilation (merging information from experiences into existing mental structures) and accommodation (modification of existing mental structures by comparing new and old information) children gain knowledge (Saracho, 2021). Children's cognitive structures change when they adapt to their environment (through

assimilation and accommodation of information) and children reach mental equilibrium (Mellou, 1994). During play, children learn through trial and error, observation, and active participation in their environment (Wait-Stupiansky, 2017). Piagetian theory explains that play occurs at children's developmental level and follows three consecutive stages of play: (1) sensory-motor play, (2) symbolic play, and (3) games with rules (Saracho, 2021). As children gain knowledge and experience, they progress through the stages of play, and the actions taken in previous stages decrease in frequency.

Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1896-1934) theorized that children's cognitive development manifests during play in the social context of the child. Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory posits play as a method for satisfying unmet needs, which change as children mature. During symbolic (dramatic) play, children engage their imagination to satisfy their unmet needs (Nell et al., 2013), which leads them to develop symbolic and abstract thought (Mellou, 1994; Saracho, 2021). Symbolic play allows children to interpret objects, assign meanings to them, and communicate their understandings without the use of complex language (Nell et al., 2013). This supports the development of sophisticated language skills.

Vygotsky's theory is both social and cultural. Learning is contextualized through interactions with peers, adults, the environment, and the culture in which the child resides (Bodrova & Leong, 2017). While playing, children interact and develop together during interactions within a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which explains processes and skills that children are developing alongside a more knowledgeable other (Bodrova & Leong, 2017). The ZPD is the space between what children are capable of learning through independent problem-solving and the potential of learning with adult guidance or with a more knowledgeable peer (Vygotsky, 1978). As children develop and their play becomes more complex, children

must negotiate their individual needs alongside the needs of their peers to remain in play (Nell et al., 2013). According to Vygotsky, children are bound by rules imposed by themselves and their peers (Vygotsky, 1967). Thus, suppression of impulses and delayed gratification leads to gains in self-regulation (Nell et al., 2013).

Jerome Bruner. Bruner (1915-2016) theorized that children learned to become flexible and engage in problem-solving by obtaining information about their experience and environment and testing behaviors while playing (Saracho, 2021). As a result, novel behavioral combinations emerge and can be used later as needed to solve problems or find creative solutions (Mellou, 1994). Children also increase their ability for social communication during play by allowing children to practice social behaviors without the pressure of an end goal (Saracho, 2021). Both Bruner and Sutton-Smith believed that play was preparation for the future use of skills in life (Mellou, 1994; Saracho 2021).

Brian Sutton-Smith. Brian Sutton-Smith's (1924-2015) play theories explain the cultural significance of play in human life (Saracho, 2021). Sutton-Smith (1967) noted that children engaged in symbolic substitution with objects, pretending that they are something else, which results in divergent thinking abilities, novel associations with objects and their meanings, and increases in the expression of ideas. During play, creativity, flexibility, adaptability, and problem-solving are developed (Mellou, 1994). Later in his life, Sutton-Smith (1997) explained that play supports children in survival and living a positive life due to the increases in adaptive behavior and personal meaning created while playing (Nell et al., 2013). His theories have contributed to ongoing research and theory about the nature of play.

Other Important Theorists

While the acceptance of play in society globally has surged and waned over the last several centuries (Saracho, 2021), support for play in early childhood persists. Several other significant early childhood theorists supported play in and out of the classroom, and their ideas have influenced current ideologies regarding play.

Fredrich Froebel. In the mid-1800s, Fredrich Frobel (1782-1852), called the father of kindergarten, created special learning materials that encouraged children's hands-on play, spatial knowledge, and a love for the outdoors (Frost & Sutterby, 2017). Froebel believed that the inner world of children was revealed outwardly during play. Adults who engaged in play with children had opportunities to bond with them and understand what children know and need to know (Nell et al., 2013). Frobel believed in using play as a method of education and created a curriculum around the manipulation of objects, singing songs, and playing games to promote learning (Saracho, 2021). His methods influenced later early childhood education models where play is included in schools.

Maria Montessori. Montessori (1870-1952) created play materials, offered them to young children, observed them in use, and utilized the results to help teach children about specific educational concepts and the objects they were manipulating (Saracho, 2021). Tenants of Maria Montessori's educational philosophy such as self-direction, independence, collaboration, and active learning support children's development during playing (Povel, 2017).

John Dewey. In the early 1900s, John Dewey (1895-1952) suggested that children's play should be open-ended and educative. He believed that children's life experiences should be the basis of their education (Saracho, 2021). Dewey noted children recreating their lived experiences and believed that mental and moral growth resulted from play in intentional environments

created by teachers (Dewey, 1916). Dewey's ideas were foundational in advancing the progressive education movement and the role of play in learning (Saracho, 2021).

Stuart Brown. Brown (1933-present) explains the importance of play in learning, creativity, and survival. Brown asserts that the drive to play is both biological and inherent in young children (Brown, 2009). Research Brown conducted regarding the neuroscience of brain development indicates that play results in the integration of divergent parts of the brain and the creation of complex synaptic connections (Nell et al., 2013). Other theorists and researchers' work is supported by Brown, wherein play leads to problem-solving and creativity ability during exploration during play. Brown takes this idea further, indicating that the creation of art and culture, communication, and connection are biologically oriented and emerge during play (Brown, 2009). Research regarding play, including Brown's, indicates that there are a multitude of developmental benefits for children.

Benefits of Play in the Classroom

Classical and modern play theories are used to examine the function of play as it relates to the development of learning for young children. Research indicates that play has a significant role in developing the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development of children (Brown, 2009; NAEYC, 2020). Students' knowledge in cognitive content areas, as well as critical thinking and problem-solving, are developed during play.

Math and Science Skills

Math and science learning concepts such as spatial recognition, logic, reasoning, number sense, and hypothesizing are accessible through play in elementary school classrooms. Research indicates that playful activities such as building with blocks, playing math games, and integrating mathematical skills into play increase mathematical abilities (Nath & Szucs, 2014; Stipek, 2017;

Trawick-Smith et al., 2017). In their study, Trawick-Smith et al., (2017) administered the Tools for Early Assessment of Mathematics instrument at the onset (in the fall) and conclusion (in the spring) of the study to measure conceptual mathematical knowledge. Next, they video-recorded 41 preschoolers during block play to determine the relationship between block-building complexity and math abilities. Researchers found that three and four-year-old children with higher mathematical concepts created more elaborate block structures, especially in conjunction with peers, during play (Trawick-Smith et al., 2017). They conclude that free time in block play that allows for complexity in building has a positive impact on later mathematical learning and is supported by social interactions (Trawick-Smith et al., 2017).

Stipek (2017) observed preschool teachers using playful learning during mathematics lessons which included multiple components of the math curriculum. Students in the lesson were enthusiastically engaged in playing math games which reflected standards-based math teaching. Students practiced adding, categorizing, turn-taking, counting, and communicating simultaneously during each of the math games described (Stipek, 2017). During each game described, children were active and communicating with peers. Separating these skills would not serve students in their holistic development, thus reinforcing the positive outcomes from play on academic skill development.

Language and Literacy

Language, vocabulary, writing, reading, and social development are enhanced through various forms of play at school and set the foundation for language development as children grow (Mielonen & Paterson, 2009; NAEYC, 2020; Cavanaugh et al., 2017; Grindheim, 2020; Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2020). The development of language and literacy skills can occur during play through scaffolded interactions with peers and teachers (Saracho, 2004). Play offers

a specific social situation where language development can flourish naturally because children are driven towards interacting with peers and their environment. Oral language, complex cognitive abilities, and reading and writing skills are developed through authentic interactions during play (Cavanaugh et al., 2017; Mielonen & Paterson, 2009; Saracho, 2021).

Grindheim (2020) found that preschool children problem-solve during imaginative play, using oral language they had previously learned to interpret their real-world problems in their play scenarios. In their video observations, researchers noted children using language to explore friendship, danger, and inclusion in their peer community. Researchers assert that imaginative play offers benefits for linguistic and social development for children (Grindheim, 2020).

Cavanaugh et al. (2017) conducted a study with two kindergarten classrooms at two different public schools. Over the course of the six-week study, the children in each class were separated into two groups and assigned to the control or experimental group and given a pretest. The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) standardized test was used for standardization. For fifteen minutes a day, children participated in a literacy intervention group with either play-based direction or teacher-directed tasks. Data also included teachers recorded observations and data regarding the use of letter sounds in journal writing. After three weeks, the groups switched and were given a midpoint test. After the six weeks, a post-test was administered to determine the effect of focused guided play on literacy skills. After three weeks of the intervention, the DIBELS test revealed a statistically significant advantage for students in the experimental condition with a medium effect size. The data collected by teachers indicated gains for students in “storytelling skills, application of new vocabulary, and recurring practice of phonemic and phonics learning through the invented games and by continued application during free time” (Cavanaugh et al., 2017, p. 842).

Developmental Competencies

Other developmental areas such as social-emotional (Brown et al., 2020; McInnes & Birdsey, 2014; Newman et al., 1996; Walsh et al., 2010; Weisberg et al., 2013), gross and fine motor (Gümüşdağ, 2019; Sutapa, 2021), executive function (Berk et al., 2006; Berk & Meyers, 2013; Cavanaugh et al., 2017; Fleer et al., 2017), and creativity (Howard-Jones et al., 2002: Tsai, 2012) also result from play-based learning. All developmental areas are vitally important for success in school and lifelong well-being (Cavanaugh et al, 2017; Jones et al., 2015). Environments that support developmentally appropriate learning allow children to utilize their imaginations to develop realistic thinking, explore, theorize, experiment, and ask questions (Nilsson et al., 2018).

During guided play in Cavanaugh's (2017) study, after the six-week study, kindergarten children displayed improved executive functioning and social skills after practicing negation and communication during literacy play. Teachers noted higher levels of motivation from students as a result of their ongoing ability to be creative and feelings of accomplishment in their creations (Cavanaugh et al, 2017). In Ireland, researchers desired to determine the effectiveness of a new play-based curriculum and its effectiveness on nine key quality indicators: "motivation, concentration, confidence, independence, physical well-being, multiple skill acquisition, higher-order thinking skills, social interaction, and respect" (Cavanaugh et al, 2017, p. 57). Researchers administered the Quality Learning Instrument to children in their Year 1 (four to five years old) and Year 2 (five to six years old) classes (Walsh et al., 2010). The assessment indicated that all classrooms engaged in the play-based learning program scored higher than control classrooms that were not implementing play-based learning. Play-based learning offers holistic developmental opportunities for young children. Integrating cognitive, emotional, social, and

linguistic skills during playful learning experiences prepares students for more challenging academic content (NCSEAD, 2019).

Developmental learning is typically included in conversations about educating preschool and kindergarten students but becomes scarce for grades 1-3. Riley and Jones (2010) point to the need for developmental competencies such as choice-making, communication, cooperation, and problem-solving to continue during the primary years since children are still growing and developing skills necessary for life. This thinking is congruent with recommendations made by the NAEYC (2020) for play to support the holistic development of all early childhood students.

Play Deprivation and Child Well-being

The pressures of academic rigor on student well-being are noteworthy. Educators have cited negative student behaviors in the absence of play-based practices in early childhood classrooms (Barblett et al., 2016; Weisberg et al., 2013). Children lacked joy, motivation, and engagement, which deeply concerned the teachers who felt that early learning environments should include these characteristics (Barblett et al., 2016). Researcher Peter Gray (2011) cites evidence for decreases in happiness, ability to maintain self-control, ability to control emotions, and increased social isolation in children in the wake of play deprivation.

Access to play is necessary to ensure the well-being of young children. Play creates a safe and accessible avenue for children to engage in self-regulatory behaviors needed for development and learning throughout their lives (Riley & Jones, 2010). During play, children engage with their peers, developing their social competence. In Jones et al.'s (2015) longitudinal study, researchers compared the social competence of kindergartners with their success and well-being 13 to 19 years later. Those who had demonstrated positive prosocial skills were more likely to graduate high school, be employed, and obtain a degree and were less likely to

experience difficulties in adulthood such as incarceration and substance abuse (Jones et al., 2015). For students to be successful in academic tasks in upper elementary and beyond, they must be given opportunities to develop necessary developmental skills during the early years (Costantino-Lane, 2019).

Conversely, teachers who utilized play-based practices to meet students at their developmental level observed joy, engagement, and activeness in their learning (Kobylak & Kalyn, 2017; Nilsson et al., 2018). Maintaining agency during play affirmed students' learning capacity and increased their confidence in the facilitation of further exploration of concepts (Kobylak & Kalyn, 2017).

The Role of Play in Schools

Early childhood professionals assert that play should be a significant part of a young child's day (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Through play, children practice social, emotional, cognitive, language, regulatory, and motor skills during interactions with materials, peers, and educators (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC, 2020). As an essential approach to learning for young children, play occurs in innumerable ways and can take on many forms that instigate creativity, human development, inquiry, and communication (Brown, 2009; NAEYC, 2020; Saracho, 2021; Sutton-Smith, 1997). For learning to occur during play, children must maintain agency, meaning they have a significant role in decision-making which leads to the development of problem-solving skills, and greater success in executive functioning (Zosh et al., 2017).

Toub et al. (2016) synthesize and expand upon previous research in the field to explain that one of these four things can occur during play for a meaningful learning experience to occur: "(1) individuals take an **active** role in the learning environment, (2) they are **engaged**, (3) information is **meaningful**, and (4) learners **interact** in a social context" (p. 125), offering a

point of departure to examine play and the role it plays in learning. However, educators and researchers have struggled to come to an accord on the exact function of play in classroom settings and directives for optimal integration.

The Decline of Play

Research regarding the utilization of play within kindergarten and first-grade classrooms shows a decline in play and offerings of art, dramatic play, science, music, and sand and water table centers since the late 1990s and an increased focus on literacy and mathematics instruction centering around adult-directed teaching (Miller and Almon, 2009; Bassok et al, 2016). Costantino-Lane (2019) interviewed veteran teachers from California who had 18 to 34 years of teaching experience and had taught in both developmental and academic kindergartens. Their unique perspectives on how kindergarten had changed over the years provided insights into the drastic changes that have occurred in formal schooling. Her findings were consistent with Bassok et al. (2016) who compared kindergarten classrooms from 1998 to 2010 using a dataset from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study. Their comparisons revealed that students in 2010 spent a significant amount of time in teacher-directed tasks associated with uniform assessments rather than in play or creative activities. This was a drastic change from the data gathered in 1998 (Bassok et al., 2016). Kindergarten teachers in Costantino-Lane's (2019) study felt that this didactic approach to learning forced them to limit or remove play-based learning opportunities from their classrooms to conform to curriculum regulations and expectations placed on them by administrators.

Due to the immense pressure to demonstrate academic achievement, teachers must work harder to ensure their students are prepared for the next grade level. Brown et al. (2020) video-recorded a classroom in Texas that exemplified a typical kindergarten day. In focus group

interviews, study participants compared their own teaching practices to the video to explain their understanding of teaching practices. Teachers reported feeling concerned that social and emotional development were no longer prioritized over academic development. One teacher in the study lamented feeling like a "loser teacher" (Brown et al., 2020, p. 9) in her district if she was not readying students academically for first grade throughout the kindergarten year despite her own beliefs regarding developmentally appropriate practice for young children. The pressures of academic achievement continue to be pushed down in early childhood classrooms where standardized learning takes precedence over students' developmental needs.

Play-Based Learning: Play on a Spectrum

Different types of play can meet multiple goals such as: providing a pleasurable activity for children, creating time for social interactions, and offering natural opportunities for children to learn through inquiry and action (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Nilsson et al, 2018; Zosh et al., 2018). Pyle and Danniels (2017) suggest the adoption of a learning continuum wherein teachers have varied levels of involvement and direction in children's play. Considering play on a continuum, rather than focusing on one specific type of play, allows multiple types of play to occur simultaneously to satisfy different learning objectives based on student needs or interests.

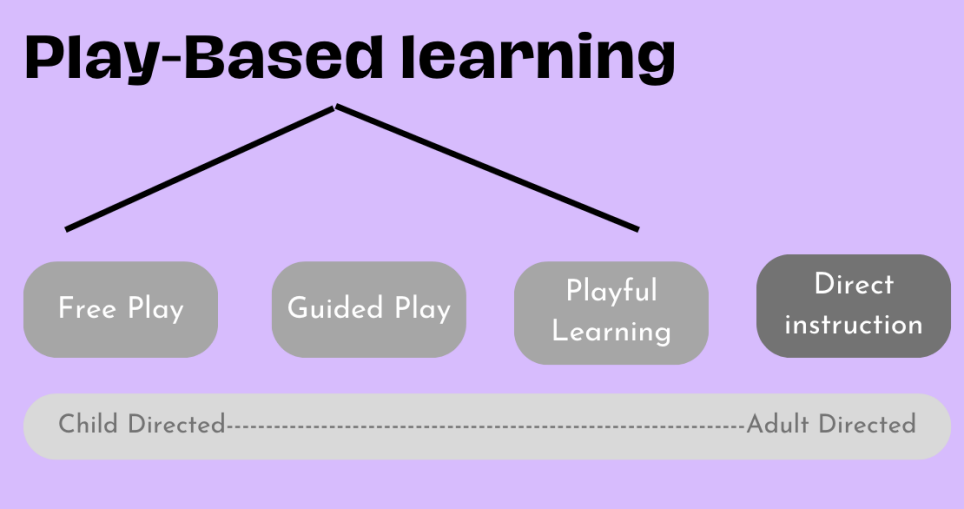
Zosh et al. (2018) also recommend a more "nuanced conceptualization" of play to broaden the various definitions teachers use to describe the relationship between play and learning. They assert that multidimensional definitions of play allow researchers and practitioners to connect certain types of play to specific educational and developmental outcomes (Zosh et al., 2018). Since different forms of play are better suited to support learning in various developmental areas, they can therefore be applied in the form that will serve students best. To increase the role of play in schools, researchers suggest broadening the conceptual understanding

of play to allow teachers to consider varying levels of adult and child initiation and direction for learning within play situations (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Zosh et al., 2018).

Play-based learning can occur in a variety of ways including (1) free play, (2) guided play, and (3) playful learning all of which I situate under the umbrella of play-based learning. (See Figure 1). For the purpose of this research, the definition of play-based learning cited in the *PTLA* will be used. Play-based learning is "any learning activities that are performed by a child for self-amusement that have behavioral, social and psychomotor rewards. Play-based learning shall also mean activities that are child-directed, joyful and spontaneous whereby the rewards come from within the individual child" (Oklahoma Play to Learn Act, 2021, p. 2).

Figure 1

Play-Based Learning Continuum



Free Play in the Classroom

During free play, children choose their activity, their level of engagement, and their interactions with other players and materials. Free play includes little to no adult involvement or guidance, has no goal or outcome expectation, and is child-initiated and directed (Gray, 2013). This type of play is most typically associated with definitions of play. Free play in the classroom

supports children by allowing them to engage freely in a non-stressed frame of mind, participate autonomously, and extend concepts they are learning at their own pace (Brown, 2009; Toub et al.,2016). Free play includes social, emotional, cognitive, and self-regulatory development (Hassinger-Das et al., 2017; Weisberg et al., 2013) and involves mixing fantasy with reality simultaneously (Brown, 2009; Grindheim, 2020). Because it is naturally driven by children, free play is generally enjoyable and desired.

Sutton-Smith (1997) asserts that the enjoyment of engaging in play can be reason enough for children to have space for free play. However, in the current educational climate, offering activities with no academic goal may not be feasible. In this outcome-oriented environment, utilizing play in schools requires reinforcement from academic and developmental arenas. Meaningful learning can occur during child-driven free play (Gray, 2013), however, some researchers and teachers acknowledge pressures for teacher directives to take place to support children in learning specific goal-oriented academic concepts and skills in schools (Costantino-Lane, 2019; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Toub et al., 2016). Considering this assertion, other types of play with greater teacher direction may be more widely accepted in classrooms.

Guided Play in the Classroom

During guided play, children maintain the locus of control and actively engage in the environment (like free play) while an adult scaffolds specific learning by making suggestions about the play, posing open-ended questions, and co-playing with children (Toub et al., 2016; Weisberg et al., 2013; Zosh et al., 2018). The adult structures the activity by designing the play environment with a learning goal in mind and at times initiates the play (Zosh et al., 2018). Children then direct the play based on their own individual interests and motivations. Guided play lays the groundwork for discovery approaches to learning, enhanced by meaningful adult

feedback at appropriate times (Hassinger-Das, et al. 2017). Research suggests that guided play is a successful way to facilitate new learning because students retain autonomy while teachers guide and support them to reach intended learning goals (Toub et al., 2016; Zosh et al., 2018).

Playful learning

Playful learning has multiple definitions given by researchers in the field that focus more readily on the instrumentality of play in service of learning goals. Zosh et al. (2018) characterize it as any type of learning that retains joyful, playful engagement and can capitalize on children's intrinsic motivation toward the attainment of academic knowledge. Pyle and Danniels (2017) offer a similar concept, where activities support targeted academic skills set by a teacher and are playful and engaging for the children. Both sets of researchers situate this type of learning closer to the definition of direct instruction. Though some student direction remains, the teacher retains the locus of control.

Other types of playful learning include *Game Play,* rule-based play with predetermined outcomes (Riley & Jones, 2010), and *Inquiry play,* which is driven by the interests and motivations of students and in response to activities initiated by children in the classroom (Kobylak & Kalyn, 2017; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). To best meet the needs of students, all types of play-based learning should be considered within early childhood classrooms.

Implementation of Play in the Primary Grades

Implementation of play-based practices within primary grades is sparsely reported in research studies. While some articles offer recommendations for utilizing play (see Riley & Jones, 2010; Stone, 1995), few study the impact of such activities on student development and learning in first, second, and third grade. Included in this section of the review are primarily

practitioner articles demonstrating play in the context of learning within primary classrooms. One research article is also included.

Primary Grade Play Examples. Play allows primary-grade children to engage in meaningful, hands-on, real-world applicable experiences to learn academic content and developmental skills (Cooper & Denver, 2001; Jarrett, 1997; Kobylak & Kalyn, 2017; Peterson, 2015). When play is personally meaningful, children remain engaged in learning. Children's inquiry and experimentation also lead to deepened learning through subject integration during play (Kobylak & Kalyn, 2017; Wohlwend & Peppler, 2015). The application of play in primary classrooms can be achieved through thoughtful planning using intentional materials.

Children who are curious about a concept can easily access new information through play by interacting with others and their environment. Using inquiry-based learning, teachers can plan relevant content coverage based on students' interests (Kobylak & Kalyn, 2017; Ranz-Smith, 2007). Inquiry units offer holistic learning by centralizing a topic of study and applying multiple subject areas to the topic. In a teacher action research study, students in a first-grade class became interested in the moon. Their teacher created a play-based, emergent, inquiry unit that had ample play opportunities to support the exploration of outer space (Kobylak & Kalyn, 2017). During the unit, students designed a space station to simulate life in space, wrote non-fiction texts to demonstrate their research, and tracked the moon cycle on the calendar. Vocabulary, writing, counting, and storytelling were addressed through play within their unit (Kobylak & Kalyn, 2017). Data was derived from teacher observations and reflections, student work samples, and photo documentation. When the study concluded, the teacher noted higher levels of creativity and problem-solving, greater enthusiasm for learning, and higher-quality documentation of their own learning from students all as a result of the play-based learning that

took place (Kobylak & Kalyn, 2017). Inquiry topics naturally lead to exploration and active participation from students which can be achieved through play in primary classrooms.

Learning that is personally meaningful to students results in higher levels of engagement and positive developmental outcomes (Cooney et al., 2000; Wohlwend & Peppler, 2015). Another play-based learning experience in the primary grades occurred using Playshops, "a curricular model... developed to encourage playful and collaborative learning as well as the rigorous learning that the Common Core standards hope to inspire" that combine literacy, arts, technology, and sciences (Wohlwend & Peppler, 2015, p. 23). Playshops were created by researchers to meet the needs of individual elementary children in preschool and the primary grades by combining student interests, content-based learning, and creativity (Wohlwend & Peppler, 2015).

In one example, students in a combined K-1 classroom used storytelling to create films collaboratively with their peers. To create their scenes, children created their own toys out of art materials, utilized language skills to write their stories, and engaged in media play by creating their final recorded film to tell their story (Wohlwend & Buchholz, 2014). This opportunity for multimodal storytelling helped develop students' creativity, problem-solving, and social skills (Wohlwend & Buchholz, 2014). Researchers used the student-created videos in addition to their own observations to assess student learning in comparison with the pre-Playshop implementation. Through their storytelling, researchers noted students' abilities for negation over roles within the project, cooperation, collaboration, multiple modes of meaning conveyed through prop creation, and greater storytelling abilities as a result of using the Playshop model (Wohlwend & Buchholz, 2014).

Dramatic play is a naturally child-driven way to relate subject-specific knowledge to students. Also titled sociodramatic play (Cooper & Denver, 2001), children engage in make-believe play and use their imaginations as they learn through interactions with peers and materials. In first-grade classrooms, children experienced learning through subject integration at dramatic play centers. In Mrs. Cooper's first-grade classroom, students were invited to create play environments based on their interests using teacher-curated prop boxes (Cooper & Denver, 2001). Every child assumed a role in designing each play environment using props from the box and materials in the classroom. To create a card shop, students utilized writing, reading, and mathematical skills while engaging in collaboration with peers, conversation, and problem-solving (Cooper & Denver, 2001). Once the shop was complete, the students engaged in play by purchasing cards as customers and selling cards as merchants. This play context provided ample opportunities to address the curriculum and first-grade standards through real-world experiences that were meaningful to the children (Cooper & Denver, 2001).

In another first-grade classroom, dramatic play was used to facilitate literacy development through an open-ended writing context based on a real-world scenario (Peterson, 2015). In this classroom, first-grade students became employees of a sign-making company wherein they created signs for things around their classroom environment. The children retained agency in their writing which resulted in motivation to continue creating signs through their play (Peterson, 2015). Authenticity was inherent in the signs produced, evidenced by the personally important concepts children expressed through their sign-making. Dramatic play can be utilized in formal writing contexts, or as an independent role-play center where writing is included within a larger play situation (Peterson, 2015).

Other subject areas can likewise be incorporated into dramatic play to facilitate engaging learning opportunities for students. Jarrett (1997) suggests that math and science skill development can occur through children's creativity and experimentation in dramatic play centers. In her article, she gives examples of centers that could be integrated into any elementary school classroom: a doctor's office, a zoo, a classroom museum, a fix-it/tinkering shop, post office, etc. The centers offer opportunities for students to "do math problems, invent, experiment, write with a purpose, and try adult career roles" (Jarrett, 1997, p.13). In her classroom, she noted high levels of engagement and motivation from her students while at learning centers (Jarrett, 1997). Dramatic play scenarios inspire imaginative thinking and practical application to student learning.

In Nath and Szucs' (2014) study, researchers recorded 7-year-old children in the UK using Legos to create complex structures. The study aimed to study the relationship between Lego construction ability and math performance while testing visuospatial memory as a mediator. Researchers utilized the Automated Working Memory Assessment-1 and Lego construction tasks created by Miles Richardson. Children were asked to create structures based on photo card representations. Research revealed that children's ability to construct using 3-D objects was correlated with the development of their visuospatial memory and indicated growth in children's mathematical abilities through the research task (Nath & Szucs, 2014). The skills demonstrated were not correlated with verbal memory, meaning that children had to rely on complex spatial knowledge to construct with Legos. The results indicated that long-term mathematical development is involved with visuospatial processing and thus the use of Legos (and other manipulatives) for construction play improves mathematical abilities (Nath & Szucs,

2014). Play-based learning can improve student learning in primary grades, yet barriers to implementation persist.

Teachers' Beliefs about Play and Learning

Teacher beliefs about the implementation of play are complex and interwoven throughout their personal and professional perspectives. Play pedagogy is rooted in theoretical beliefs that children develop cognitive, emotional, physical, and social skills through interacting with their environment and peers (Ranz-Smith, 2007). However, if play is not viewed as an avenue to learn, it is often recognized only as something children do for fun once educational time has ended. Educators' beliefs about the relationship between play and learning vary with some educators reinforcing the play-learning dichotomy and others harmoniously integrating the two in their classrooms.

Problematizing the Play-Learning Dichotomy

Enacting play in school settings is problematized as a result of the ideological dichotomization of play and learning (Nilsson et al, 2018; Toub et al., 2016). Due to the pressures of standardization and expectations of academic performance, young children spend a significant portion of their day engaged in didactic tasks rather than in exploration and interaction with peers and materials (Miller & Almon, 2009). For many stakeholders, the perceived inability to directly measure students' academic success presents a major concern for integrating play in schools. Teachers are tasked with ensuring every student meets the same set of learning goals simultaneously based on their grade level standards, yet some administrators, parents, and other educators do not believe play provides an adequate avenue for learning (Walsh et al., 2010; McInnes & Birdsey, 2014; Ranz-Smith, 2007). The resultant dichotomization of play and learning has resulted in fewer educators implementing play in their classrooms.

Viewing play as separate from learning ignores the developmentally appropriate methods inherent in learning through play and perpetuates diminishing play practices for young learners (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Curriculum and learning standards set by states or school districts espouse equality and homogeneity of learning, the result of which is a "one size fits all" model of education. As the system of education becomes further standardized by those who are not directly working with children, the needs of the children are left unaccounted for (Giroux, 1985). Thus, the inclusion of any activity, including play, in a classroom that does not result in quantifiable learning outcomes has been viewed as non-educational. Teachers are grappling with inconsistencies in educational discourse about play and learning which has resulted in reliance on highly structured learning situations, even if educators believe that play and learning are connected (Biesta et al., 2014; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016).

Teacher Reinforced Dichotomy. Difficulties with implementation in a classroom are abundant when no common understanding exists within the field (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Martlew et al., 2011; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Investigations into teachers' definitions and implementation of play pedagogy in their classrooms revealed inconsistencies between what teachers described as play and what they enacted throughout the school day (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Miller and Almon, 2009). While teachers self-report personal beliefs of the positive correlation between play and learning, research indicates that these beliefs do not necessarily lead to the use of play-based practices (Cooney et al., 2000; Feliciano & Dy, 2021; Newman et al., 1996; Ranz-Smith, 2007). Teachers feel pressure to reach all curricular objectives expected by their school districts. As a result, they rely on more didactic teaching over implementing play-based learning (Jay & Knaus, 2018; Ranz-Smith, 2007). To better understand the types of play

available to students in a classroom, it is imperative to examine the current perceptions of teachers in the early childhood field.

The NAEYC (2020) advocates for the holistic development of students' growth at school; however, many teachers perceive cognitive and academic growth as the primary goal of schooling. Pyle and Danniels (2017) interviewed fifteen full-day kindergarten teachers regarding their beliefs about play and six of the fifteen shared similar ideologies, positioning play as developmentally appropriate for children with positive effects on students' social growth but felt play was dichotomous to learning (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). The teachers conceptualized play as child-centered and child-directed and offered it during free time. Conversely, cognitive or academic-based learning was correlated only with activities that were teacher-directed/facilitated and therefore could not occur within play (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

Similarly, Fesseha and Pyle (2016) surveyed 69 full-day kindergarten teachers in Ontario and 41% percent of respondents reported similar ideologies, wherein play was conceived as a way for students to develop social and personal skills, but not academic knowledge. This dichotomization of play and learning is a familiar concept to early childhood educators, despite the necessity to offer activities that address developmental skills during their early education (NAEYC, 2020). While teachers in both studies who ideologically maintain this dichotomization of play and learning are in the minority of the overall participants, their perceptions affect the students in their classrooms through the activities and learning opportunities offered in their classrooms.

In Martlew et al.'s (2011) study, six primary 1 teachers in Scotland (equivalent to kindergarten in the US) were interviewed to understand their perspectives regarding a shift to a more active, engaged pedagogy. Researchers also conducted systematic and targeted

observations of the teachers and children to compare teacher-reported data to classroom practices. Teachers described personal support for and utilization of play-based practices to educate students, but primarily teacher-directed learning activities and classroom management practices occurred during researcher observations when playtime was supposedly occurring (Martlew et al., 2011).

This misalignment between beliefs and practices is common within the field as educators grapple with foundational beliefs about play and expectations for student achievement (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Martlew et al., 2011). Altering classroom practices requires educators to consider the connections between their beliefs and practices where play and learning converge. In a meta-synthesis of 62 studies, Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) evaluated only studies that contained educators' self-reported understanding of play-based learning. This extensive overview of research revealed a multitude of conceptualizations about the connection between play and learning, in addition to variations in general pedagogical adoption by educators (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). With so many variations in concept and action, approaching implementation is a complicated endeavor.

Teachers' Positive Play-Learning Concepts. Teachers who were more practiced in utilizing play in their classrooms felt confident in offering many different types of learning experiences with varying levels of teacher involvement (McInnes et al., 2011). In a comparison of two preschool classrooms, teachers who worked with 3-5-year-olds offered multiple avenues for playful learning in their classrooms based on their beliefs regarding play. Researchers gathered data through observations and semi-structured interviews. In the classrooms where teachers were more confident about the play-based learning they offered, teachers perceived better student learning outcomes through play than through direct instruction in their classrooms

(McInnes et al., 2011). In Fesseha & Pyle's (2016) study most teachers (59%) believed that social and academic development occurred concurrently during play. Teachers observed expressions of children's natural inclination to interact and explore during play which led them to approach learning concepts without overt teacher reinforcement. These holistic, child-centered approaches to learning helped teachers feel capable of differentiating classroom activities to meet the needs of all students through the integration of content knowledge (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). Kobylak and Kalyn (2017) experienced similar findings in their teacher-action research in a first-grade classroom in a Canadian elementary school. After transitioning from a kindergarten teaching position to a first-grade classroom, the educator in the study discovered an apparent lack of play in the curricular materials. Using a classroom inquiry project, the curriculum was reconceptualized and grounded in exploration which gave students the opportunity to follow their interests through play. At the culmination of the inquiry, the researchers concluded that students were naturally more interested in engaging with academic content that was playful and socially engaging as opposed to teacher-directed work that was prescribed (Kobylak & Kalyn, 2017).

Educators also identified other functions of play that were beneficial for students such as energy stimulation and release, a benefit not afforded to them during seat-based work (Feliciano & Dy, 2021; McInnes & Birdsey, 2014). Greater engagement in creative work, such as art and science, was likewise noted during play (Feliciano & Dy, 2021; Wohlwend & Peppler, 2015). Educators who perceived their students to be capable learners through play became more comfortable increasing the play offered to their students.

Concerns of Standards on Play-Based Learning

Approaching play with a standards-based mindset proliferates in a variety of ways in different classrooms. Some veteran kindergarten educators in California felt empowered by mandated standards (Costantino-Lane, 2019). They reported in their interviews that the standards provided a helpful outline for what students needed to know and offered a framework to integrate playful opportunities driven by student's interests into their teaching (Costantino-Lane, 2019). However, other teachers expressed concern for the enhancement of academic skills, especially literacy and numeracy, through play (Walsh et al., 2010; Ranz-Smith, 2007). Heavy focus on academic development in literacy and math ignores the needs of the whole child and focuses narrowly on cognitive growth in limited areas.

Many teachers do not feel they are allowed to incorporate any activity that cannot be tested or rationalized (McInnes & Birdsey, 2014). Teachers who participated in focus group interviews in Brown's (2020) study stated that they felt disappointed about the effects of increased focus on academic proficiency and standards (Brown et al., 2020). Their reflections also included discouragement in their district to draw, use dramatic play, or offer any activity that didn't directly tie to an academic expectation or standard (Brown et al., 2020). Play is declining because it is not regarded as a practice through which accountability for student growth can be measured by teachers uniformly.

Teachers Assessment of Learning Through Play

Assessments are intended to indicate what a child knows or needs to know. Teachers are pressured to report students' academic growth from assessments based on declarative knowledge (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). However, some formative assessments consume important classroom time that teachers might otherwise use to facilitate play without providing holistic data about the child (Pyle & DeLuca, 2017). Pyle and DeLuca (2017) surveyed 67 kindergarten teachers and

conducted interviews and observations with 10 additional teachers to explore the role of assessment during play. 83% of survey participants indicated that academic skills could be assessed during play despite only 58% of participants answering that academic learning was the purpose of play. The researchers connect this discrepancy in the data to the difficulty teachers face in justifying play in academic settings (Pyle & & DeLuca, 2017). Half of the teachers in this study believe that play offers opportunities to assess social and academic skills, yet many teachers reported that assessment during play was challenging. Some teachers felt that play did not offer the same opportunities for assessment that traditional uniform assessments had (Pyle & DeLuca, 2017). However, the teachers who utilized authentic assessment during play such as anecdotal notes, photos, observations, and checklists were capable of measuring student growth in both developmental and academic areas during play (Pyle & DeLuca, 2017).

Of the ten teachers who were interviewed and observed by researchers, nine removed children from play periods to conduct formal assessments of academic content while also integrating assessments during play periods. The tenth teacher exclusively assessed children's social and academic learning during play (Pyle & DeLuca, 2017). Visual documentation such as drawings produced by children and photographs of them in class were powerful tools teachers utilized to assess student learning. When teachers presented children with their previous work and facilitated a discussion about their thinking, they felt it led to deeper skill processing and reflection from the children (Pyle & DeLuca, 2017).

Assessments that measure only cognitive skills do not provide a holistic picture of each child's full development or allow children to take an active role in their own growth measurement. Teachers who committed to the documentation of learning through authentic assessment methods during play such as journaling, observing, taking photographs, collecting

work samples, conversations, and field notes, discovered their approaches to student learning to be more responsive to student's needs and interests than traditional uniform assessments (Kobylak & Kalyn, 2017; Martlew et al., 2011; Pyle & DeLuca, 2017). These assessment methods posed a difficulty for teachers who were used to a more rigid curriculum with accountability-based assessments as they transitioned to a play-based pedagogy (Martlew et al., 2011; Pyle & DeLuca, 2017). The lack of uniformity in assessing students forced teachers to work harder to document educational progress. Therefore, when considering the transition to play-based teaching in primary grade classrooms, teachers' use of assessments and the capability of educators to enact them during play should be considered.

Teachers Role In Play

The teacher's role in play also lacks consensus within the field. Some educators conceptualize their role to be omnipresent and integral to student learning, while others feel that any adult participation detracts from what children might achieve through playing independently of adults. In a longitudinal study in Norway by Lerkkanen et al. (2016), researchers discovered that teacher-directed practices did not optimally enhance seven-year-old children's reading or math abilities. Instead, child-centered, cooperative activities with peers based on active choice-making played a larger role in the academic success of students in both math and literacy (Lerkkanen et al., 2016). However, many teachers rely on teacher-directed learning tasks in lieu of playful learning. Understanding teachers' conceptions of their role in play can support increasing the use of play-based learning in schools.

Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) found in their meta-analysis that teachers view their role in play on a spectrum based on the level of adult involvement or direction, with most educators citing facilitation as their main role. Facilitation is defined as "setting up the environment and

providing different props and materials so that the children can choose what they want to play with, how and when" (Moon & Reifel, 2008, p.787). The materials offered can support learning goals in one or more areas. During the facilitation of play, teachers also typically scaffold children's learning by posing questions and engaging when appropriate (Jensen et al., 2021). This practice helps guide students to expand the concepts they are exploring within play without dictating exactly what occurs during the play.

Teacher as Facilitator of Play. Teachers can participate in the advancement of learning and facilitation of play without being physically involved by providing materials and structuring the environment to promote high-quality play situations (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Kobylak & Kalyn, 2017). Before children are invited to play in the classroom, educators first consider what materials would best serve student growth based on their current skill levels and interests (Jarrett, 1997; Kobylak & Kalyn, 2017; Nell et al., 2013). Various materials may create richer play situations if the students feel the materials are interesting and accessible and can promote academic growth (Riley & Jones, 2010). Through intentionally setting up the classroom, teachers may contribute to the positive outcomes of play.

Reflection on peer interactions can lead teachers to alter classroom organization in service of play. Teachers of four- and five-year-olds in Norway rearranged parts of their classroom to promote social interactions by moving a quiet reading area to a smaller sector of the classroom and repurposing the largest space for imaginative play. Students who did not typically engage with one another became engaged in meaningful, collaborative play together as a result (Grindheim, 2020). The novel diversity in play materials in a larger space that allowed for gross motor movement created situations for each child to learn and engage based on their own

interests, abilities, and needs (Grindheim, 2020). Teachers may involve themselves overtly in play to support the development of specific skills.

Teachers' Direct Involvement in Play. While the consideration of materials and learning spaces is crucial to supporting quality play, teacher involvement during play promotes children's development. Using approaches similar to those of guided play, teachers prepare the play environment in service of a pedagogical goal, gently scaffold children using their directives, and maintain a playful learning environment (Hassinger-Das, et al. 2017). Additionally, teachers participate in active listening, pose questions, and encourage high-quality play behaviors during interactions with and between children (Jensen et al., 2021; Kobylak & Kalyn, 2017). This type of involvement from teachers allows children to retain agency in planning and directing their play, while adult guidance can enhance interactions and outcomes. Jensen et al. (2021) compared video recordings of play situations in kindergartens in Canada and South Africa, using the constant comparison method of data analysis. Observational data revealed teachers in both locations remained in proximity to children during play, making suggestions to initiate or advance play, and posing questions to promote exploration and interaction with peers and materials (Jensen et al., 2021).

Certain skill advancements require direct adult interactions with students, but interventions should be thoughtfully planned. Kindergarten teachers in Costantino-Lane's (2019) study wanted play and learning to occur in meaningful ways where children could co-generate their learning with their teacher. Teachers considered developmentally appropriate ways to present information using the perspectives of the students, honoring their role and autonomy in learning through play. In doing so, teachers' perceptions about their ability to facilitate student growth remained positive, and they felt encouraged to continue utilizing guided play.

Nilsson et al. (2018) posit that child directives are valuable and necessary to their learning. Preschool teachers in the study observed children making meaning from their explorations and posed meaningful questions to scaffold students' thinking while maintaining the original direction of students' processing (Nilsson et al., 2018). Children and adults who engage dialogically during play can co-create meaning if educators honor students' interests. Educators who engage in play with their students balance the desires of the children with their own identified goals to optimize development and growth. The teacher's role in play can inspire further student discovery when they are actively engaged with the materials and model exploration (Nell et al., 2013). Teachers who were able to participate in play situations with their students and observe their interactions felt they were able to meet individual student needs during play more successfully than during seat-based instruction (Kobylak & Kalyn, 2017; Grindheim, 2020).

Conversely, teachers must be cautious about inserting their own directives into play. Researchers in the study conducted by Jensen et al., (2021) noted kindergarten teachers inserting their own ideas into play situations that did not align with the children's play. Other teachers removed agency from their students during play by making choices for them and directing their play to specific tasks that were not chosen by the children (Jensen et al., 2021). Too much teacher direction can hinder student learning if used too frequently (Lerkkanen et al., 2016). The frequency and quality of interactions between teachers and students during play have a significant effect on student learning during play. Teachers may require support to increase their abilities to facilitate high-quality play-based learning. However, the degree of child direction in their learning plays a significant role in the advancement of skills.

Supports and Barriers to Play Implementation

Successful play practices are dependent upon support and resources, while obstacles can hinder implementation and outcomes. The ability to provide children with quality play opportunities is enmeshed within multiple facets of the school and community. To implement play successfully, teachers cite a need for further training/education (McInnes et al., 2011).

Administrators

Lack of administrative support presents a significant barrier to using play in classrooms (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Nell et al., 2013). Many administrators have minimal background knowledge, training, and professional experience in early childhood, yet they obtain jobs in primary schools where young children attend (Barblett et al., 2016; Mann, 2017). Without this contextualized knowledge, administrators may lack understanding about what is happening in early childhood classrooms and assess what they observe based on their own educational background and training. In some education centers serving students from birth to age eight, administrators advised teachers to utilize classroom practices contrary to their pedagogical beliefs and the instruction they received in their teacher preparation programs (Barblett et al., 2016). In focus group interviews, teachers explained the need to continuously justify the use of play-based learning, resulting in feelings of exhaustion and diminished well-being (Barblett et al., 2016). The teachers who had administrators with experience in early childhood felt lucky and supported in implementing developmentally appropriate play (Barblett et al., 2016).

Administrative support and leadership are necessary to address professional learning needs (Mann, 2017). For play in classrooms to be successful, those in leadership positions can explore areas of weakness within schools and work with staff members to strengthen high-quality practices, including play. Kindergarten teachers who had direct instructional support and feedback from administrators felt enhanced confidence and capability to teach using play (Yin et

al., 2021). Principals in Fung and Cheng's (2012) study observed educators attempting to implement play practices in line with the rich theoretical teachings from their preparatory programs but noted their inability to translate conceptual ideas into quality practice. They identified a need for more teacher training specifically to gain a richer repertoire of strategies to facilitate meaningful play (Fung & Cheng, 2012). This level of investment in play by administrators can strengthen practices school-wide.

Colleagues

Teachers rely on support from their colleagues when implementing playful pedagogy. In multiple studies, teachers utilizing a pedagogy of play felt the need to justify classroom practices to their colleagues who lacked knowledge about play-based practices (Barblett et al., 2016; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Nell et al. 2013). Consequently, poor professional confidence emerged from defending and advocating for play against opposing teaching methods (Barblett et al., 2016). As a result, teachers became reluctant to implement play. Kindergarten educators in California feared being viewed as incompetent by colleagues or losing their position if their students were playing in school (Costantino-Lane, 2019). When faced with such adversity, other educators in Costantino-Lane's study (2019) chose to simply shut their doors and play covertly, which allowed them the ability to maintain teaching practices they believed in. While this approach still allowed students time for play, teachers who chose this path felt isolated and lacked confidence in themselves as educators.

When educators do not feel supported in their teaching practice, they may revert to outdated teaching methods that are not developmentally appropriate (Fung & Cheng, 2012). In Brown et al.'s (2020) study, teachers implemented teaching practices that went against their beliefs about education and the high-quality methods they had been taught during their teacher

preparation programs (Brown et al., 2020). Thus, the social and environmental factors within schools are extremely important. Confidence in incorporating play into the classroom can be enhanced by positive trust between teachers who are enabled to share their experiences, gain feedback, and amend play practices collaboratively (Yin et al., 2021).

Parents

Parents are a child's first teacher and their opinions about how their children are educated have an impact on educational decision-making. Parents'/caretakers' value and understanding of play can pose a significant barrier to play within the classroom (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Nell et al., 2013). Parents who maintain the belief that play should occur at home and that learning happens at school perpetuate the dichotomous thinking that reinforces the separation of play and learning (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). Parental pressures to take learning seriously leave no room for play-based methods. Without the support of parents, teachers' anxiety regarding parental acceptance increased, leading to inhibited implementation of play practices (Fung & Cheng, 2012).

Parents may be unaware of the benefits of play or the positive correlations between play and learning. Researchers cite a need for parent education programs to be more widely available to support parents in understanding the positive aspects of play for young children (Fung & Cheng, 2012; Kobylak & Kalyn, 2017; Nell et al., 2013). Teachers and researchers believe that parents will advocate for the educational practices they believe to be most valuable for their child, thus, educating parents about the importance of play will lead them to support play practices as legitimate learning (Nell et al., 2013). Parents who already support learning through play can assist the ongoing practices in their child's classroom through resource donation, volunteerism, and learning at home (Kobylak & Kalyn, 2017).

Time for Instruction and Play

Teachers contend that the amount of time needed to implement play in classrooms is greater than traditional types of teaching which places limitations on the amount of time they could allow children to spend engaged in play (Jay & Knaus, 2018; McInnes et al., 2011; Ranz-Smith, 2007). Large class sizes, lack of instructional assistance (teacher's aids), and the pressures of academics can limit the amount of time left to plan for and engage in play (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Nell et al., 2013). Despite holding positive views of active, engaged play, teachers may struggle to adjust to a play pedagogy in place of direct instruction without support. However, teachers in a primary level one classroom in Scotland (equivalent to kindergarten in the US) expressed that when children were engaged in active learning (during play), it afforded them more time to spend conversing with children and scaffolding their learning (Martlew et al., 2011). Kindergarten teachers in California echoed this claim, proposing smaller class sizes as a way to mitigate time restraints during the school day. They stated that a smaller class size also allows teachers to interact with students throughout the day to ensure their needs are being met (Costantino-Lane, 2019).

Professional Development

Implementation of play-based practices is strengthened when teachers experience training, professional development, and quality teacher preparation programs. Multiple studies reflected teachers' beliefs about the efficacy of play-based training and the types of possible support they perceived would result from their attendance In research conducted by Nell et al. (2013) educators participated in a play workshop designed for adults wherein they interacted with open-ended materials individually or in collaboration with other participants, reflected on their experiences playing, and discussed their play processes collaboratively (Nell et al., 2013).

Outcomes from this workshop resulted in the teachers considering implementing a learner-centered approach based on children's interests, reflecting on the role play has in children's development and learning, and feeling prepared to use a reflective teaching practice to strengthen assessment and planning for future learning (Nell et al., 2013). Workshops such as this can support educators in implementing play-based practices

Play Legislation

Throughout modern history, time for play has decreased in the lives of children. The standards movement created an 'accountability shove down' into the earliest years of schooling, which fortified the prevalence of didactic teaching and led to the disappearance of play from learning environments (Hatch, 2002). International comparisons in academic assessments have led to increased pressures to ensure high student performance. Some stakeholders view the increase in academic expectations in early childhood as a necessary solution to remaining globally competitive in academics (Carnoy & Rothstein, 2013). As a result, developmentally inappropriate teaching practices and the removal of play in early childhood continue to proliferate (Miller & Almon, 2009).

The benefits of play are recognized and sustained in the early childhood field despite the inappropriate academic expectations imposed on young children (NAEYC, 2020; IPA, n.d.). Play recommendations, mandates, and legislation have been enacted around the globe that allow or enforce play practices at different levels of early childhood. These rulings attempt to reconceptualize play so that it is analogous to academic teaching in learning centers and schools. The creation of a more child-centered learning approach through play aligns with early childhood theory and current research in the field. The impact of this shift away from didactic

teaching and towards play is contextualized through the locations where mandates and legislation are prevailing. Models internationally, nationally, and state-wide are examined.

Internationally

The passage of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) spurred a movement towards play in some areas. Through a review of current literature, it is clear that other countries assumed responsibility for ensuring the young children in their jurisdiction were assured the right to play through practice recommendations and guiding frameworks. Some representative examples are examined henceforth.

Canada

In the province of Ontario, the Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program (FDK) became free to the public in 2010 (Becker & Mastrangelo, 2017). The FDK offers public pre-k and kindergarten for children ages 4 and 5 (called junior and senior kindergarten), with the goal of boosting students' development prior to compulsory schooling at age 6 (Becker & Mastrangelo, 2017). While other provinces in Canada offer half-day and full-day kindergarten programs, Ontario's program is the most comprehensive. One of the major expectations for the program includes a "play-based environment that promotes the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development of all children" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016, p.8). The document titled "The Kindergarten Program" acknowledges global perspectives about the necessity for play in an inquiry-based learning environment and posits play as the most optimal form of learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016).

Australia

Australia's early childhood framework titled The Early Years Framework aims to extend and enrich children's development and learning from birth to age 5 in early learning settings

(Department of Education and Training, 2009). It states that “Early childhood educators guided by the Framework will reinforce in their daily practice the principles laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Convention)” revealing an important direct impact of the UNCRC on early education practices in Australia (Department of Education and Training, 2009, p. 5). The Framework advocates for learning to occur through play and for teachers to be responsive to children's interests when facilitating classroom activities.

Scotland

The Early Years Framework for young children in Scotland sets forth recommendations to maximize positive experiences at the start of a child’s life, from pre-birth to age eight (Scottish Government, 2008). Children are valued and cared for through their communities by empowering families and community members to invest in their youngest citizens. This framework also acknowledges the impact of the UNCRC and reinforces the rights of children and their humanity locally in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2008). The goal of this framework is to outline ways in which parents, caregivers, teachers, and community members at large may invest in children and their upbringing. Part of ensuring every child has a quality start to their life means prioritizing the development of play spaces, opportunities for play, and the removal of barriers to play for children (Scottish Government, 2008). Scotland aims to improve lifelong outcomes and children’s quality of life through play at school by utilizing holistic curriculum development, promoting outdoor play, and increasing play opportunities.

Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, a paradigmatic shift resulting from new expectations for kindergarten altered the previous teacher-directed, structured teaching in favor of more child-directed, play-based practices. The Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide [KECG] (2017) aims to provide

children with quality learning play experiences and to promote more free exploration in play. Expectations for kindergarten classrooms dictate “Half-day and full-day kindergartens… arrange no less than 30 and 50 minutes every day respectively, for children to participate in free play” (KECG, 2017, p. 57). The guide was intended to provide a framework for teachers who work with children aged two to five in learning settings before primary schooling (KECG, 2017). The child-centered approach is less common in eastern countries, therefore a significant pedagogical shift has occurred for educators to enact play-based learning in early childhood.

Difficulties with Policy Implementation

The frameworks created by government entities are grounded in research, supported by rationales, and strengthened by recommendations for practice. Dedication to the success of play in early education is abundantly clear in these documents. However, in each of the countries discussed thus far, educators identified significant challenges associated with implementing play while reconciling the pressures of academic accountability (Barblett et al., 2016; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Martlew et al., 2011; Yin et al., 2021). The increased availability of full-day programs that tout play as a primary pedagogical practice for pre-primary students initially sounds like a beneficial scenario. However, teachers are faced with increased expectations to include extensive academic content and assessment of skills while also creating play situations that honor the interests and emergent ideas of children (Barblett et al., 2016; Pyle & DeLuca, 2017; Yin et al., 2021). While teachers may have a strong belief regarding play-based learning, implementation in classrooms poses a greater difficulty.

It is important to note that each country likely views play through their cultural lens and the impact on students in their local area. In consideration of global play frameworks and mandates, it would be pertinent to remain mindful of how each culture defines and enacts play

and learning. It seems that the impact of the UNCRC (1989) had notable effects on early childhood education, specifically play, in many countries regarding policy and practice, but educators in classrooms require continued support from stakeholders for there to be continued success.

Nationally

As the only United Nations member to not ratify the UNCRC, national guidance for child well-being, and consequently play, remains absent (IPA, n.d.). Educators seeking direction or resources for pedagogy and practice can look to national organizations. The National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], advocates for quality learning practices, such as play, in place of a government mandate. Early childhood educators refer to recommendations and publications from the NAEYC, positioning their organization as significant leadership for teachers in the US. In their "Developmentally Appropriate Practice" [DAP] statement, the NAEYC (2020) asserts that "every child, birth through age 8, has the right to equitable learning opportunities—in centers, family childcare homes, or schools—that fully support their optimal development and learning across all domains and content areas." (p. 1).

While this document is not backed by any federal legislation, it gives substantive evidence for the necessity of play in early childhood. The authors acknowledge that play is engaging for children, essential, and leads to their holistic development (NAEYC, 2020). The DAP statement could have a greater impact nationwide if the federal government were to create legislation that emulated the standards and expectations for play and the rights of children outlined in its pages.

State

With no federal legislation, individual states have taken the lead in advocating for their youngest population. State Departments of Education in California and New York have published guides for play in early childhood that advocate for play as a primary practice but are not connected to legislation (California Department of Education, 2021; New York State Department of Education, n.d). In the US, only New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Oklahoma have passed legislation for play. Support for the inclusion of play is evident in official documents, but it has yet to be seen how advocacy in this form impacts teachers' practices.

New Hampshire

In 2018, New Hampshire legislatures added an amendment to the Substantive Educational Content of an Adequate Education law. The provision states "educators shall create a learning environment that facilitates high quality, child-directed experiences based upon early childhood best teaching practices and *play-based learning"* in support of the teaching of kindergarten standards (New Hampshire Department of Education, n.d.). To prepare kindergarten educators with instructional strategies and tools, Dr. Kimberly Nesbit hosted two workshops prior to the new school year in August 2018 (New Hampshire Department of Education, n.d.). The State Department website contains video recordings of her workshop presentations and other resources for educators including information and guidance for teachers to implement play-based learning that can be accessed at any time. Though this amendment is helpful in the promotion of play-based learning, it only addresses the kindergarten year.

Connecticut

Most recently, the state of Connecticut passed the most comprehensive and inclusive law to date. The bill students in kindergarten and preschool to be educated using play-based learning. The bill states that PBL "must (1) be incorporated and integrated into daily practice; (2) allow for

the students' needs to be met through free play, guided play, and games; and (3) not involve, predominantly, using mobile electronic devices." (Russell-Tucker, 2023). Additionally, teachers in grades one to five have the right to use play-based learning during the instructional time of a regular school day following the same guidelines as prek and kindergarten listed above. The bill also adds play-based learning to educators' professional development expectations. It states,

> Under current law, educator professional development must include a number of specific topics including refining and improving various effective teaching methods that are shared between and among educators. The bill adds that this must include play-based learning, as defined in the bill, for those teaching preschool or in grades kindergarten through five. (Russell-Tucker, 2023)

The professional development provision was expected effective July 1st, 2023. The teaching expectation will begin this year on July 1st, 2024 which provides time for educators to process the instructional changes and begin incorporating more PBL.

Oklahoma

The state of Oklahoma gained the right to play in the fall of 2021. The Oklahoma Play to Learn Act (2021) was formulated by teachers, legislators, doctors, parents, counselors, state school boards, local school board members, professors, and other interested parties. On a working day in the fall of 2019, the group met to work on the language of the bill which was finalized using suggestions from the group. Though it did not pass in the 2020 legislative session, it returned in 2021 with bipartisan support.

This piece of legislation states, "It is the intention of the Oklahoma State Legislature through this act to focus on the importance of child-centered, play-based learning as the most rigorous and most developmentally appropriate way for children in the early childhood grade

levels to learn literacy, science, technology, engineering, art and math academic concepts." (Oklahoma Play to Learn Act, 2021, p. 2). The bill supports the development of "physical, social, emotional, cognitive and academic learning opportunities in all curricular domains, which may include unstructured time for the discovery of each child's individual needs, abilities and talents" through "movement, creative expression, exploration, socialization, reading for pleasure, art, music and dramatic play" (Oklahoma Play to Learn Act, 2021, p. 3). The bill ensures that no punitive measures can be taken against any teacher who uses play-based learning in any classroom from birth to third grade in the state.

Unlike legislation in other areas, the bill does not enforce play, but it does advocate for its use and protects educators who enact play pedagogies in their classrooms. Advocacy through legislation can influence educators who seek support and validation for their practices. The International Play Association [IPA](2021) congratulated Oklahoma in an online posting after the passage of the bill. The author of the piece encouraged advocates from other states to contact the organization to begin advocacy for legislation in their state, revealing an impact beyond the bounds of this state (IPA, 2021). This piece of legislative advocacy is monumental, but there is greater work to be done.

While the bill contains language to set up formal training for educators, no such training has yet to come to fruition. This means that any educator who believes that play-based learning is the most developmentally appropriate way to teach must do so within their own current abilities. Based on the national and international data, it would seem that without support from other educators, administrators, and training, teachers will likely continue to do what they feel comfortable with, even if they disagree with it theoretically. This concerning fact leads me to posit a need for training to support teachers in utilizing play in their classrooms.

As a response to the passage of the *PTLA*, I piloted a study to gain some initial data in the fall of 2021. After interviewing 6 primary grade teachers, two from each grade level, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd, I found that five of the six educators did not have an awareness of the Play to Learn Act prior to our interview (Spivey, in progress). All six teachers had positive views of play for children and identified the joy, creativity, chaos, and mess as correlational. However, most play occurred during recess, brain breaks, and occasionally as a fun learning activity for a special time. This is consistent with research indicating that educators support play during recess, a time that constitutes the sole inclusion of play for students while at school (Feliciano & Dy, 2021; McInnes & Birdsey, 2014; Newman et al., 1996).

All six teachers in my study indicated that social skills such as sharing, negotiation, peer-to-peer communication, and critical thinking were acquired through play (Spivey, in progress). Additionally, they felt that play helps children learn faster, and make meaningful connections, but most did not feel that they could incorporate play into their day due to an excess of learning objectives. One teacher does currently use play in her teaching, especially during literacy centers, but even she felt forced to defend her practices frequently (Spivey, in progress).

After I explained the Play to Learn Act, teachers shared that they would be more likely to facilitate play if they saw other teachers doing it, if they had more time, resources, and materials, and if they had support from their colleagues and administrators (Spivey, in progress). They remained unsure if the bill would change anything about their practice or the practice of their grade-level teammates without these types of support. Participants stated that the bill was empowering, encouraging, helpful, and supportive of educators. These findings were consistent with others in the field who cite similar needs for colleagues' support to reinforce play practices (eg. Yin et al., 2021).

The Oklahoma Play to Learn Act applies from birth to third grade, meaning all of early childhood. This is the most far-reaching legislation that has passed, despite the lack of government enforcement. I posit a need for more training and support for educators in their practice, in addition to making play the expectation. The children in our state deserve the most developmentally appropriate, active learning environment, and play should be a cornerstone.

Summary

From the literature, it is evident that the field would benefit from consensus on what 'counts' as play. Teachers attempting to implement play within their classrooms would benefit from a broader or more nuanced definition of play that serves to aid in children's development. Adopting a spectral definition of play, such as the example presented in Figure 1, would allow teachers to include a variety of play modes that would meet the academic and developmental needs of students more readily than a uniform approach to teaching.

Other difficulties surrounding the advancement of play include accountability pressures and stakeholders. Outside influences from school districts, administrators, parents, and colleagues can positively or negatively affect the efficacy of play. Teachers who feel supported by stakeholders outside of the classroom can implement play in their classrooms and grow in their practice through reflection, communication, and trial and error. However, those who are not supported feel incapable of approaching play at the level they consider best for their students. Some teachers feel that the academic demands placed on them from external sources are too great to even attempt play, while others express a misalignment between play and learning, reinforcing the ongoing play-learning dichotomy. The need for teacher education/training about the positive correlation between play and learning is evident.

Significant factors related to teacher ability were also revealed in this literature review. For teachers to successfully utilize play in schools, their self-efficacy must be fortified. Teachers who felt trusted to implement play continued to do so with the support of stakeholders. In addition, ongoing reflection and training in play practices positively influenced teachers' sense of efficacy and empowered them to advocate to community members for support.

Some noteworthy discoveries made throughout this process are worth mentioning. One significant conclusion garnered from the research articles revealed that most research about play is occurring outside of the United States in countries that have nationwide mandates or government frameworks for play-based practices in early education already in place. It seems likely that overt guidance from the government would incentivize the study of this topic. Another significant finding centers around the age/grade level of the studies included in this literature review. While reviewing current research, the majority of empirical articles referenced kindergarten and preschool-aged children or classrooms (see Costantino-Lane, 2019; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Nilsson et al, 2018; Yin et al., 2021). This could be explained by the differing structure of the schooling systems in other countries where children begin formalized schooling (i.e. no longer considered “early years”) at the age of 6. Articles advocating or reporting research about play occurring in the primary (1st-3rd) grades (or the age level equivalent in other areas) provide much less comprehensive information than articles centered around younger children (see Kobylak & Kalyn, 2017; Riley and Jones, 2010). Educators and other stakeholders will need to challenge the norms and traditional expectations of formalized learning for play to be used successfully in primary grades (Kobylak & Kalyn, 2017).

The pressures of academic achievement certainly preclude play from occurring as often in educational settings once children have entered what the U.S. considers to be “the academic

years" of schooling. However, the NAEYC (2020) recommends play remain in classrooms through third grade. For play to be a primary pedagogical practice, further studies should be conducted at all levels of early childhood in the United States. This would serve to inform researchers and administrators of the needed methods of support for educators. Revealing teacher beliefs about play will hopefully unlock the possibility for play-based pedagogies to flourish.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Research Purpose

This mixed-methods study addressed primary grade teachers' beliefs regarding play-based learning in grades one, two, and three and the impact of the *Play to Learn Act* in the state of Oklahoma. After the passage of the PTLA in 2021, teachers in the state gained protection for using play-based learning in their classrooms. However, it was unclear if this legislation supported educators in the goal of enabling play to be used in schools. A sequential explanatory design with a case-selection variant was used to explore this idea (Creswell & Clark, 2018). This research design occurs in two phases where the initial data collection leads to choosing participants for the second phase of data collection. (Creswell & Clark, 2018) In the first phase of the study, quantitative questionnaire data was collected from teachers in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades in the state of Oklahoma using an online questionnaire with Likert-scale and open-ended response questions created on Qualtrics. In the second phase of the study, focus group interviews were conducted with a subset of the initial participants to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' beliefs regarding play and their need for support to increase play practices. All data collected is used to explore the impact of the *Play to Learn Act.*

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How is the Play to Learn Act influencing play-based learning in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade classrooms in Oklahoma?

2. What do primary grade teachers believe about the need for and effects of play-based learning in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade?

3. What do primary grade teachers believe about their role in play and necessary support to better implement play-based learning in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade classrooms?

Pragmatism Worldview

Postulating the theoretical underpinnings of a mixed methods study reveals the worldview of the researcher in the context of the research presented. As a novice researcher, I recognize the need to deeply consider research paradigms, the positions they implicate, and their alignment with my beliefs and my research. I have had an affinity towards more qualitative-based research and have identified with the constructivism worldview as described by Creswell and Clark (2018). However, to provide depth to the study a more widely conceived construct such as post-positivism (typically associated with quantitative research) could be considered. Creswell and Clark (2018) suggest a need for identifying one's worldview to guide the study, "which may or may not be associated with a specific discipline or community of scholars, but which suggests the shared beliefs and values of researchers" (p. 35).

I believe that to gain knowledge, we must interact with our environment and the people in it. As Schutz et al. (2004) explain, knowers are enmeshed in the social and historical contexts of their lives, therefore our interactions are contextualized by our environment. As humans, our intersectional ways of knowing and being in this world create unique perspectives that contribute to a collective of knowledge. My philosophical beliefs about the construction of knowledge align with John Dewey, in that knowledge is constructed during experiences, intelligent action, and in

consideration of a problem with the goal of finding a solution (Biesta, 2010). Knowledge is transactional and based on our actions and their consequences (Biesta, 2010). Thus, exploring individualized subjective knowledge and reality is integral to understanding participant perspectives. In addition, I believe that there are truths that are commonly agreed on that align with a post-positivist perspective, allowing for research to test hypotheses and refine existing theories. Therefore, I believe a pragmatist worldview best fits my individually held beliefs about the world and this research study, because pragmatism "is based on the belief that theories can be both contextual and generalizable by analyzing them for 'transferability' to another situation." (Shannon Baker, 2016, p. 322).

Pragmatism grants us the ability to look at knowledge in different ways in relation to the process and procedures used to generate it (Biesta, 2010). Rather than subscribing to a particular paradigm with assumed methodologies and methods typical of other stances, this mixed methods research is approached in a way that works for the research questions being studied. Since mixed methods can be mixed at multiple levels, the pragmatic paradigmatic perspective places importance on the research question(s) to ensure the entire study is aligned toward successfully answering the question(s) (Creswell & Clark, 2018). For this study, I plan to engage in both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. My research methods are designed to best answer my research questions without the pressure of acknowledging a fully subjective view of my participants or objective reality sought to be reinforced by my results.

I believe that the nature of inquiry is exploration, understanding, and action. Our inquiries seek to explore, understand, and act in relation to a subject and the contextual relations surrounding it. We can choose to study something based on an identified need, interest, or problem. Inquiry allows us to make connections between what is known and what will be known

while recognizing that our world is ever-changing and acknowledging that nothing can ever be fully known (Biesta, 2010; Shultz et al., 2004). However, inquiries give multiple vantage points for viewing a phenomenon and create different ways to view connections between new and previously held knowledge. Within this inquiry, I seek to understand new perspectives in addition to comparing them with prior experiences in the field. My beliefs are supported by the pragmatic worldview in this research by allowing me to test previous theories, compare multiple data sets, and abductively analyze my findings to find transferability within the field of early childhood education (Shannon-Baker, 2016). I believe this inquiry can lead to perspectives that support the betterment of classroom practices based on the perspectives of those who are the primary stakeholders, in this case, teachers.

Research Design

To best answer the research questions, a mixed methods design including both quantitative, numerical data and qualitative, text-based data was integrated to formulate results (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003). This mixed-methods study employed an explanatory sequential design with a case-selection variant (Creswell & Clark, 2018). This design occurred in two phases. Quantitative data collection and analysis initiated the study and was followed by qualitative data collection and analysis. Participants who engaged in the qualitative portion of the study were chosen based on their answers to quantitative questions and open-ended question responses on the questionnaire (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Unlike a simple explanatory sequential design, the case selection variant places priority primarily on the qualitative data rather than on the quantitative data (Creswell & Clark, 2018). This research utilized a multilevel sampling strategy, nested sampling, where one strand of data, the qualitative data, is a subset of the quantitative data (Headly & Plano Clark, 2020; Teddlie & Yu, 2007). The

initial quantitative data collection phase provided preliminary findings regarding teachers' beliefs about play and the *PTLA*. The results of this portion supported my purposeful selection of participants for the second qualitative part of the study, which examined the phenomenon in depth through focus group interview discussions. Both strands of data were used to answer all the research questions.

Greene et al. (1989) outline five main purposes for mixing multiple research methods. My rationale for choosing this mixed methods design was to achieve complementarity, where one method, the qualitative data, will elaborate on and enhance the results from the other method, the quantitative method the quantitative (Greene et al., 1989). Greene et al., (1989) suggest that aiming for complementarity, wherein methods are used to measure "overlapping but different parts of a phenomenon" (p.258) can increase the validity of the findings. These methods were intentionally converged to assess the same phenomenon, teachers' beliefs about play-based learning in the primary grades (Greene et al., 1989). The questionnaire data provided perspectives from a larger group of educators which increased the generalizability of the findings (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Participant questionnaire data likewise allowed me to purposefully choose participants to participate in the focus group interviews who would provide rich descriptions of their lived experiences (Johnson & Turner, 2003). Both pieces of data were converged to delineate teachers' current beliefs about play in the primary grades and avenues for increasing play, based on educator-identified strengths and weaknesses.

Explanation of Choice

The choice to use a mixed-methods design was a direct result of seeing a need to identify the beliefs about play for teachers in Oklahoma following the passage of the Play to Learn Act. The goal of this dissertation is to support and inform the future professional development for

early childhood educators in response to the new legislation. In other parts of the world where play practices are mandated, educators noted the difficulty in altering their pedagogy without support (Barblett et al., 2016; Yin et al., 2021). Therefore, I assert that for the Play to Learn Act to have the greatest impact, it is paramount for training and support to be made available to all educators. A quantitative research study would allow me to explore the beliefs of a large number of participants which would be more representative than a small sample size resulting from a qualitative study. A qualitative study would provide me with rich descriptions of what teachers are experiencing and their needs but might not be generalizable to the entire population in the state. To gain both broad perspectives and in-depth understandings, I assert a mixed-methods design to be most applicable for the exploration of the phenomenon of teachers' beliefs (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

Phase One: Quantitative

Quantitative Design. In the first phase of data collection, a researcher-created, mixed questionnaire design was used. The questionnaire consisted of 36 closed-ended items, with five open-ended questions at the end (See Appendix A) (Johnson & Turner, 2003). The closed-ended questions yielded statistical data regarding generalized play practice perceptions of primary grade teachers, and the open-ended questions provided short, descriptive explanations for participant beliefs. This type of questionnaire design included intra-method data triangulation (Johnson & Turner, 2003), which was strengthened by the follow-up data collected in the second half of the study. Using Likert-scale questionnaire questions provided a uniform measuring tool for all participants, thus increasing the validity of the data (Johnson & Turner, 2003).

Participants. The target population for this study were first, second, and third-grade educators in the state of Oklahoma. The criteria for participation were as follows: (1) Participants

may teach in an Oklahoma public, private, or charter school, (2) must be a full-time educator (not a long-term substitute) (3) teach in a first, second, or third-grade general education classroom and (4) be 18 years of age or older. OU IRB approval was obtained before the initiation of the research.

The desired target sample size for this research was 194 participants in the first phase of data collection. Using a sample size calculator, I allowed for a 7% margin of error and a 95% confidence level. The population is estimated at 15,000, which accounts for roughly 500 school districts in Oklahoma and one teacher per grade level in each district. Participants were recruited using two sampling methods. First, participants were recruited using a nonprobabilistic sampling method called convenience sampling (Creswell & Clark, 2018), and second, participants were recruited using simple random sampling (Rahi, 2017). Both processes are described henceforth.

To invite participants to the study using the convenience sampling method, I sent a message request to post the invitation to the study in six social media groups on Facebook. I chose each of the Facebook groups because they were aimed toward education or play in the state of Oklahoma. Administrators from the following five groups approved and posted the survey: Oklahoma Rural Schools Coalition, Oklahomans for Public Education, Oklahoma Early Childhood Teacher Educators, OU Early Childhood Graduates, and Oklahoma Play Coalition. I also posted the survey to my personal Facebook page and an unknown number of shares resulted from these posts.

This initial round of questionnaire data collection resulted in 910 total recorded responses. After an initial review of the data, I found that a large number of the responses collected were invalid due to incompleteness, participants located outside of the state of Oklahoma, duplicate responses, and participants who were not 18 years of age. Through a data-cleaning process, I

found that roughly 25 responses were valid and legitimate. To increase participation of true respondents, a second round of recruitment to the study was initiated. Using the state department of education website, I obtained email addresses for elementary educators using the publicly-available State and District School Directories (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2023). The directory was last updated in February 2023, therefore some educators who were not yet employed were not included in the directory and conversely, others may not have been employed as listed. Participants were chosen using a simple random sampling procedure. In this method, the researcher used computer-generated numbers to indicate which participants from the overall population listed would be included in the sample (Rahi, 2017). Thus, "every individual has an equal chance of being selected in the sample from the population" (Acharya, 2013, p. 330).

First, I utilized an online random number generator to acquire the numbers three, seven, 11, and 23. These numbers were used to identify which districts within each county would be contacted to participate in the study. The third, seventh, 11th, and 23rd listed districts for each of Oklahoma's 77 counties were included in the study. I chose to include all 77 counties so that all teachers from the state had a chance of being chosen. For those counties that had less than three districts, the first district was chosen. There were 544 school districts in Oklahoma as of February 2023 (OSDE, 2024). Teachers invited to the study had "ELEM ED" and "Regular programs" listed as their qualifications. Some teachers in the district were not invited to the study such as those who were identified as teachers of special education, virtual programs, gifted education, etc. A total of 123 districts were included with 3,056 total recruitment emails sent. 547 emails were returned without being received by the recipient. The OSDE directory did not indicate what grade level teachers taught, therefore some teachers who were not 1st, 2nd, or 3rd grade teachers may have received the recruitment email.

After the second round of data collection ended, 945 total responses were recorded. Data was reduced using systematic cleaning procedures. The following criteria and number of deleted responses are as follows: 1 for repeat IP address, 13 for "no" answer regarding at least 18 years of age/consent to participate, 24 for "I do not teach in Oklahoma or one of these grade levels", 147 for incompleteness, 146 for geographically outside Oklahoma, 565 removed for listed zip code outside of the state of Oklahoma. I deleted 896 responses in total, thus the final sample contained 49 responses.

Participant Demographics. The following tables represent the participant demographics from the first phase of this study. There were 49 participants who provided their gender, age, race, school demographic, school type, grade level, years in grade level, years of teaching experience, and teacher preparation. All percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number. Table 1 represents the gender of the participants who participated in the questionnaire. The largest number of participants identified as female.

Table 1

Participants' Gender

Gender	N	Percent
Female	41	84%
Male	8	16%
Total	49	100%

Table 2 displays the reported participant ages in range format. The greatest number of participants were in the 18-25, 31-35, and 41-45 ranges at 16% in each category.

Table 2

Participants' Age

Age Range	N	Percent
18-25	8	16%
26-30	6	12%
31-35	8	16%

36-40	7	14%
41-45	8	16%
46-50	3	6%
51-55	4	8%
56-60	1	2%
60+	4	8%
Total	49	100%

Displayed in Table 3 are the races identified by the participants. The largest race identified by participants was white at 75% of participants.

Table 3

Participants' Race

Race	N	Percent
White	37	76%
Black or African American	2	4%
American Indian or Alaska Native	6	12%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	3	6%
Other	1	2%
Total	49	100%

Table 4 displays the school demographic that participants identified for their school. The greatest number of participants indicated that they teach in a suburban area at 41%.

Table 4

School Demographic

School Demographic	N	Percent
Urban	15	31%
Suburban	20	41%
Rural	14	28%
Total	49	100%

Teachers identified the type of school where they teach, public, private, or charter school. Table 5 displays the results. The majority of teachers indicated that they teach in a public school.

Table 5

School Type

School Type	N	Percent
Public school	40	81%
Private school	8	16%
Charter school	1	2%
Total	49	100%

Table 6 displays in which grade-level teachers are currently employed. The greatest number of participants currently work in the first grade, but there were close to an even number of participants for every grade level.

Table 6

Grade Level

Grade level	N	Percent
1st	18	36%
2nd	15	30%
3rd	16	32%
Total	49	100%

Table 7 displays the years in the current grade level that teachers identified. On the survey, teachers identified a number rather than choosing from a list. The greatest number of teachers were in their first year teaching in their specified grade level.

Table 7

Years in Current Grade Level

Years in current grade level	N	Percent
1	12	25%
2	5	10%
3	8	16%
4	2	4%
5	8	16%
6	4	8%
7	3	6%
9	2	4%
10	1	2%
12	1	2%
20	1	2%
27	1	2%

35	1	2%
Total	49	100%

Table 8 shows the total years of teaching experience reported by participants. Participants chose from a range of years listed on the questionnaire. The greatest number of participants indicated that they had between zero and three years of teaching experience, meaning that they were early in their teaching career.

Table 8

Total Years of Teaching Experience

Total Years	N	Percent
0-3	16	33%
4-7	7	14%
8-11	8	16%
12-15	5	10%
16-19	4	8%
20-23	4	8%
24-27	1	2%
27+	4	8%
Total	49	100%

Table 9 displays the highest level of education identified by participants. This question only identifies the degree and is not associated with the field of study. The majority of teachers held a bachelor's degree.

Table 9

Level of Education

Level of Education	N	Percent
Bachelor's degree	27	55%
Master's degree	15	31%
PhD or other advanced degree	7	14%
Total	49	100%

Table 10 displays the ways that teachers identified that they were prepared for the teaching profession. Teachers held degrees in early childhood (EC) and elementary education (ELEM). Some teachers held a degree in another field and were alternatively certified (AC). On the questionnaire, teachers had the option of choosing the first five options listed on the table or choosing "other" and explaining their teacher preparation qualifications. The greatest number of participants had degrees in elementary education.

Table 10

Teacher Preparation

Teacher Preparation	N	Percent
Bachelor's degree EC	11	22%
Bachelor's degree in ELEM	21	43%
Master's degree in EC	4	8%
Master's degree in ELEM	2	4%
Degree in another field, AC	3	6%
Bachelor's & Master's in EC	1	2%
Bachelor's & Master's in ELEM	2	4%
Bachelor's EC & bachelor's ELEM	2	4%
Master's EC & master's ELEM	3	6%
Total	49	100%

Data Collection. In the first phase of data collection, quantitative data was gathered using a questionnaire to identify educators' beliefs about play and the *PTLA*. When attempting to locate a survey with high validity, I found that no other data measuring tool fit the needs of the current study. I explored existing surveys using search terms such as "teachers' beliefs about the play," "play beliefs," "play in schools," and "beliefs about play-based learning," but none yielded an option specific to the primary grades nor a tool specific to this state. Since this research focused specifically on primary grade educators and the state of Oklahoma, my researcher-created questionnaire was utilized.

I created a questionnaire online using Qualtrics with 35 Likert scale, close-ended questions, one multiple-choice question, and five open-ended questions. Questions were formulated in consideration of the current literature regarding teachers' beliefs about play. Questions were also based on pilot study data (Spivey, in progress) wherein teachers reported their beliefs about play and their perceptions of the *PTLA.* The Likert scale and multiple-choice questions explored teachers' familiarity with the *PTLA,* their personal beliefs about play, and their ideas for support needed to increase play. Participants were offered an opportunity to be placed in a drawing to win a $20 gift card for completion of the survey.

The open-ended questions allowed participants to provide a short explanation for their personal beliefs about play in the classroom, identify support that might increase play in their classroom, and note their perception of students' learning in relation to play. The questions and prompts were as follows: 1) "Please explain your personal beliefs about play in the classroom in the grade you teach", 2) "From your perspective, what is the relationship between play and learning for children in your grade?", 3) "Please list current examples of play or playful learning available to your students.", 4) "What are the most significant barriers to using play in the grade level you teach?", 5) "What might increase your willingness or ability to incorporate more play into your classroom?" Some questions were chosen because of the findings from a qualitative pilot study conducted during the fall 2021 semester with six teachers, two from each primary grade level (Spivey, in progress).

The questionnaire was distributed using Qualtrics via the internet. After receiving OU IRB approval, I began the initial phase of data collection. I posted a recruitment message on Facebook explaining the overall purpose of the study, to understand primary teachers' beliefs about play, with a link to access the questionnaire. To gain consent for their participation, the first

question asked if the participant was over the age of 18, in what grade (one, two, or three) they currently worked, and if they consented to participate in the study. Participants were asked to provide some basic demographic information: age, grade level they teach, area where they teach (rural, urban, or suburban), years as a teacher, level of education, zip code, ethnicity, teacher preparation experience, and gender. Only questionnaires with all answers completed were included in the data analysis. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were invited to provide their email to indicate their willingness to participate in the follow-up focus group interviews. The questionnaire was initially opened on January 11th, 2024, and closed on January 28th, 2024. It was reopened on February 4th, 2024, and closed on February 15th, 2024.

Data Analysis. To begin, all data from the close-ended Likert scale items and one multiple-choice question were reduced through computer-generated descriptive statistics using SPSS (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003). Mean, standard deviation, and frequency counts of all data were used to notate the overall data set. The quantitative data was analyzed to explain general beliefs about teachers' beliefs about the PTLA and play-based learning. The data was organized into tables and utilized to answer all three of the research questions.

Open-Ended Response: Qualitative Analysis. The open-ended data was open-coded and used to identify meaningful participant responses for follow-up focus group interviews. Data also contributed to the formulation of the final follow-up questions for the focus group interviews. All participant responses from the open-ended responses 20-25 on the questionnaire were organized by question in a document. Next, I employed a qualitative data analysis software called MaxQDA that supported me in my coding process. The program allowed me to color coordinate, seriate, and organize the codes. Computer coding programs assist in the organization of the data and provide a structured method of organization of the analytic process that was revisited throughout

the analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To analyze the qualitative questionnaire data, I conducted a thematic analysis. A thematic analysis process described by Morse (1994) offers four cognitive processes to aid in analyzing data: comprehending, synthesizing, theorizing, and recontextualizing.

First, during the comprehending stage, interpretation of the data occurred through inductive coding wherein I engaged in open coding, by doing line-by-line coding of the data (Morse, 1994). During the initial reading of the documents and throughout the coding process, I engaged in memo writing to track the development of the analysis throughout the process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ezzy, 2002; Morse 1994). Memo writing is helpful in maintaining a stance of active inquiry (Morse, 1994) and making the researcher's process visible. This coding process allowed me to reveal meaningful perspectives from the participants and deeply explore the characteristics of the concepts covered within the study (Morse, 1994).

During this phase, another graduate student assisted with creating the coding structure to attempt to achieve intercoder reliability (ICR) (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). ICR ensures that codes created during the analytic process are consistent and accurately represent the data from more than one perspective (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). First, we read the documents to familiarize ourselves with the data and made a priori decisions regarding the units of coding, and the conceptual depth of the codes (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Both researchers coded the first document, item set 20 separately, then compared codes and came to conceptual agreements before coding the remaining four documents and comparing again to revise the coding frame. When discrepancies were noted in both rounds of comparison, we discussed the meanings of the codes and adjusted the coding scheme through "negotiated agreement," wherein we discussed disagreements to resolve them (Campbell et al., 2013, p. 305). Discussion of the meanings of

codes allowed us to improve our analysis reflexively rather than objectively (Campbell et al., 2013). The final intercoder agreement was calculated at 88% agreement. According to Campbell et al., (2013), there are many considerations to make when accepting this number. However, they recommend following guidelines set by Miles and Huberman (2014) which suggest that 85-90% is a reliable agreement. Before moving into the next phase, I conducted the focus group interviews. The remaining qualitative data analysis will be explained in the qualitative section.

Validity. I identified methods to minimize threats to the internal validity of my study. The validity of the data collection instrument was increased by considerations made during its creation. Tsang et al., (2017) suggest that preliminary steps occur prior to creating a questionnaire. They suggest researchers conduct a thorough literature review, attempt to locate an existing validated survey, identify the specific constructs to be studied, write questions that can be easily understood by all participants, consider the length of the survey to counter attrition and review/revise the questions during creation (Tsang et al., 2017). I engaged in each of these suggestions during the creation of my survey instrument. To counter attrition, the quantitative portion of the study only included a questionnaire which participants should have been able to complete in one sitting, minimizing the chances of them leaving the study (Morse & Graves, 2009). Validity was likewise assured by the uniformity of the questionnaire questions providing participants with a standard measure (Johnson & Turner, 2003). Once data was collected, I chose to only analyze those questionnaires that had been fully completed.

Phase Two: Qualitative

Qualitative Design. In the second phase of data collection, a basic qualitative design was followed wherein the data revealed participants' experiences, the meaning they gave to those experiences, and how the experiences led to actions in the classroom (Merriam, 2009). In this

study, the experience of using play, the meaning assigned to play, and the possible changes that could occur with increased support were investigated. Focus group interviews were conducted with a smaller portion of the original group of questionnaire participants. Focus groups provide meaningful explanations about participants' beliefs and practices and allow the researcher to interpret previously gathered information with greater depth (Johnson & Turner, 2003).

Participants. All participants from phase one were invited to provide an email address to indicate their willingness for phase two of the study. Upon completing the data analysis for phase one, I utilized my findings to purposefully choose participants based on the questionnaire responses. I used a purposeful sampling technique called homogenous sampling, which aimed to understand a particular subgroup with distinctive characteristics (Creswell & Clark, 2018). In this case, attitudes towards play-based learning were considered.

Creswell & Clark (2018) advise researchers to consider how much qualitative information should be collected for meaningful themes to be developed. My goal was to include twenty-one teachers in my follow-up focus group interviews, representing approximately ten percent of the initial participant data set. I hoped that this number would provide adequate diverse perspectives about the phenomenon of play. However, due to the lower number of participants in the initial round of data collection, the number of participants in phase two was also lower than desired.

Of the 49 participants who participated in the questionnaire, 33 provided an email address indicating a willingness to participate in a follow-up focus group interview. I created three focus group opportunities based on open-ended answers provided on the questionnaire. After reviewing the quantitative data, the results revealed similar perspectives between many of the participants. Four participants were initially chosen based on disagreement towards statements in Q13: "Play is beneficial to children" and "Children learn academic skills while playing." Participants also

disagreed or were neutral regarding Q11: “I believe The Play to Learn Act is necessary and does or will have an impact on my teaching,” and disagreed or were neutral regarding the statement, “I do not think the Play to Learn Act matters or will have an impact on my teaching in the future.”

Next, participants were identified based on open-ended responses provided on the questionnaire. I coded participant responses which included some or all of the following criteria to be included in the following groupings: 1) indicate many barriers prohibit/ strongly limit PBL, have a negative or slightly positive regard towards PBL, or provide few examples of PBL currently provided to students 2) indicate that some barriers limit play based learning, have a mostly positive regard towards PBL, or provided several examples of PBL currently provided to students, and 3) indicate that barriers do not have a significant effect on PBL, have a positive regard towards PBL, or provided many examples (including free play) of PBL currently available to students. Seven participants were not invited due to the quality of their open-ended responses which lacked enough detail or insight to warrant follow-up invitations.

Recruitment emails were sent to 26 participants (eight for focus group one; nine each for focus groups two and three) daily for five days. Overall, only 5 participants agreed to participate in focus groups. Two invitees emailed to inform me of their inability to participate. No other responses were received. After consideration of the groupings, participants were rearranged into two focus groups. Three participants were grouped into a group labeled “prohibitive attitudes” associated with their opinions on how play might be prohibitive through barriers and two participants were put into a group titled “hopeful attitudes” which were associated with their opinions of hope for play-based learning. One participant did not attend the first focus group meeting but was invited to the second meeting. The same participant also did not attend the

second focus group. In total, two focus groups took place with two participants each. See Table 11 for participant data.

Table 11

Focus Group Participants Demographic Data

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Grade	Years in grade level	Total years taught	School demographic	Education
Marcy	F	W	1	1	3	Private; suburban	Masters; elementary
Annie	F	W	1	1	7	Public; suburban	Bachelors; early childhood
Kate	F	W	1	1	1	Public; urban	Masters; early childhood
Marie	F	W	2	15	30	Public; rural	Bachelors; elementary

Data Collection. Phase two data was collected through focus group interviews with participants. When preparing the semi-structured, open-ended interview questions (Johnson & Turner, 2003), I created a sample set based on current research and findings from my pilot study to provide a detailed understanding of teachers' beliefs about play and explore possible types of support needed to increase the levels of play occurring in the primary grades. Once the initial round of data collection was complete, I reviewed participant responses and noted emergent themes. Questions were revised and added in hopes that a greater depth of understanding regarding teachers' beliefs could be elucidated.

Two focus groups with two participants each occurred via Zoom. The first focus group took place on Monday, February 19th at 4:30 pm and lasted for 43 minutes. The second focus group occurred on Wednesday, February 21st at 4:30 pm and lasted for 60 minutes. The interviews each began by reading the verbal consent script and participants indicated their oral

consent to participate in the focus group interviews. The oral consent script was also emailed to all focus group participants. Next, participants introduced themselves and provided some background information regarding their teaching history. Once both teachers had an opportunity to introduce themselves, I asked the prepared semi-structured interview questions. Some follow-up questions were asked, as needed. Both participants had the opportunity to answer all questions and respond to each other. The interviews were voice-recorded and partially transcribed using the Otter.ai program. After all interviews were complete, I reviewed the transcriptions in full and corrected all errors. Reviewing the transcriptions through this process prepared me for the data analysis phase of this research. Participants were sent an online $10 gift card for participating in a focus group interview.

Data Analysis. The second strand of qualitative data was analyzed inductively. After both focus groups were completed, all interview transcriptions were reviewed and checked for accuracy. Both transcripts were open-coded using the same process I described to analyze the open-ended questionnaire data. Codes were compared with previously identified concepts in the coding scheme formulated during the coding of the open-ended questions from the phase one questionnaire.

Next, I began the synthesizing stage. I reviewed the codes from each of the open-ended response documents and two focus group transcripts in search of commonalities (Morse, 1994). In this axial coding stage, codes were merged based on common understandings, and categories were created that exemplified themes from the data across open-ended responses and focus interview groups (Ezzy, 2002). At this point, I began a structural coding process wherein I identified text as it related to one of the research questions (MacQueen et al., 2008). The

structural coding process provided me with a framework to organize my data. Once all data was synthesized, I transitioned to stage 3, theorizing.

Morse (1994) explains the process of theorizing wherein researchers seek links to existing theories. Thus, connections between the research data and prior theory were made through the process of thematizing. The emergent themes from interview data exemplified participant beliefs and experiences and were connected to existing theory. Once themes were established, the process of recontextualizing was initiated.

In the final stage of processing the data, Morse (1994) states that recontextualizing the data allows researchers to fit new findings into established theory, thus advancing the discipline. I utilized the themes from this research to explain the lived experiences of the participants in relation to other educators who are engaged with play-based learning pedagogy. I hope that the data from this understudied population, primary grade educators, will provide unique contributions to the idea of utilizing play-based learning in schools.

Trustworthiness. To increase the trustworthiness of my study, I ensured that the credibility of participants' responses were protected by reflecting on my own biases prior to the creation of the interview questions. I created open-ended, broad questions that can be answered in many ways to allow for the participants' own opinions to be shared and counter any potential assumptions about their experiences. My biases or opinions could influence the data collection and analysis; therefore, I collected thick, rich descriptions of participants' responses and represented their answers using raw data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). The intercoder reliability process described previously also contributed to the trustworthiness of the study (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

To increase transferability, I used purposeful sampling to ensure that the participants' characteristics were likely to answer the research questions (Creswell & Clark, 2018). I additionally attempted to engage in member checking by sharing a transcription of each focus group with participants to ensure the accuracy of their responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One of the four participants responded that she was satisfied with the transcription and felt it portrayed her feelings accurately. Finally, I maintained an audit trail by keeping data inventoried, created a codebook to note the organization of codes, and utilized memoing to ensure processes of data analysis were recorded (Ezzy, 2002).

Mixed Methods Data Analysis

Upon completion of data collection and analysis for both the quantitative and qualitative strands of data, I integrated and analyzed the data using a mixed methods interpretation (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Inferences will be drawn across both strands of data to add insight into the use of play in the primary grades, leading to meta-inferences. For this research design, the integration of the two data types is done with the intent to explain and bolster the quantitative data using qualitative results (Creswell & Clark, 2018). The research questions will be answered using both sets of data and findings will be organized using the research questions in chapter four.

Chapter 4: Findings

The goal of this study was to understand the impact of the *Play to Learn Act*, by exploring the beliefs about play held by primary grade educators in the state of Oklahoma and identifying the types of support that might increase educators' use of play in classrooms. The findings from this sequential explanatory mixed-methods study will be presented in association with the research questions in this study. Both quantitative and qualitative data will be reported concurrently using the organization from the structural coding process (MacQueen et al.,

2008). The rationale for organizing the data this way is to provide a holistic description for each of the research questions.

Research Question 1

The first research question in this study was "How is the *Play to Learn Act* influencing play-based learning in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade classrooms in Oklahoma?" First, findings from the quantitative questionnaire data were used to answer this question. Specifically, RQ1 was answered using item set 12. There were no open-ended questions on the questionnaire regarding the PTLA, therefore only themes from the focus-group interviews were included second.

Quantitative Data

Item Set 12: The Play To Learn Act. This portion of statements contained five sub-statements and focused on teachers' familiarity with the PTLA, and their perceptions regarding the bill's ability to support educators in using play-based learning. Before the statements were displayed, participants read the following explanation of play-based learning taken from the *Play to Learn Act* which provided equal context for everyone participating in the questionnaire:

Educators may create a learning environment that facilitates child-directed experiences based upon developmentally appropriate early childhood practices and intentional,

> sustained, play-based learning opportunities, including, but not limited to, movement, creative expression, exploration, socialization, reading for pleasure, art, music, and dramatic play. Play-based learning is any learning activities that are performed by a child for self-amusement that have behavioral, social and psychomotor rewards. Play-based learning shall also mean activities that are child-directed, joyful and spontaneous whereby the rewards come from within the individual child. (Oklahoma Play to Learn Act, 2021, pp. 2-3)

In the presentation of the data, the categories of strongly agree and somewhat agree and strongly disagree and somewhat agree have been grouped in the presentation of the findings. The same groupings will be used for all quantitative data findings.

The first sub-statement "*Before I took this survey, I was aware of the Play to Learn Act*" explored participants' awareness of the PTLA prior to participation, and resulted in 63% of respondents who answered in the affirmative, (n=16 strongly agree [SA], n=15 somewhat agree [A]), 14% neither agreed nor disagreed (n=7 [N]), and of 22% teachers disagreed (n=5 somewhat disagree [D], n=6 strongly disagree [SD]). This indicated that most participants had some level of awareness of the PTLA before participating in the questionnaire.

Next, teachers indicated their agreement with the second sub-statement, "*The Play to Learn Act has helped me feel more supported in using play in my classroom,*" which explored their perceptions about the support the PTLA may previously or currently offer. Here, 61% answered in agreement (n=14 SA, n=15 A), 22% neither agreed nor disagreed (n=11), and 17% disagreed (n=6 D, n=3 SD). The majority of participants agreed that the PTLA has helped them feel supported in using play. The sub-statement "*The Play to Learn Act does not currently have any impact on my teaching*" resulted in 41% agreement (n=7 SA, n=13 A), 12% neither agreement nor disagreement (n=6), and 47% disagreement (n=14 D, n=9 SD). Nearly half of the participants disagreed that the PTLA did not have an impact on their teaching. However, slightly less than half of the participants agreed that the PTLA did not have an impact.

The next two sub-statements aimed to understand the teachers' perceptions of the need for the PTLA and future possibilities that it might have to support the use of play-based learning in their classrooms. Participants responded to "*I believe the Play to Learn Act is necessary and does or will have an impact on my teaching"* with 84% agreeing (n=23 SA, n=18 A), 10%

neither agreeing nor disagreeing (n=5), and 6% disagreeing (n=2 D, n=1 SD). Conversely, participants answered the opposite question "*I do not think the Play to Learn Act matters or will have an impact on my teaching in the future*" with 14% agreeing (n=4 SA, n=3 A), 12% (n=6) neither agreeing nor disagreeing, and 74% disagreeing (n=17 D, n=19 SD). Considering these two statements together, teachers' answers indicated that the majority believed there is a need for the PTLA and that it does have the potential to impact their future teaching practice. See the descriptive statistics listed in Table 12.

Table 12

Item Set 12: The Play to Learn Act

Questionnaire Statement	N	M	SD
"Before I took this survey, I was aware of the Play to Learn Act"	49	3.61	1.367
"The Play to Learn Act has helped me feel more supported in using play in my classroom"	49	3.63	1.202
"The Play to Learn Act does not currently have any impact on my teaching"	49	2.90	1.373
"I believe the Play to Learn Act is necessary and does or will have an impact on my teaching"	49	4.22	.941
"I do not think the Play to Learn Act matters or will have an impact on my teaching in the future"	49	2.10	1.229

Themes from Focus Group Interviews

During the focus group conversations, participants responded to prompting questions about the PTLA. The two themes used to describe participant responses were *current awareness and support* and *possible future impacts.* These two themes outlined participants' current awareness levels of the PTLA, the level of support it is currently offering, and the possibility for the bill to impact play-based practices in the future. Representative quotes were presented in association with themes to illustrate participant perspectives. All codes included in the coding structure can be found in the codebook (See Appendix B).

Current Awareness and Support. The first theme *current awareness and support* revealed varied levels of both awareness of the bill and support for the bill among participants. Included in this theme were explanations of each participants' level of awareness before participating in the questionnaire. Focus group participants were provided with pseudonyms which will be used throughout the results section in connection with their answers. Categories included in this theme were *highly aware, unaware, positive support belief,* and *not currently supportive*.

Highly Aware. The two participants in the first focus group, "prohibitive attitudes" were coded *highly aware* of the PTLA. Both Annie and Macy were aware of the bill prior to its passage. Macy stated "I knew about it from when I was in my master's program. I advocated with the legislator on some things, and I presented with him so I knew about it" (Focus Group 1). Annie contextualized her awareness and shared "I also followed it from when it was you know before it was called the Play to Learn Act, the one that was the previous generation" (Focus Group 1).

Unaware. Both participants in the second focus group, "hopeful attitudes" had their responses coded as *unaware* regarding their awareness of the PTLA. Both of these participants indicated that they were not aware of the bill before participating in the questionnaire. Marie shared "I'd never heard of it" (Focus Group 2). Kate added "I feel like I should answer yes. Because I'm sure that in one of my classes in college they told me about it, but I really don't remember anything about it" (Focus Group 2).

Positive Support Belief. Also included in this theme were codes associated with participants' perceptions of how supportive the bill has been towards implementing play-based learning. Two participants expressed a *positive support belief* for the bill to generally support

educators. Annie shared that “I was always for it because it kind of, it gives those teachers a safety net if they're incorporating play in their classroom” (Focus Group 1). Macy contributed,

> I think it's been beneficial. I think there's a lot of people that have really jumped on this play wagon and trying to incorporate getting the knowledge out there. So hopefully...the ball keeps moving and it doesn't get stuck somewhere and it just ends because I think it's a great, great thing. (Focus Group 1)

Despite this expression of positivity, Macy also noted that her *sustained play belief* would support her in implementing play-based practices with or without the bill. This code explained her ongoing belief that play is valuable to children and should be used in primary-grade classrooms. She detailed her feelings, stating

> I would still want to incorporate play anyway... I don't know that that changed my idea of how I taught. I think it was something I knew was there to help me as a safety net had, should I come into contact with someone who felt like that was not needed in the classroom. (Focus Group 1)

Not Currently Supportive. Kate felt that the bill was *not currently supportive* of her play practices due to her short time in the profession. She stated, “I think since I just started that it hasn't affected that much” (Focus Group 2).

Possible Future Impacts. However, participants considered the *possible future impacts* that the bill might have on themselves and other educators. This second theme was characterized by the descriptions participants gave for how the PTLA might impact the use of PBL in the future. It contains three categories *spreading awareness*, *safety/legal protection for PBL*, and *resources/support needed*. Codes included in these categories exemplified the ideas that

participants shared for more effective promotion of the PTLA to increase play-based learning practices by primary grade educators.

Spreading Awareness. Participants considered *spreading awareness* to be an important part of future advocacy efforts in increasing the impact of the bill. In their responses, participants noted the need for *teachers* to have greater awareness of the PTLA. Annie's response explained her belief about the ability of the bill to support teachers to advocate for themselves. In her answer, she stated

> I feel like some of those teachers that are maybe on the fence about it, that kind of gives them, allows them to add more play into their classroom without, you know, repercussions because even if somebody is like, 'Oh, well you can't do that,' like 'well actually according to state law, I can.' But also hopefully they have the confidence to be able to... if they knew like the meat and potatoes of the bill, they might be a little bit more confident in saying 'yeah, I can and here's why'". (Focus Group 1)

Kate shared her feeling that other teachers' awareness would support her in continuing to use PBL. She shared that "I would say for me it would be helpful if other teachers were more aware so that I don't feel bad when I'm implementing them in my classrooms that I guess I can feel understood. (Focus Group 2).

Kate also noted a need for awareness for *parents* and their ability to support play practices as she drew from current positive attitudes in response to her pedagogical practices. In her answer she stated

> I am really lucky that I have this year parents who are all really excited about play in the classroom, and they're always telling me, 'thank you so much for making it fun for letting them play in the classroom, we really value that.' But I know that won't always be the

> case and that lots of times parents won't be aware of that. So... also parents too. (Focus Group 2)

Last, participants indicated that *administrators* awareness of the PTLA could improve the ability to implement it in schools. Macy expressed,

> I think it depends on the admin really. I think it comes from the top down. If your admin is supportive of the bill and I think and they know about it, I think it helps with teachers feeling that ease... I think the admin really can help push kind of that play piece if they know about the bill and what the benefits of it are. (Focus Group 1)

Safety/Legal Protection for PBL. The second significant sub-category centered around how the PTLA created *safety/legal protection for PBL.* Participants recognized the ability of the law to legally protect their right to teach using play. Annie noted that

> People can't come in and say you can't do it this way, because research has shown that yes, this is a really great way for kids to learn is through play, and gives teachers that protection of I can make a playful classroom because it's what's best for kids. (Focus Group 1)

Kate expressed her newfound comfort in the ability for the bill to protect her play-based teaching practices considering the news that she would be getting a new administrator in the coming year. She shared

> that literally was one thing that went through my head when he told me today that we would have a new principal and I was like, ‘what if he like, doesn't understand like, all the play-based stuff and in my classroom,’ so I think that now having that terminology read to me again, with that actual worry that I've had today that it does make me feel a little bit more secure that I have a lot to back me up. (Focus Group 2)

Macy noted her altered perception regarding education upon moving into Oklahoma wherein she realized the need for legal protections around play-based teaching. She shared her shift, stating

> I moved here from another state when I was learning about this act, or bill when it was a bill. I didn't even know that that was the thing that was of concern to teachers because where we, when I lived in another state that was just normal every day, there was always play in my kids' elementary and primary schools. And so when I came here and I was like, 'Oh, they're trying to mandate this law to make sure that that's okay.' Like I was kinda like, 'wait, what's happening in education, you know, like, what's, where's the shift?' And I totally missed something here because I thought that was kind of normal, like everyone plays and that's, they shouldn't be being told they shouldn't be doing that. And if they are like, why is that happening? So it was kind of an eye-opening experience moving here and, and then learning about that, and I was like, 'oh, okay, that's the thing'. (Focus Group 1)

Resources/Support Needed. Last, the theme *resources/support needed* included one code wherein Macy explained her need for greater support than simply knowing the bill exists. She states

> I wish there were more tools like more professional development, things where I could get some more resources on things that I can use that other people have found beneficial and keep teaching first-grade content because that for me is more valuable than just really knowing that the bill is out there (Focus Group 1)

which illuminated the limited current impact of the *Play to Learn Act*. The ideas central to this theme were explored in greater depth in response to research question 3.

Research Question 2

The second research question guiding this study was "What do primary grade teachers believe about the need for and effects of play-based learning in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade?" RQ2 was answered quantitatively using items 13, and 14, from the questionnaire. These items centered on teachers' beliefs regarding the need for play-based learning in their grade level and ways that play might support student growth in the developmental domains. Qualitative data from items 19, 20, and 21 on the questionnaire and follow-up focus group interviews provided greater context regarding teachers' beliefs about play-based learning in the primary grades.

Quantitative Data

Item Set 13: Beliefs About Play. In question set 13, teachers were asked to consider their personal beliefs about play. A definition of play was provided to all participants: "an activity that is spontaneous, done for its own sake, and enjoyable by the player." This section did not specifically direct teachers to consider play-based learning at school, rather it probed teachers regarding their beliefs about play generally. For descriptive statistics, see Table 13.

First, teachers responded to the statement "*Play is beneficial for children*" with 92% agreement (n=39 SA, n=6 A), 2% (n=1) neither agreeing nor disagreeing, and 6% disagreeing (n=3 D, n=0 SD). Next, they answered "*Children learning academic skills while they are playing*" with 92% agreeing (n=31 SA, n=14 A), 4% (n=2) neither agreeing nor disagreeing, and 4% disagreeing (n=2 D, n=0 SD). Teachers were prompted with "*Play supports social, emotional, and executive function development and self-regulation skills*" to which 92% indicated agreement (n=38 SA, n=7 A), 8% (n=4) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 0% disagreed (n=0 D, n=0 SD). These statistics indicated that most participants agreed that play is generally beneficial for children and beneficial in the acquisition of academic knowledge and in support of social and emotional skills.

To understand their beliefs about the appropriateness of play at school, teachers indicated their agreement with the statement "*Play is appropriate at home, but not at school*" with 10% agreement (n=1 SA, n=4 A), 8% (n=4) neither agreeing nor disagreeing, and 82% disagreeing (n=0 D, n=40 SD). Last, respondents answered the statement "*Play makes learning more meaningful for children*" with 88% agreement (n=37 SA, n=6 A), 4% (n=2) neither agreeing nor disagreeing, and 8% disagreeing (n=3 D, n=1 SD). The majority of respondents indicated that they believed play was appropriate at school and made learning more meaningful for children.

Table 13

Item Set 13: Beliefs About Play

Questionnaire Statement	N	M	SD
"Play is beneficial for children"	49	4.65	.805
"Children learning academic skills while they are playing"	49	4.51	.767
"Play supports social, emotional, and executive function development and self-regulation skills"	49	4.69	.619
"Play is appropriate at home, but not at school"	49	1.49	1.082
"Play makes learning more meaningful for children"	49	4.53	.981

Item Set 14: Play-Based Learning and Academic Subjects. In the next two sets of statements, teachers transitioned to thinking about play-based learning for their specific grade level. Play-based learning was defined on the questionnaire as "any learning activities that are performed by a child for self-amusement that have behavioral, social and psychomotor rewards. Play-based learning shall also mean activities that are child-directed, joyful and spontaneous whereby the rewards come from within the individual child" based on the language from the PTLA (Oklahoma Play to Learn Act, 2021, pp. 2-3). For the descriptive statistics associated with item set 14, see Table 14.

Teachers were asked to indicate their agreement with the following "Children should have opportunities for play-based learning in the following subject areas." For "*Literacy,*" 92%

agreed (n=27 SA, n=18 A), 6% (n=3) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 2% disagreed (n=0 D, n=1 SD). In consideration of "*Math,*" 96% agreed (n=32 SA, n=15 A), 0% (n=0) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 4% disagreed (n=1 D, n=1 SD). For "S*cience,*" 82% agreed (n=35 SA, n=5 A), 14% (n=7) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 4% disagreed (n=1 D, n=1 SD). When asked about "*Social Studies,*" 88% agreed (n=25 SA, n=18 A), 8% (n=4) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 4% disagreed (n=1 D, n=1 SD). Considering "*art,*" teachers indicated 84% agreement (n=34 SA, n=7 A), 12% (n=6) neither agreement nor disagreement, and 4% disagreement (n=0 D, n=2 SD).

Last, participants could optionally indicate their agreement with the option "other" to indicate another subject area where they believed children should have opportunities for play-based learning and 18/49 participants responded. Statistically, 83% agreed (n=9 SA, n=6 A), 0% (n=0) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 16% disagreed (n=2 D, n=1 SD). Six participants indicated the following as other subjects appropriate to integrate play-based learning: poetry, free play, all areas of education, social-emotional, technology, and writing. Some participants who chose this option declined to include an example.

Table 14

Item Set 14: Play-Based Learning and Academic Subjects

Questionnaire Statement	N	M	SD
"Literacy"	49	4.43	.791
"Math"	49	4.55	.792
"Science"	49	4.47	.960
"Social Studies"	49	4.33	.875
"Art"	49	4.45	1.001
"Other"	18	4.11	1.231

Combined Qualitative Themes

To answer RQ2, considerations of teachers' beliefs about play, the need for play in educational settings, and the effect of play in educational settings were included in the data analysis. On the questionnaire, teachers responded to item 19, "Please explain your personal beliefs about using play in the classroom in the grade you teach," item 20, "From your perspective, what is the relationship between play and learning for children in the grade you teach?" and item 21, "Please list current examples of play or playful learning available to your students. Explain how frequently they are offered." Participants' responses were utilized to organize their ideas into three themes: *relationship between play and learning, benefits of play incorporation,* and r*ole of play in primary grade classrooms.* These themes were also formulated using answers from follow-up focus group interviews.

Relationship Between Play and Learning. The first theme, *relationship between play and learning,* outlined participants' beliefs about how play and learning were related. This theme explained teachers' beliefs about the level of need for play to be utilized in educational settings. One category resulted from data analysis under this theme: *Perceptions of interconnectedness.* The responses were organized into three sub-categories titled *strong connection, conditional connection,* and *minimal/lack of connection.*

Strong Connection. First, answers that were coded as having a *strong connection* were explored. Participants' responses that evidence a strong connection explain that play and learning are linked to each other to support children. One participant stated, "I think there is a close relationship between games and learning" (Open-ended Response Item 20). Another wrote, "I believe that play is essential to learning" (Open-ended Response Item 19). The strength of connection is also demonstrated by this participant who expressed, "I believe that play is the most meaningful and age-appropriate way for kids especially kids in early childhood to learn"

(Open-ended Response Item 19). Some responses indicated that play is learning and thus the connection is inextricable. A participant noted, “To play is to learn” (Open-ended Response Item 19). Another stated, “Play is not just a way for children to have fun, but it is also an essential part of their learning and development” (Open-ended Response Item 20). Kate’s response reflected the idea of a strong connection between play and learning as well: "It's how they're naturally learning and exploring the world. So it makes sense that that would be the most effective way to also help them learn in school” (Focus Group 2).

Conditional Connection. Next, the responses coded as *conditional connection* were grouped. Participants’ responses that described a connection between play and learning that were contingent upon one factor or another were placed in this category. One respondent felt that there was an age level appropriateness that would need to be present to use play with their students. They wrote, “I use play when appropriate for my lessons. I think play is more appropriate for PreK and Kindergarten, but it still has benefits in older grades” (Open-ended Response Item 19). Another participant also listed appropriateness as a condition of the connection between play and learning. They wrote “Games...are often played mainly for entertainment purposes...I am not totally denying the role of games in learning. Appropriate game activities can enhance students' interest and participation in learning to a certain extent” (Open-ended Response Item 20). A different participant noted their belief that “kids learn from playing with the correct support and guidelines” rather than just from playing freely (Open-ended Response Item 20). Another participant shared a similar belief: “Play has to be established and expectations have to be set” (Open-ended Response Item 20).

Minimal/Lack of Connection. Finally, participants expressed their belief that there were *minimal/lack of connections* between play and learning. These responses were primarily

characterized by statements that prioritized direct instruction for learning and those that overtly asserted that they believed play and learning are not connected. One quote that represented these beliefs was

> I believe that learning should be the main activity in an elementary classroom and that games can distract students and make it difficult for them to focus on their learning tasks. I feel that games have a limited role in the classroom and do not contribute much to the learning outcomes of the students. (Open-ended Response Item 19)

A second participant wrote, "Games may give students a wrong attitude towards learning. They may think that learning is a recreational activity without much effort. This may lead to a lack of motivation and patience when students face real learning tasks" (Open-ended Response Item 19). A third participant detailed their belief in the lack of connection between play and learning and stated, "Games can be used as a supplementary means to enhance the fun of learning, but they cannot replace systematic teaching and learning" (Open-ended Response Item 20).

Role of play in primary grade classrooms. The second theme that explained participant teachers' beliefs regarding the need for play-based learning is the *role of play in primary grade classrooms.* Teachers in the study shared their current methods for incorporating play into their classrooms and explained how they created a balance in their approach to instruction. The two categories included in this theme are *current implementations in primary grade classrooms* and *implementation considerations*.

Current Implementations in Primary Grade Classrooms. Participants were asked on the questionnaire and during focus group interviews to describe play opportunities available to their students. Using the play-based learning spectrum, some responses were coded into the three categories, *free play*, *guided play,* and *playful learning.* Three other categories are also included

to denote responses that did not fit into the PBL spectrum: *outdoor play*, *physical education class*, and *multiple applications.* Some responses are teachers' beliefs about the types of play that they believe should be included in their classrooms while others are specific examples of those types of play that are currently in use.

Descriptions of play coded as *free play* were those that indicated an abundance of student choice, or that specifically were labeled as such. One participant expressed their belief regarding children's ability to play in school. They stated, "Children should be allowed to play. It shouldn't always be educational games, it can be just play" (Open-ended Response Item 19). Another participant provided multiple examples of free play available to their students:

> In my classroom, I make time for my students to create/play without much direction. They seem to enjoy pretending to work in stores and exchange money and use adding machines with money, they sketch fashion ideas and I have fabric swatches. They make several and have fashion shows. I have Legos, they play reporter, and investigator. They have also built roads and ramps to race or push cars off of. (Open-ended Response Item 21)

One respondent noted that students have access during "fun Friday unstructured play" (Open-ended Response Item 21). Annie also shared details about her once-a-week free play time in first grade. She shared,

> on Fridays, we try to do open play centers so they can like go into the kitchen area and go into the block area and stuff like that. So I try to provide you know, at least one time a week where they don't have any expectations of what they're supposed to there's nothing there's no recording or anything they just get to play for like 20 or 30 minutes. (Focus Group 1)

Students in Kate's class have free play time each day. She explained that "the last 30 minutes before lunch, they have free play, so they get to choose what they want to do so they can get manipulatives and just play with them" (Focus Group 2).

The participants also connected free play with children's *recess time*. A participant wrote, "We also have recess before school, after lunch, and in the morning we are permitted to go out for occasional extra recess" (Open-ended Response Item 21). In their conversation about free play, Kate and Annie shared the differences in the time allotted they have for recess. Kate shared that at her school,

> We do 30 minutes in the morning with snack and then we do 30 minutes after lunch. And then sometimes they'll get a third recess because like on Fridays will sometimes we'll go outside for 30 minutes at the end of the day on Friday. (Focus Group 1)

Annie noted that her school only offers one recess a day for first graders:

> We have 25 [minutes] for one recess after lunch. The benefit to our schedule is our recess backs right up to our specials and so they get kind of like a longer break time in the middle of the day but it would be nice to be able to break up our morning a little bit more because kindergarten gets two recesses so I'm 'not' jealous. (Focus Group 1)

Participants also described play where they had a greater level of direction or intention behind a learning activity, which was typically associated with a learning goal. These types of play were coded as *guided play.* Under the category of guided play, multiple types of learning were coded. Responses are organized into the following sub-categories: *language oriented, group work, project work, hands-on learning, directed play, centers,* and *puzzles.* Responses of *guided play* that were *language oriented* centered around playful ways to incorporate literacy or language into the curriculum. Multiple teachers noted the use of playful objects to practice

writing. Macy shared, “For my phonics, I use my playdough and I use my sand, and... we use shaving cream” (Focus Group 1). Reader’s theater and class discussions were also included.

Playful opportunities that included students working together were coded as *group work.* Participants noted that learning was more playful when students worked collaboratively. One participant stated, “Play is also used in group work when students are asked to work together for certain assignments” (Open-ended Response Item 21). Another participant noted, “I do lots of centers and partner activities” (Open-ended Response Item 19). Marie specified the amount of time available for students to work together, “we do partners at least half the day” (Focus Group 2).

Teachers also felt that guided play could be achieved through *project work.* One participant wrote, “I do some project-based learning where I can” (Open-ended Response Item 21). Annie expressed that observing her students allowed her to see their interests which increased her ability to create projects based on their interests. She said,

> I feel like it also can lead into like different kinds of projects...this year we'll do dominos where we have to match or add or subtract but they've really kind of caught on to like the engineering part of it where they like set up the whole track of dominoes and then knock them down. We watched some videos...but they can get more ideas on how to create their patterns being become more and more complete with them. So it's kind of it gives you the opportunity to like, ‘Where are their interests and where can I like, create a project for them?’ So I think that's kind of neat. (Focus Group 1)

Some examples of guided play included *hands-on learning.* One participant wrote about the separation between play and learning that occurred in first grade but added, “I try to incorporate hands-on learning as much as possible” (Open-ended Response Item 20). Another

participant offered a subject-oriented example. They wrote, “Take science class as an example, I will design some games related to experiments so that students can explore the mysteries of science in the process of hands-on operation.” (Open-ended Response Item 19). Two teachers also specifically stated that they engaged students in *directed play,* where they had specific goals tied to the play. One example from a participant read, “directed play during reading and math groups to practice and master skills daily” (Open-ended Response Item 21).

Many teachers in the study included play during learning *centers* which typically allowed students to interact with prechosen materials that had some open-ended properties but were still tied to specific academic goals. One teacher noted, “I use playful activities in daily center rotations” (Open-ended Response Item 21). Another specified, “Center activities and review games are used daily, but these are teacher-directed” (Open-ended Response Item 21). Annie shared her daily center activities, stating

> we do centers every day while I'm doing small groups... But the centers that I put out, even if there's a paper reporting, it's some kind of like puzzle they're putting together or it's like a splash game that they can play together or it's a story that they can write that has like an open ending. (Focus Group 1)

Macy approached centers differently but still included them. She shared, “I do centers three times a week. I really don't have the ability to do them five just the way that our schedule is built” (Focus Group 2). A few teachers also noted their use of *puzzles* to meet curricular or developmental goals. One noted, “I also use games and puzzles to teach math and critical thinking skills” (Open-ended Response Item 19). Another wrote, “Puzzles are used for visual discrimination. Students are asked to complete a puzzle using the illustration. They are then

asked to reassemble the puzzle using the back side of the puzzle pieces" (Open-ended Response Item 21).

In the next sub-category *playful learning,* were descriptions of games used in the classroom to support student learning. On the play spectrum, this category was most closely related to direct instruction. Examples of games provided by participants may or may not have had direct teacher involvement but are intended to help students understand specific academic concepts. Some responses generally mentioned games while others indicated subject-oriented game play. *Math games, literacy games, science games,* and *social studies games* were included. One teacher explained how they presented games in their classroom for students: "I have 3 different areas in class that offer a different set of games, stem toys, etc. One area also has writing and art choices. The third has all of the others but an addition of board games" (Open-ended Response Item 21). Others simply stated their use of games such as "board games", and "Games on a specific topic" (Open-ended Response Item 21).

Many examples of *math games* were included by participants. Examples provided by separate participants on open-ended response item 21 were "Math Monopoly is a game in which students roll dice to move forward, solving math problems or completing math tasks as they go," "Multiplication Games," and "the "number game" so that they can learn to count and calculate in the game" (Open-ended Response Item 21). Marie also gave an example of a math game students played in her class. She shared, "They love to play around the world with math flashcards, just racing each other" (Focus Group 2). Teachers also felt that l*iteracy games* were necessary in primary grade classrooms. Different participants shared examples such as "spelling games," "literacy bingo," and "reading-based games in ELA" (Open-ended Response Item 21). Marie also provided an example of a spelling game, "that's their favorite game of the week. That's

called sparkle. It's absolutely no prep, easy as can be." (Focus Group 2). One example was provided for *science games* and *social studies games* as well.

Other codes were assigned to examples of play implementations that were provided by teachers, though some were limited in their use. One such example was *outdoor play.* One teacher said, "I encourage students to engage in outdoor play activities, such as tag, soccer, or nature exploration." (Open-ended Response Item 21). Another teacher provided an example, stating, "We have an outdoor classroom and a water lab outside to provide spaces for outdoor play-based learning, but these rarely get used." Teachers also noted opportunities for play during *physical education class.* One teacher expressed, "The only play-based learning are stem labs and gym" (Open-ended Response Item 21). Another noted, "Physical education classes are scheduled several times a week to allow students to engage in a variety of physical games and sports" (Open-ended Response Item 21).

Some examples of play-based learning used in primary grade classrooms did not fit into a specific designation along the play spectrum. These responses were coded under *multiple applications* which indicated that the play examples could be applied in various contexts. The sub-categories included were *experimentation, manipulatives, technology, art,* and *dramatic play.*

The code *experimentation* described play examples where students were able to experiment with objects, primarily to understand scientific concepts. Participants stated, "We do labs in science," and "science experiments" as a form of experimentation play (Open-ended Response Item 21). Participants also described other types of experimentation with objects that occur in their classrooms. Participants described play with *manipulatives,* in which students used classroom objects to play freely or to understand a specific concept. One participant described

their inclusion as “Dominoes for math activities including addition/subtraction and engineering concepts. Playdough mats for both ela and math” (Open-ended Response Item 21). Multiple participants indicated that students had access to Legos for building or math-related activities. Macy shared about the manipulatives she utilizes for teaching phonics. She stated, “I have lacing tools with phonics pieces. I have the Lego blocks that are phonics pieces. I have unifix cubes that are phonics pieces” (Focus Group 2).

Teachers also considered the access children had to *technology* related play. In their examples, they indicated that children played games on iPads and Chromebooks. Additionally, Macy provided a teacher-led example of technology play, stating, “We do Kahoot games with our social studies too. And so that's another kind of technology type of game that we play. I mean, it's on a tablet, but sometimes we'll do Jeopardy with those” (Focus Group 2). Participants also indicated that play could be associated when children created *art.* Teachers provided examples of free art creation in their classrooms. Additionally, Marie shared about a more teacher-directed art opportunity in her class. She said, “When we have a response to literature...I do lots of lots of directed drawing” (Focus Group 2). Finally, teachers shared examples of *dramatic play* options they’ve made available to their students. One teacher noted the “dramatic play area where they have costumes, puppets and props” (Open-ended Response Item 21). Multiple other responses included puppets as options for students. Two participants mentioned having a home living center in their room. One wrote, “I have a home living center in my room. This gives students the chance to practice real-life activities and use vocabulary while playing!” (Open-ended Response Item 21). Kate shared about the specific way she uses her dramatic play center, which is accessible to students each day. She said,

> we have a dramatic play corner which is very strange for first grade because nobody else in my building, like kindergarten barely even has dramatic play centers, which I think is insane. But we have a dramatic playing corner, and we change it depending on like our social studies theme or like our science...So first it was like a doctor office, turned into like a vet, and now it's a space station because we're learning about planets. So during free time, they get to go and play with the manipulatives that are there. (Focus Group 2)

Implementation Considerations. The second and final category included under the theme *role of play in primary classrooms* is *implementation considerations.* Participant responses included in these sub-categories illustrated ways that teachers considered the role of play in their classroom instruction and their beliefs regarding the need for play in schools. The sub-categories included *positive need belief, balance of play and direct instruction*, and *perceptions of access.*

The first sub-category, *positive need belief,* summarized participants' beliefs that play was needed in primary grade classrooms. A few representative quotes included, "Children need play," "I think it is essential," and "Children should be allowed to play" (Open-ended Response Item 19). Marie indicated her positive belief, "I think that children, that that's their modem, and that they should experience learning in a modality that's comfortable with them," and Kate responded, "I would agree, definitely. That they should be playing. That's what's developmentally appropriate for them" (Focus Group 2).

Though many teachers indicated a need for play, the consideration for a *balance of play and direct instruction* proliferated in responses as well. One participant described her practice, stating, "I use teacher-directed lessons for a portion of my classroom then allow them to use what they have learned to create and imagine, play" (Open-ended Response Item 19). Another wrote, "I'm going to make sure that the kids get a good mix of work and play" (Open-ended

Response Item 19). A third participant noted that they used games “once or twice a week depending on how well my students get their work done that week” (Open-ended Response Item 21). Examples from the focus group interviews provided more context as to what this looks like. Kate explained her process during math:

> we always start our math with a game or with manipulatives and I'll let them first just play with the manipulatives otherwise they're not going to pay attention when we're trying to do more directed stuff. I'll let them play with it for a few minutes, just free play, and then we'll start our lesson where it's more directed what to do with the manipulatives like unifix cubes or the tens blocks and ones blocks or even we did like popsicle sticks for tally marks. (Focus Group 2)

Finally, the sub-category *perceptions of access* provided detailed explanations from the two focus group interviews regarding teachers’ perceptions of the levels of accessibility to implement play in primary grade classrooms and various considerations they must make. Coded portions include *access to tools/materials, perceptions of ease, targeted skills,* and *open-ended vs targeted skills.* As participants explained why they felt certain play situations could be implemented more successfully than others, the idea of *access to tools/materials* arose. Macy explained why play occurred more frequently in literacy than math, sharing,

> I feel like I have a lot more tools and manipulatives that I use for my ELA phonics program than I do for my math. So that's typically where I tend to have more of my centers focused on... I just have a more diverse group of things. Where math where we're learning, you know, addition and subtraction I feel like it's always the same kind of blocks or counting items that they use for those things and I have my base 10 pieces but

> for my phonics...I just feel like I have a lot more at my disposal to use for those things and so that we use those a little bit more than I do my math tools. (Focus Group 1).

Access to play was also conceptualized as a *perception of ease*. This theme for Macy coincided with her belief regarding access to tools. Though she described her desire to include a wider range of play opportunities, Macy explained "I just feel like that's and I hate to say it, but it's one of the more easier things...I can pull a game together...I have supplies that I can do that with." (Focus Group 1). Kate also expressed academic subjects that she believed provided an easier way to incorporate play. She noted,

> it's easier to come up with games for math. I don't know. I just feel like it's easier to work with numbers. And then I also think it's easier to find like exploratory play like with social studies and science because it's stuff that you can actually touch. (Focus Group 2)

The participants also considered the ways that play addressed *open-ended vs targeted skills.* Annie and Macy both felt they were able to offer more open-ended math play than literacy play. Macy asserted, "Math is more, a little bit more freeform than I would say my phonics and ELA centers are... with ELA. I think that's a little bit more structured" (Focus Group 1). Annie shared a similar outlook. She noted,

> I would say my math centers have more access to like, a little bit more like freedom of choice play because once they're done with whatever our math lesson is... they can go grab...a free choice math lesson...My literacy centers, while they're still playful, it's something that I've chosen specifically to hit some of those targets. (Focus Group 1)

Benefits of Play Incorporation. Teachers considered their personal beliefs regarding play in their classrooms. From their answers, they identified multiple benefits derived from

incorporating play into the learning space which represent the effects of PBL in schools. The third theme *benefits of play incorporation* contained three categories to provide greater context to their answers. The three categories are *developmental benefits*, *pedagogical benefits,* and *supporting student learning processes*.

Developmental Benefits. Teachers in the study shared their beliefs about the types of benefits play has on children's development. The category *developmental benefits* contained codes derived from explicit expressions of teachers' beliefs regarding ways in which children develop from playing in schools. Also included are codes that note teachers' reports of the inclusion of learning activities that support development in multiple areas. One participant quote that represented this idea states, "I feel personal play would be beneficial and more meaningful to students and how they learn. (Open-ended Response Item 19).

First, participants noted *cognitive benefits.* Among those were developments in children's *math* abilities. One participant stated, "Often during math...students play various games to help enforce the skills being taught" (Open-ended Response Item 21). Another participant wrote, "A number of math games are used to help students reinforce math concepts and skills" (Open-ended Response Item 21). Participants also claimed *science* skills were developed through play in primary grade classrooms. A participant noted, "Science games not only develop students' observation and experimental skills but also allow them to experience the fun of science in a hands-on way" (Open-ended Response Item 21). Kate provided some examples of science-based playful learning that occurred in her classroom. She shared,

> Lots of times I'll just bring in objects for them to like explore and play with. So like when we were studying about rocks. I just brought in different types of rocks and they could

> play with it that way or when we were studying about the layers of the earth. We went outside and I said here's chalk. Show me how you could represent that. (Focus Group 2)

Participants also shared that student learning through play occurred during *STEM* (science, technology, engineering, and math) activities. One participant wrote, “I have different stem activities in our play areas” (Open-ended Response Item 21).

Other areas of cognitive development were noted by teachers. C*ritical thinking and problem-solving skills* were mentioned as a benefit of play-based teaching. One teacher said, “Games often contain a problem-solving element, which helps develop students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills” (Open-ended Response Item 19). Another noted, “For my classroom, I think the biggest benefit of play is learning to solve problems” (Open-ended Response Item 20). Marie contextualized this during focus group 2 wherein she described her belief that children need greater access to play in schools because it supports “problem-solving and thinking outside the box. We don't need to just answer questions and take a test. We need to think” (Focus Group 2). Kate responded by saying,

> Yeah, I would agree with that point of that it helps them think for themselves kind of. I've noticed some of my kids come in, and they just want me to give them the answer or give them the formula of how to get the answer instead of trying to think creatively about it, or critically about it. And I think that some forms of play really help build those muscles and give them a safe place to build those muscles because they're having fun while they're doing it. (Focus Group 2)

Second, I noted instances where participants provided examples of *language/literacy* development as a benefit of play-based learning. Participants believe that multiple types of play could benefit students’ language growth. One participant shared, “Through vocabulary games,

students not only increase their vocabulary but also improve their mental agility and spelling skills" (Open-ended Response Item 21). A second participant wrote that they would incorporate "role-playing activities to help students practice language skills or empathy" to benefit language development (Open-ended Response Item 19).

Next, participant responses that noted the *social and emotional* benefits resulting from play are included. Teachers' beliefs centered around the ability of play to support multiple social and emotional skills. One participant stated, "I believe that using play in the classroom is important for social-emotional growth" (Open-ended Response Item 19). A second respondent wrote more specifically about the emotional benefits in their response: "Play provides a space for emotional expression and exploration that helps students develop emotional intelligence and emotional management skills" (Open-ended Response Item 20). Marie noted the importance of her students choosing their partners to work and play with because it prepares them for their future. She said, "I want them to make a choice because... that's what they're gonna have to do in the world" (Focus Group 2). Macy also noted how students were prepared for life through social and emotional growth opportunities during play. She stated,

> I think it allows them to understand social and emotional aspects of everyday life. Things that they have to deal with... getting mad over losing a game... it opens the door for those kinds of teaching moments and they're learning from that experience. (Focus Group 1)

As noted by participants, other social-emotional skills are developed during play. *Peer interaction and collaboration* is one area where they felt students benefitted from play. One participant wrote that "It gives them the opportunity to collaboratively work with others to achieve a common goal" (Open-ended Response Item 19). Another stated, "It also teaches them to listen and interact with their peers" (Open-ended Response Item 20). A third participant

included that “Play is an opportunity to socialize, and through games and group activities, students can develop social skills of teamwork, communication and sharing” (Open-ended Response Item 20). Macy also said, “I just see a lot more benefits when they're having to work with their peers, they get different ideas about certain topics” (Focus Group 1).

Under this category, the sub-code e*mpathy* was also identified as something that could be taught or developed. In the open-ended response item 21, a participant wrote, “In... social-emotional learning, students can role play to develop expressive skills and empathy.” Macy also shared that students are supported in their “peer relationships and, you know, when someone's feeling sad, how do they help with that” (Focus Group 1). Participants also included that *relationships* (a sub-code) are built through play which benefited their students. One participant wrote “I feel like play in the classroom builds relationships and SEL skills for my students that will benefit them throughout the year” (Open-ended Response Item 19). Another noted that they included “free-play for building relationships” (Open-ended Response Item 21).

Other codes were assigned to other ideations of the benefits of play as they relate to social and emotional development. One code *self-expression,* was given to a participant response who wrote that play “helps them learn to express themselves” (Open-ended Response Item 20). Another code included was *relieves stress and anxiety*, which organized responses that indicate the stress-relieving benefits of play. One participant wrote, “It can also be a great way for children to relieve stress and anxiety” (Open-ended Response Item 20). Annie reflected this sentiment in her response and said, “Aside from academics, I also feel like it's a really good stress reliever... kind of gives them a chance to feel like they're disengaging their brain while they're still actually working through all of that stuff” (Focus Group 1). Marie also noted her concerns about increased stress in students' lives. She shared her ideas for increasing play to

combat these stressors: “I think there's that a lot of things we could do to let them be comfortable in their environment, at school, and at home” (Focus Group 2). Conversely, participants wrote about how play benefits children because it can build *confidence and self-esteem.* One participant wrote “Play gives students confidence” and another stated, “Play can help children to build their confidence and self-esteem" (Open-ended Response Item 20). Finally, Marie noted that children develop a *growth mindset* as a result of being offered play in the classroom. A growth mindset indicates that children believe they are capable learners. She described her students’ approach to learning and the changes they have had over the year after being offered multiple opportunities for playful learning:

> at the beginning, they were very worried about ‘oh, I got behind...or I'm not doing it exactly right.” And now they're much more open to “well, it doesn't matter if that looks hard. I'm gonna give it a try.’ And ‘it doesn't matter if it didn't come out exactly like that. I like doing it.’...the more we present them choices, the more they're just eager to try something” (Focus Group 2).

Other benefits were identified by participants as they considered play-based learning in their classrooms. One category included is *motor skills.* One participant shared their belief that “I believe that using play in the classroom is important for...developing fine and gross motor skills” (Open-ended Response Item 19). Macy expressed her belief that “they do need to get up and move their bodies” to benefit from playing (Focus Group 1). Another benefit the participants identified was the development of *imagination and creativity.* One coded segment notes, “I encourage students to engage in free play during recess and indoor recess to allow them to explore their interests and develop their imaginations” (Open-ended Response Item 19). Another participant stated, “Through games, children can better understand and apply what they have

learned and develop their creativity and problem-solving skills" (Open-ended Response Item 19). Annie expressed that even though she would not classify some of her learning activities as play, but only playful, she still noted that "it's still kind of like that imagination and creativity that they get to use" (Focus Group 1). Finally, Macy spoke about the benefit of play for *holistic development*. She said, "I think it's essential to help them develop their whole person versus just sitting at a desk doing worksheets all day long" (Focus Group 1).

Pedagogical Benefits. The second category under the theme *benefits of play incorporation* is *pedagogical benefits.* This category contained participant responses that designated teachers' beliefs about how play benefited their play pedagogy. Teachers' beliefs about teaching played a large role in what types of activities and lessons were implemented in the classroom. Five sub-categories explain the many pedagogical benefits that teachers identified: *motivation and active engagement, enhanced learning atmosphere, subject area integration, classroom management,* and *assessment of children's understanding.* Each section contains representative quotes.

First, the code *motivation and active engagement* explained teachers' beliefs that play increased students' motivation towards and active engagement in learning. One respondent wrote, "Through interesting learning activities, teachers can stimulate students' curiosity and thirst for knowledge, prompting them to explore knowledge more actively" (Open-ended Response Item 19). Another shared their rationale for using play: "I really enjoy using games in the classroom to teach children how to learn. I feel that this approach is very beneficial to students as it makes learning more fun and interactive and increases motivation and engagement" (Open-ended Response Item 23). Some responses are characterized by comparing student responses to play/games to didactic teaching methods. One participant stated, "It's hard for

students to get motivated in the classroom with normal teaching methods but with games the children are enthusiastic and energetic and actively respond" (Open-ended Response Item 19). In focus group two, Kate stated "I also think that it just helps kids be excited about learning." Annie's response related to her answer wherein she shared,

> I also I try to bring in play with whatever I do. Yeah, there are times we had to like sit and like you know, do [the literacy curriculum] or whatever. But, you know, anytime I can get some kind of movement in there or turn a center from a pencil paper center into a playful center, I feel like they're going to be more engaged with it, which means they're going to practice the skills more often and like more deeply, because it's interesting to them instead of just writing down things. (Focus Group 1)

Codes included in the category, *enhanced learning atmosphere,* detailed the benefits that play offered to the classroom environment and atmosphere while children are learning. A participant wrote, "I believe that play in the classroom is central to creating the best learning environment for my students" (Open-ended Response Item 19). Others listed the atmospheric enhancements that arise from using play in the classroom. One participant noted, "Games can break the tension of a traditional classroom and provide students with a positive, fun learning experience" (Open-ended Response Item 19). Another stated, "Children can learn in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere" when play is involved (Open-ended Response Item 19).

Teachers also recorded the opportunity for *subject area integration* during PBL. A participant wrote, "Play-based learning is also important for integrating learning over all subject areas" (Open-ended Response Item 19). Another participant noted the difficulty that they faced with implementing play and the ability for integration to increase their inclusion of play. In their response, they said "In second and third grades, it can be tough to implement play-based learning

in the classroom because content area knowledge really comes into play. The best way we do it is through project work that integrates subject areas" (Open-ended Response Item 19). Annie provided examples of ways that subjects might be integrated during play-based learning that benefited her ability to reinforce multiple concepts at a time. She shared,

> if you've got the literacy in a dramatic play center, and you've got the money in a dramatic play center, and you've got all of these things that are supporting what you're doing, they're still applying things that they learned in [the literacy curriculum] and they're still applying things that they've learned about money or time. (Focus Group 1)

Two participants specifically noted that play benefits their *classroom management.* The first respondent stated, "I have noticed that play helps my kids enjoy school which helps my classroom management" (Open-ended Response Item 19). The second noted their belief that it could support them if they were able to incorporate more play. They noted "I wish I could implement more play into my classroom. I feel it could help management wise and academics" (Open-ended Response Item 19). Last, one participant included an indication that play could benefit their *assessment of children's understanding.* While discussing during focus group one, Macy shared the following:

> It's it gives me more insight I feel like then just a worksheet because I can hear their conversations as they're actually verbalizing kind of how they're thinking about certain things versus just getting an answer on a piece of paper.

Supporting Student Learning Processes. The final category which illustrates the benefits of incorporating play into the classroom is titled *supporting student learning processes.* In responses coded under this category, teachers describe their perceptions regarding the beneficial ways in which students processed learning through play-based learning opportunities. A

representative quote that exemplifies this idea is, “Learning is enhanced by play experiences that are joyful, student-centered, meaningful, actively engaging” (Open-ended Response Item 20). This quote explains how the process of learning through play can affect students in a positive way. Four sub-categories are included under this category: *increase interest in learning, exploration and open-ended processing, enjoyment,* and *fosters connections.*

Teachers expressed that play leads to an *increase interest in learning* when it is available in the classroom. On open-response item 19, multiple participants noted similarly that games/play “can stimulate students' interest”, “increase their interest in learning”, and “increase children's interest in learning”. Marie explained this idea further by describing interest-oriented activities she had implemented. She followed these examples by expressing the importance of tailoring learning to student interests: “They just they just have such an appetite if you feed it and you don't have to follow what the next person's doing. You know, they get a completely different experience” (Focus Group 2).

Another sub-category that explains the benefits of play for *supporting student learning processes* was *exploration and open-ended processing.* Responses included in this section denote areas where participants felt that play allows children the ability to explore concepts and process information in an open-ended way. One participant wrote about their belief regarding open-ended processing stating, “It gives them time to process ideas and concepts with themselves and each other without the pressure of "getting it right".” (Open-ended Response Item 20). Another participant felt that “they are able to take risks and try new things in a safe and supportive environment” (Open-ended Response Item 20). A third participant stated, “I think play allows students the freedom to creativity explore and grow beyond what teaching directed learning can do” (Open-ended Response Item 19). Another likewise compared the process of learning through

play to didactic teaching: “Exploring and discovering a phonics rule or math concept is much more meaningful for the child than a lecture or one modality instruction” (Open-ended Response Item 20). Finally, Annie noted ways that she allows her students to explore using materials during play that give students greater freedom when “they finish something, they have the ability to go grab one of those centers when they're done and be able to just free explore with some materials. And I feel like it keeps them more interested” (Focus Group 1).

Participants also expressed that *enjoyment* comes from play and supports students in their learning processes. One teacher expressed their belief that “without playing, students get bored and are less interested in learning. It is important for learning to be enjoyable” (Open-ended Response Item 20). Another participant expressed, “I think students learn more when they are having fun!” (Open-ended Response Item 20). Kate expressed the impact of enjoyment on her students in the following response:

> I had so many kids who like this year their parents told me ‘my kid is excited to go to school for the first time in their life. They love going to school. They come home saying how much fun they had at school. And we haven't had this experience. Usually, they're crying when we drop them off and stuff.’ So I think just getting them excited about it and thinking ‘oh, this could this is something that I'm good at. This is something I enjoy!’ ,instead of making learning a chore. (Focus Group 2)

Finally, teachers noted the various ways that play *fosters connections* to learning. The responses included in this sub-category are primarily associated with teachers’ perceptions regarding the benefits that play offers to students as they make connections to academic content. One participant stated, “Children develop their own schema, play-based learning facilitates these connections” (Open-ended Response Item 19). Another wrote, “Students make connections

while playing. They are able to apply what they have learned to real life situations" (Open-ended Response Item 20). A third participant expressed, "I think children should learn through play and when done right can have greater impact than traditional teachings" (Open-ended Response Item 20). Macy expressed her opinion of the depth of learning that play offered to children. She said, "I think it helps them retain the information too, because there's that connection with what they're doing and the brain and developing those more deep connections versus just that surface level" (Focus Group 1). Kate also noted where students made connections to prior knowledge during play. She stated,

> So during free time, they get to go and play...and I've noticed that they are continuing learning because they're using vocabulary that we've been learning throughout the week, but it's not like I'm directing them they're just playing, however, they want interacting with what's there. (Focus Group 2)

Participants also noted other ways that play fosters connections. One code describes how play *supports concentration.* In their response, the participant wrote "By introducing fun elements into learning activities, teachers can help students improve their concentration levels and increase the concentration of their learning" (Open-ended Response Item 20). Two responses were coded *makes learning easier*. The ease of making connections to content was described by one participant who said "Using games in the classroom can make students understand and master knowledge more easily" (Open-ended Response Item 19). Kate noted a similar idea based on her own beliefs:

> it's just the natural way that they learn so it's gonna make more sense to them when it's present in that format, it's gonna make more sense, and it's getting catch on better. Like,

> they're going to get it easier than if you're just handing them a spreadsheet or something. (Focus Group 2)

Participants also expressed that connections were fostered through *unconscious learning.* A participant stated, “Students are able to learn while not even realizing they are learning” (Open-ended Response Item 20). Another wrote, “Students can absorb knowledge unconsciously while playing” (Open-ended Response Item 20). Annie noted that her options for open-ended play support this idea because “it gives them a little bit of a break while also still not realizing that they're still learning. They're still learning and still thinking” (Focus Group 1).

Considering connections, participants noted how play benefited knowledge acquisition. Codes assigned to *increases memory of content* explained teachers’ beliefs that play allowed students to remember what they have experienced more successfully. A participant detailed this by writing, “If I can create a game or activity of interest for a lesson, it's going to be more meaningful and impactful than just listening to a lecture” (Open-ended Response Item 19). A second participant stated, “I think it helps the concepts taught be added be cognitively added to their minds in the best and most effective way they store information” (Open-ended Response Item 19). Another participant noted, “Playing helps whatever they're learning to stick more concretely in their minds” (Open-ended Response Item 20).

Research Question 3

The third research question guiding this study was, “What do primary grade teachers believe about their role in play and necessary support to better implement play-based learning in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade classrooms?” RQ3 was answered using closed-ended items 15, 16, 17, and 18, open-ended items 19, 20, 22, and 23 from the questionnaire, and focus-group interviews. These items and questions explored the role of teachers in play-based learning, teachers’

perceived views of support currently available to them, and challenges that inhibit the use of play-based learning practices. Descriptive statistics from items 16, 17, and 18 are detailed first. Themes from the open-ended questionnaire questions and follow-up focus group interviews are presented second.

Quantitative Data

Item Set 15: Teachers' Role in Play-Based Learning. For the next set of statements, teachers were asked to consider their personal beliefs about their role in play-based learning at the grade level they teach. They indicated their agreement with six different roles, 1) facilitator, 2) observer, 3) leader, 4) co-player, 5) uninvolved, and 6) a director. Each role is described in relation to its title to provide a uniform understanding for every participant. See Table 15 for the descriptive statistics associated with these items.

First, teachers indicated their belief in being "*a facilitator: I set up materials, scaffold children's learning, and ask questions*" wherein 90% agreed (n=25 SA, n=19 A), 8% (n=4) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 2% disagreed (n=1 D, n=0 SD). For "*an observer: I watch children play and note areas where they are developing,"* 84% agreed (n=25 SA, n=17 A), 12% (n=6) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 4% disagreed (n=2 D, n=0 SD). In consideration of their belief as "*a leader: I guide children in play such as games, where I retain agency over the game,*" 63% agreed (n=14 SA, n=17 A), 20% (n=10) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 16% disagreed (n=6 D, n=2 SD). Next, teachers indicated their belief in their role as "*a co-player: I play with my students collaboratively or next to them while they play,*" and 74% agreed (n=13 SA, n=23 A), 16% (n=8) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 10% disagreed (n=5 D, n=0 SD). For "*uninvolved: I do not get involved in children's play,*" 24% agreed (n=3 SA, n=9 A), 8% (n=4) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 67% disagreed (n=20 D, n=13 SD). Last, teachers designated

their belief that their role is "*a director: I give children instructions and help them follow directions,*" and 59% agreed (n=14 SA, n=15 A), 27% (n=13) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 14% disagreed (n=3 D, n=4 SD). These results indicated that teachers mostly identified their role in play as a facilitator who sets up the environment and supports learning during play. In all roles, except uninvolved, more than half of the respondents agreed that they take on that role during play which indicated that teachers see themselves in multiple roles during play.

Table 15

Item Set 15: Teachers' Role in Play Based Learning

Questionnaire Statement	N	M	SD
"a facilitator: I set up materials, scaffold children's learning, and ask questions"	49	4.39	.731
"an observer: I watch children play and note areas where they are developing"	49	4.29	.842
"a leader: I guide children in play such as games, where I retain agency over the game"	49	3.71	1.137
"a co-player: I play with my students collaboratively or next to them while they play"	49	3.90	.918
"uninvolved: I do not get involved in children's play"	49	2.37	1.236
"a director: I give children instructions and help them follow directions"	49	3.65	1.200

Item Set 16: Perceived Support for Play-Based Learning. In this set of statements on the questionnaire, teachers indicated their level of agreement with various stakeholders who currently support them in teaching through play-based learning. See Table 16 for descriptive statistics. First teachers indicated if "*administrators at my school*" supported them in using play-based learning. Of the total participants, 67% agreed (n=13 SA, n=20 A), 18% (n=9) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 14% disagreed (n=7 D, n=0 SD). For "*coworkers,*" 76% agreed (n=17 SA, n=20 A), 12% (n=6) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 12% disagreed (n=4 D, n=2 SD). In consideration of "*parents*", 65% agreed (n=8 SA, n=24 A), 27% (n=13) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 8% disagreed (n=3 D, n=1 SD). In each of these three categories, more than half

of the participants indicated agreement of support. Teachers overall felt more supported by their coworkers than they did by administrators or parents.

When considering the support of "*laws/legislation/policy,*" 29% agreed (n=1 SA, n=13 A), 37% (n=18) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 35% disagreed (n=11 D, n=6 SD). The greatest number of respondents indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed that laws/legislation/policy support them in teaching play-based learning. Last, teachers indicated their agreement that their "*school district*" supported them in using play-based learning with 45% agreement (n=5 SA, n=17 A), 29% (n=14) neither agreement nor disagreement, and 27% disagreement (n=8 D, n=5 SD). While the greatest number of respondents indicated that their school district supports them in using play-based learning, less than half of the overall respondents agreed.

Table 16

Item Set 16: Perceived Support for Play-Based Learning

Questionnaire Statement	N	M	SD
"administrators at my school"	49	3.80	1.00
"coworkers"	49	3.94	1.088
"parents"	49	3.71	.890
"laws/legislation/policy"	49	2.84	1.028
"school district"	49	3.18	1.149

Item Set 17: Personal Beliefs Towards Play-Based Learning. The next set of statements focused on the teachers' personal beliefs regarding their ability to implement play-based practices in their classrooms. Teachers considered eight statements. See Table 17 for listings of descriptive statistics. First, teachers responded to "*I have enough materials to facilitate high quality learning through play.*" 47% agreed (n=9 SA, n=14 A), 12% (n=6) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 41% disagreed (n=15 D, n=5 SD). The greatest number of respondents

agreed that they do have enough materials, but this represented less than half of the overall participant group. Next, teachers indicated if "*I have enough time for play in my classroom*" with 29% agreement (n=2 SA, n=12 A), 12% (n=6) neither agreement nor disagreement, and 59% disagreement (n=16 D, n=13 SD). Most teachers disagreed that they felt they had enough time to implement play-based learning. Considering external pressures, teachers specified their agreement with "*There is pressure on me from others to teach using only teacher-directed activities*" 49% agreed (n=12 SA, n=12 A), 33% (n=16) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 18% disagreed (n=6 D, n=3 SD). Almost half of the respondents agreed that there is pressure to teach using teacher-directed instruction. These results indicate a mix of beliefs regarding external pressures.

For "*I can confidently help my students reach the grade level academic expectations through play,"* 67% agreed (n=11 SA, n=22 A), 16% (n=8) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 16% disagreed (n=7 D, n=1 SD). For the statement "*I feel confident in my abilities to create meaningful learning through play for my students,*" 69% agreed (n=13 SA, n=21 A), 21% (n=10) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 10% disagreed (n=5 D, n=0 SD). To follow this question, teachers designated their agreement with "*I would feel more confident if I had more training on using play in the classroom*" with 86% agreement (n=22 SA, n=20 A), 8% (n=4) neither agreement nor disagreement, and 6% disagreement (n=3 D, n=0 SD). The majority of participants indicated that they have an established level of confidence in reaching grade-level academic expectations and creating meaningful learning through play. However, a greater number of respondents agreed that they would feel more confident if they received training that supported implementing play.

The last two questions explored teachers' desire to use play in their classrooms. First teachers indicated their agreement with "*I am uninterested in using play in my classroom. I do not see the benefits for students at this age/grade level*" with 6% agreement (n=0 SA, n=3 A), 8% (n=4) neither agreement nor disagreement, and 86% disagreement (n=12 D, n=30 SD). Last, teachers responded to "*I would like to incorporate more play into my teaching*" with 73% agreement (n=24 SA, n=12 A), 22% (n=11) neither agreement nor disagreement, and 4% disagreement (n=2 D, n=0 SD).

Table 17

Item Set 17: Personal Beliefs Towards Play-Based Learning

Questionnaire Statement	N	M	SD
"I have enough materials to facilitate high quality learning through play."	49	3.14	1.323
"I have enough time for play in my classroom"	49	2.47	1.243
"There is pressure on me from others to teach using only teacher-directed activities."	49	3.49	1.175
"I can confidently help my students reach the grade level academic expectations through play,"	49	3.71	1.041
"I feel confident in my abilities to create meaningful learning through play for my students"	49	3.86	.935
"I would feel more confident if I had more training on using play in the classroom"	49	4.24	.855
"I am uninterested in using play in my classroom. I do not see the benefits for students at this age/grade level"	49	1.59	.888
"I would like to incorporate more play into my teaching"	49	4.18	.928

Question 18: Influence on Instruction. Finally, teachers indicated through a single multiple-choice question who they believed had the greatest influence on how they plan and implement instruction in their classrooms. I have ordered their answers from greatest to least. Of the 49 respondents, 35% answered, "*Myself*" (n=17), 20% chose "*school district*" (n=10), 16% indicated "*coworkers*" (n=8), 14% answered "*administrators at my school*" (n=7), 10% designated "*laws/legislation/policy*" (n=5), and 4% chose "*parents*" (n=2). The greatest number

of participants indicated that they have the greatest influence on instruction, but this does not represent half of the overall respondents. This data shows that teachers' beliefs vary regarding instructional decision-making.

Combined Qualitative Themes

The qualitative data used to answer research question three is organized into three major themes: *role of the teacher in play, barriers and limitations to using play,* and *support needed to increase play.* Each theme is organized in its own section.

Role of the Teacher in Play. The teacher plays a significant role in the implementation of play-based learning. The first theme that was used to organize data under RQ3 is *role of the teacher in play*. Categories included in this theme were organized using titles associated with teacher role definitions in the questionnaire: *facilitator, observer, co-player, director, and uninvolved.* Many of the descriptions contained multiple elements from teacher roles which indicated that teachers take on more than one during various play situations. There were no open-ended questions relating to this topic on the questionnaire, so all responses were coded from focus group interviews. Each category will be explained in its own section.

Facilitator. In the role of a *facilitator*, teachers set up the play materials, asked questions, and scaffolded student learning. This category also includes codes wherein teachers felt their role was to intentionally create more play opportunities for their students using meaningful materials and activities. Annie explained ways that she manipulates the curriculum provided by the district to make the content more playful and engaging for her first graders. She said,

> the science curriculum we have is a very online-focused one. And sometimes that can be really dry for first grade, and so I've tried to take the important parts of that and kind of get to the interactive part...right now we're talking about shadows and light and stuff so

> we've been taking flashlights and like making it a more playful activity and a partner activity. And then we might come back together and make a diagram or a drawing...we've done chalk shadow drawings and stuff like that to try to kind of incorporate all of that together, so it's a little bit more engaging for them. (Focus Group 1).

Macy noted, “I find that I often start by sharing ideas or instruction and then observing, allowing students the opportunity to explore, make mistakes, struggle, and problem solve. I will offer suggestions but never give them a "you must" answer” (Focus Group 1). Marie likewise had an idea for how she could facilitate play and learning in her classroom. She expressed,

> I like for them to come up with what the rules are and the patterns that they find instead of me just telling them, ‘you have to do that.’ Through exploration, in kind of guiding them where we want them to, kind of towards where we want to go. (Focus Group 2)

Annie also shared, “I may give some thought questions like "I wonder what would happen if..." to guide their thinking” (Focus Group 1).

Observer. In another role, the *observer,* teachers watch children play and make notes regarding their development and abilities. Macy shared that she takes on multiple roles in her classroom. While she may begin in one role, she “transitions to an observer watching as they often adapt my rules and play new games” (Focus Group 1).

Co-Player. To be a *co-player,* a teacher plays with her students collaboratively or near them while they play. Annie mentioned that she sometimes will take on this role “When we have dramatic play centers open, I am often a “customer” where the kids take the lead and I follow a role they assign to me” (Focus Group 1).

Director. When teachers take on the *director* role, they give instructions to children and help them follow directions within the play. Marie shared, “I observe for understanding and step

in to clarify directions and redirect if needed" (Focus Group 2). Macy felt that her role is often to be a director which she characterized as "My role in the classroom during play often begins as an instructor teaching the rules of the games" (Focus Group 1). Later she noted that when children have access to free play, "My role in the classroom during play often begins as an instructor teaching the rules of the games" (Focus Group 1).

Uninvolved. The *uninvolved* role is characterized by teachers avoiding being involved in children's play. Annie expressed, "I also clean unused items when all students are fully engaged in play as to not derail their progress" (Focus Group 1). This role typically occurs after children have already begun playing.

Barriers and Limitations to Using Play. Next, to provide greater context to teachers' perceptions regarding the challenges presently facing them concerning utilizing play-based learning in their classrooms, the theme *barriers and limitations to using play* will be explored. This theme exemplifies the various ways that teachers feel inhibited in their play-based learning practices. Under this theme, codes were organized into the following categories: *policy-based challenges*, *lack of community support, practical challenges*, and *personal perceptions.* Representative quotes from open-ended questionnaire responses and focus-group interviews will be included to emphasize each category.

Policy-Based Challenges. Teachers expressed the many ways in which they believed policies in their districts and schools surrounding their teaching practices were prohibitive to using play-based learning practices. Under this category, three major sub-categories were identified: *standards expectations*, *testing/test preparation*, and *curricular expectations*. *Standards expectations* codes include responses that indicate how district or state-level expectations for the teaching of standards connect to participants' perceptions of difficulty in

teaching using play-based learning. One participant noted in the open-ended responses that "with district expectations regarding curriculum and rigorous state standards, play-based learning is almost impossible" (Open-ended Response Item 19). Another shared their concern about play (games) ability to meet standard expectations. They stated, "curriculum standards have clear requirements for teaching content and methods, and games may not meet these standards" (Open-ended Response Item 22).

To illustrate the category, *testing/test preparation,* some participants simply noted "state testing," "testing," and "testing load" as identified barriers to using play. Codes included in this category indicate that state-level test and district-level testing and the preparation for both present barriers to PBL. Participants noted various pressures including, "the pressure to do better on our standardized tests somewhat limits play time" (Open-ended Response Item 20), "I feel extreme pressure to teach all objectives before spring break in order to prepare for the test" (Open-ended Response Item 20), and "I feel that pressure to 'Test Well' is a priority in the state" (Open-ended Response Item 22). Participants also expressed the difficulty associated with weekly testing. One participant answered, "[it] is not realistic with the expectations for testing and teaching curriculum in the district" (Open-ended Response Item 19). Kate expanded on this idea during the second focus ground interview and shared "sometimes it's really hard to fit all of that in...we have to test them on multiple subjects every week" (Focus Group 2).

Last, the challenges from imposed *curricular expectations* in school districts were noted by primary grade educators. On the questionnaire, teachers were asked to specifically identify barriers to the implementation of play-based learning on item 22. This category is characterized by participant responses regarding teaching the curriculum chosen by their district, curriculum delivery, and the expectations for the pace of teaching the curriculum. Multiple responses

indicated that the curriculum presented a barrier. Teachers stated, “Curriculum expectations,” “curriculum,” “curriculum requirements,” “district content requirements,” and “too much curriculum” in response to this question (Open-ended Response Item 22). Others provided greater context in their responses. One teacher wrote, “The pressure to use curriculum is a significant barrier to using play as a learning strategy. Play is often pushed to the back burner, while curriculum is often very demanding” (Open-ended Response Item 22). Another teacher answered, “District required curriculum to be delivered the exact same way in each classroom daily. It leaves little wiggle room for projects and special interests” (Open-ended Response Item 22).

Lack of Community Support. The theme *lack of community support* centralized responses in which teachers specified perceptions of lacking various stakeholders’ support for play-based learning practices. Three categories under community support were identified by primary grade educators as barriers to the implementation of play-based learning: *lack of administrator support*, *lack of colleague support*, and *lack of parental support*. First, *a lack of administrator support* is characterized by teachers’ perceptions of administrators' misconceptions about play as a method of learning. One teacher stated, “Many administrators look at play-based learning only as play” (Open-ended Response Item 20). Another similarly noted that their “administration or higher saying play-based learning isn't rigorous enough” presented a barrier to implementation (Open-ended Response Item 22). Annie further contextualized the concept by detailing how she perceives administrators who do not have a strong understanding about the role of play in learning. Annie shared,

> there's always just this idea of when administrators come in, especially ones that aren't very familiar with early childhood, that if they're not working, if they're doing

> something... a dramatic play center, then it looks like time wasting instead of, you know, actual work. (Focus Group 1)

Another category that explains the theme of *lack of community support* is *lack of colleague support*. Codes within this category explain educators' perceptions regarding the perceived barriers that colleagues created to using play-based learning in their classrooms through lack of support for the practice, and judgment regarding the use of play in the primary grades. One teacher explained, "Other colleagues and teachers do not support me" (Open-ended Response Item 22). Another stated that judgment specifically, "the judgment of coworkers thinking we are not doing serious work in my classroom" influenced their ability to use play in the classroom (Open-ended Response Item 22). Marie echoed this sentiment in her response during a focus group interview. She said, "I think my partners definitely think I waste a lot of time" (Focus Group 2). Marie had a more supportive partner at a previous school. She noted, "I really miss that partner and that that environment" (Focus Group 2). Similarly, Kate noted her worries about the judgment of her coworkers. She stated,

> One of my biggest barriers, which is ridiculous, but it's just what the other people in my building are thinking. Because I'm always like, 'they're gonna walk by and think that we're not doing any, we're not doing serious work.' Because I think so many people don't understand that play is serious work. And I just, I think that judgment is a huge thing for me, and just worrying about other people taking me seriously, I guess, as a teacher. (Focus Group 2)

Finally, a few participants shared perceptions of *lack of parental support* as a barrier to implementing play-based learning based on actual and perceived approval of parents. One teacher answered that "parents' lack of cooperation" was a barrier (Open-ended Response Item

22). Another noted, “Some parents... may place more emphasis on traditional teaching methods and be skeptical about the role of games in learning. They may believe that games distract students and reduce learning time” (Open-ended Response Item 22).

Practical Challenges. The category *practical challenges* illustrated practical challenges identified by teachers. Coded segments within this theme are organized into the following categories: *lack of time*, *access to materials/resources*, *class size*, *lack of space*, *student behaviors*, and *lack of training*. The category with the greatest number of codes was *lack of time*. Teachers indicated that a perceived lack of time during the school day was a significant barrier to implementing play-based learning due to strict schedules around teaching. Five participants simply stated “time” as a barrier (Open-ended Response Item 22). Others offered further depth into their time-oriented struggles. One participant wrote “I don't have enough time. :(" (Open-ended Response Item 22). Another participant noted a direct connection between the barriers of curriculum implementation and the lack of time together, stating “Not enough time to follow curriculum pacing and incorporate play” (Open-ended Response Item 22). During her focus group discussion, Macy expressed the pressures she feels regarding time. Though she incorporated games as often as possible, she noted the difficulty of incorporating more play due to time constraints. She shared,

> I feel like time also, time is never on my side. And so what is the quicker way to do that?...Let's play a game. They're getting some interaction, and I can get in all the stuff I need to get in. Sometimes I feel like if I take too much time to do stuff like that, then I am never going to get where I need to be and then I'm going to get... ‘hey, you need to make sure you hit X, Y and Z by this point in the year’ and you know, ‘why haven't you gotten there?’ ‘Well, we've done this instead.’ I've wanted to incorporate reader's theater into my

> literacy stuff. But it just hasn't happened because of time. Time is never on my side. Never, never as the teacher. (Focus Group 1)

Annie responded with her own contextualized perception of the challenges that time places on setting up play-based learning in her classroom. She shared,

> if you're going to do a dramatic play setup, being able to actually set up everything...like 'when am I going to put this up and get all of the other things done and not live at school until six o'clock every night?'. (Focus Group 1)

Another major practical concern for participants centered around *access to resources/materials.* Codes included in this category center around the need for playful resources and materials, and the effect of the lack of access to those materials. Teachers in the study listed "limited availability of resources and materials," "materials," "not having resources," "resources available," and "having the materials" as barriers to implementing play-based learning (Open-ended Response Item 22). Another participant stated, "Specific play props, equipment or venues may be required for teaching and learning in elementary school, but if these resources are limited or not easily accessible, this can restrict the implementation of play activities" (Open-ended Response Item 22). Some responses were sub-coded as *too costly* to note teachers' concerns for the cost of materials/resources. One participant stated that "Incorporating play into the classroom often requires the use of props, games, and other hands-on materials, which can be expensive" (Open-ended Response Item 22). Macy clarified this barrier further in the focus group discussion. In response to my question regarding barriers, she said

> Having the tools and the finances to do it. It's a lot harder to find all the pieces and then I'm going shopping at midnight to try to get items for 25 students and I'm like, 'Oh, well,

> that was supposed to be a quick little project and that just cost me $200'. (Focus Group 1)

Annie responded with a consideration of both accessing resources and time. She added, "Even when there are avenues to ask for some of those supplies you have to know a month in advance what you're going to do and what you need so they can put in the purchase order" (Focus Group 1).

Teachers also expressed difficulties with their *class size,* regarding the number of students, and *lack of physical space* in the classroom. With greater numbers of students, one participant posed "Larger class sizes and numbers of pupils may pose challenges to the use of games for teaching and learning. With larger numbers, it is difficult to ensure that every student is fully engaged in the game" (Open-ended Response Item 22). Another participant noted that the physical classroom space can be a hindrance. They stated, "finding the time and space to set up and clean up these materials can be challenging, especially in a busy classroom setting" (Open-ended Response Item 22). Macy's feelings commiserated with this participant as she described restrictions on the types of games she can play based on the amount of classroom space available to her. She lamented,

> I wish that I could get them moving a little bit more in my classroom, but there's not enough space for us to do that. So while I would like them to like go from one side of the room to the other, right now, it's just kind of more of a game-focused play than actually physically getting up and moving around (Focus Group 1).

Student behaviors were also coded within this category as identified challenges to teaching with play-based learning. Teachers shared their perceptions that students' difficult behaviors limited their own ability to offer play in the classroom. One teacher stated, "student

behaviors severely limit what I can do in my room" (Open-ended Response Item 22). On the same item on the questionnaire, another teacher indicated that "students and how they cannot handle simple instructions" cause play to feel unattainable (Open-ended Response Item 22). Another wrote, "They want to play but cannot handle it in school appropriately" (Open-ended Response Item 20). Kate expressed difficulties with her students' perceptions about the role of play in school. She described them, stating

> I have two students who do not do well with it because they can't handle the ambiguity of it. They're like 'no, we're at school. We're supposed to be serious. This is serious work.' But, but they are the exceptions. The rest of them are excited or and will always be like, 'can we do can we do that? Again? Can we do free time yet?' (Focus Group 2)

Finally, one teacher wrote that a *lack of training* created a challenge for them. She also offered a solution in her response, stating, "Lack of training on ways to do this. This needs to be a focus during college as well as professional development days" (Open-ended Response Item 22).

Personal Perceptions. In the last theme, *personal perceptions,* coded responses illustrated the barriers that arose from teachers' mindsets about play. Categories included under this theme were *personal efficacy*, *belief that play does not meet learning needs*, and *lack of knowledge*. *Personal efficacy* responses were coded in two participant responses. One participant wrote about their concern regarding their ability to use play in relation to meeting curricular expectations. They stated, "I believe play is important for first grade, but I am not confident in my abilities to provide these opportunities in all subject areas and still meet my standards and expectations" (Open-ended Response Item 19). Similarly, a participant shared their *belief that play does not meet learning needs of* students in the primary age level. The participant wrote, "At

the primary level, students need to acquire certain basic knowledge and skills, and games may not meet these learning needs" (Open-ended Response Item 22). Last, a participant noted that their *lack of knowledge* regarding play-based learning created a challenge. The participant noted, "[I] do not have enough knowledge on how to do so" (Open-ended Response Item 22).

Support Needed to Increase Play. After identifying the barriers that might limit or prohibit play, teachers in the study considered what types of support they believe may increase their use of play in the classroom. Three categories are used to explain the various types of support that teachers identified: *policy support, community support, and personal support.* The meaning of each category and representative quotations will be reported under the category title.

Policy Support. Teachers considered the changes to many policies in Oklahoma, their school districts, and their schools that may impact their ability to implement PBL. Codes were designated for these ideas under the category of *policy support.* Two sub-categories, *greater freedom in curriculum design and assessment* and *reduced pressure/greater flexibility,* delineated the idea of how altered policies could best support play-based practices.

For *greater freedom in curriculum design and assessment*, participants described ways in which policies surrounding their curriculum design and delivery could provide them with more freedom and decision-making power. A participant noted that "looser restrictions on our curriculum" would support them in implementing PBL (Open-ended Response Item 23). A second participant stated, "More freedom to adjust the curriculum (reading especially) to incorporate the skills and standards in project approach methods rather than skills and drill" (Open-ended Response Item 23). Another participant added a comment regarding their perceived freedom in assessing their students. They felt that "If the district was more flexible with how I could record data on learning in different standards" they would be supported in utilizing play-

based practices (Open-ended Response Item 23). Annie expanded on her idea of freedom in curricular planning. She shared

> Honestly...I understand that... doing the reading curriculum is important, but sometimes just having the permission to kind of set that aside for a day or two and just do a project that the kids are interested in, you know, just allow them to explore something that way because they're going to be more invested in reading and writing and doing calculations and things like that if it's something that they're like, 'Oh, I really want to learn about this'. And you know, not get rid of it forever, but just being allowed to teach the way that I know kids learn and ways that are going to get them interested. (Focus Group 1)

In consideration of *reduced pressure/greater flexibility,* participants explained their desires for policies to result in fewer pressures and have more flexibility in their expectations of teacher decision-making. A representative statement written by one participant outlined this concept: "If there was a more integrated curriculum between subject areas, or less pressure from the district to use curriculum, it would be easier to incorporate play in the classroom" (Open-ended Response Item 23). Another participant noted, "I would be more willing to incorporate more play into my classroom if I didn't feel pressured to make sure ALL of my students reach the 40th percentile rank in the multitude of state-mandated standards" (Open-ended Response Item 23). A different participant considered policies around state testing. They stated, "Less pressure of state testing" could increase their willingness or ability to implement PBL (Open-ended Response Item 23).

Community Support. Teachers in the study described multiple ways in which the community could support their willingness or ability implementation of PBL. Answers coded in this category include *district support, school support, and parental support. District support was*

characterized by participant responses that specifically mentioned their school district. One participant stated that "District push/ learning opportunities" would be supportive (Open-ended Response Item 23). Another shared specifically how the district could be supportive of PBL. They wrote, "If the school or district provided me with a lot of the activities. This would let me know they support it and want it to be included in class" (Open-ended Response Item 23).

The participants had more responses with ideas for how their school might support them with PBL. Codes included under *school support* are *funding*, *play examples provided*, *technology support*, *colleague support and collaboration*, *administrator support,* and *access to resources*. The code *funding* included one participant simply writing that "funding" would increase their willingness or ability to increase PBL practices (Open-ended Response Item 23). Marie also explained her desire for greater funding options for play-based items. Her school restricts teachers' ability to apply for grants outside of the district. She shared "Our school doesn't allow us to... write grants or anything. But we can write a foundation [grant]" (Focus Group 2). Other teachers noted the support that having *play examples provided* by their school would offer. A response from one participant stated, "The school can also provide more game teaching examples and experience sharing so that I can keep learning and improving my teaching methods" (Open-ended Response Item 23). One participant expressed a desire for *technology support* for play-based learning technologies. They noted it would be helpful for schools to "provide educational technology support at the school level to address technical challenges that may arise and ensure teachers are able to use games and digital tools smoothly" (Open-ended Response Item 23).

Teachers expressed a desire for *colleague support and collaboration* as one participant wrote "[if] other colleagues and teachers supported me" then PBL practices could be

incorporated. Other teachers desired a space to share ideas and collaborate with one another to increase play practices together. A participant shared,

> Having a greater sense of community and collaboration among teachers could also increase my willingness or ability to incorporate more play into my classroom. If I were part of a teaching community that regularly shares ideas, strategies, and success stories related to play-based learning, it would inspire me to try new things and provide me with a support system. Additionally, collaborating with other teachers could lead to the creation of a more cohesive and consistent approach to using play throughout the school. (Open-ended Response Item 23)

Participants likewise conveyed that *administrator support* could increase play-based learning in classrooms. One teacher asserted, "more support from administration" would be supportive (Open-ended Response Item 23). Another noted the importance of trust in PBL. The participant said, "If my administrator trusted that students were learning" (Open-ended Response Item 23). One other desired encouragement in their response and stated they would feel supported if there was "encouragement from admin to do it!" (Open-ended Response Item 23). Marie affirmed this in her focus-group interview. She expressed that her "principal...he's very open-minded" which resulted in her feeling supported in teaching through play (Focus Group 2). Kate also expressed that her current principal's attitude towards PBL resulted in feelings of support. She also indicated concern over the news that her principal would not be returning and thus she may have a less supportive administrator next year. In her response, she said

> I love my principal. He just actually told us today that he's leaving...it made me sad because one reason I chose the school that I'm at is because I could tell he had a mentality where like, he really enjoyed play-based learning and just meeting kids at the

> level that they're at, instead of like expecting them to be tiny adults. Yeah, so I would say I feel very supported by him. And I'm a little nervous with him leaving because I'm nervous that the next principal won't be as supportive. (Kate, Focus Group 2)

Another sub-category within this theme was *access to resources.* Throughout the open-ended responses and focus group interviews, teachers relayed their perceptions that they would be personally supported in implementing play in their classrooms if they had access to the resources needed for play-based teaching. Participants responded in simple terms that they desire "materials," "more resources," "easier access to resources," and "access to materials" (Open-ended Response Item 23). One participant noted, "I would like to have more support and resources. For example, the school can provide more play equipment and materials so that I can have more choices and creativity" (Open-ended Response Item 23). Marie added to this idea by expressing her desire for play materials in specific subject areas. She noted her desire for them to have more hands-on materials: "social studies and science without a textbook without a worksheet. Yeah, them just experiencing different things" (Focus Group 2).

Participants also expressed a need for these materials to be prepared for them. A participant noted that "More resources that are ready-made" would support them in using PBL. Annie noted that this had already supported her during her school year as some school personnel "have... been creating centers that we can either print off or like borrow from them, and that's been really helpful" (Focus Group 1). As the conversation progressed, she expressed a desire for this to be always available. Annie said "if there was like a central library of things...for teachers to go and say, 'hey, I want to put this into a center because this is going to be more interesting than just pencil paper'" that would be very helpful (Focus Group 1). This idea also proliferated during the second focus group interview. Marie shared, "I think a resource room would be

helpful. With just I mean, you might want to do a cooking activity or just to art supplies and things. Just a resource space" (Focus Group 2). Kate responded,

> Yeah. I agree with that one too, because allowing play lots of times you need materials. And if you bring in materials for all these different subject matters, it gets... expensive to get materials and stuff. And you can do play without that. But sometimes it's funner with the materials. (Focus Group 2)

The final community-based support, *parental support,* was detailed by participants in responses regarding parental collaboration, understanding the benefits of play, and parents supporting play practices being used in the classroom. One participant simply noted that "Understanding and support from parents" could increase their willingness or ability to use PBL (Open-ended Response Item 23). Another added detail regarding *parental involvement* in the classroom. This participant wrote, "Parents can also be actively involved...by working with me to design and organize play activities for children, which will greatly increase my confidence and motivation" (Open-ended Response Item 23). Last, a participant shared their idea for a *home/school collaboration* to increase the overall benefits of play. Their response said, "Work with parents on how they can support students at home to engage in beneficial play and learning activities to build collaboration between school and home" (Open-ended Response Item 23).

Personal Support. Responses included in the category of *personal support* were those where teachers indicated areas of support that would be personally beneficial to their play practice. The sub-categories used to explain areas of personal support are titled *implementation desire, training*, *time*, and *confidence*.

Many teachers in the study indicated that they had an *implementation desire*. This aspect of PBL is vital since educators are the final gatekeepers to classroom activities. Some teachers

indicated a desire to begin implementing play-based learning in the future. Other educators indicated that they already use play-based learning and wish to continue or increase/evolve their practice. One participant wrote, "I love the idea of it and would love to implement it!" (Open-ended Response Item 19). Another stated, "I would love to use play in my classroom more" (Open-ended Response Item 19). Macy provided some ideas for how she might alter her curriculum to include greater access to play-based, hands-on learning for her students. She said,

> I just want to find some more activities that is not having them at their desk. I want to try to do more of the hands-on kind of similar to what we do with the social studies and the science. I want to try to find a way to do that with the math, and if I can, find a way to do it with the phonics, I would love to do it. We are going to do a measuring unit here soon and so that's kind of where my brain is. Trying to think of an outside the box, not a game but some sort of hands-on kind of experiment that they can do before we hit the measurement piece. So that's kind of where I'm thinking I want to go. More of that project-based play-based, kind of learning type of thing. (Focus Group 1)

Annie responded with ideas for how she would like to alter her teaching to include more play as well

> I would love if I could incorporate more dramatic play into the curriculum that we do. I mean, like for math, it's a little bit easier because we deal with money in first grade so you know incorporating money in a dramatic play center is pretty easy. (Focus Group 1)

In the responses coded *training,* teachers expressed their desire for training, professional development, ideas in alignment with curriculum, and examples of successfully implemented play activities. A participant expressed a desire for "More training or ideas on how there can be a

balance between play, instruction, and projects" (Open-ended Response Item 23). Another stated, "training opportunities so that I can learn more about game teaching methods and techniques" would be supportive of their practice (Open-ended Response Item 23).

Some responses were sub-coded to note the specific types of training that could support PBL. One participant desired to have *research* that could help teachers better understand the benefits of play. This participant wrote that "the latest research and practice on the effectiveness of games in learning to help teachers better understand the potential impact of games on student academic achievement" could increase play-based practices (Open-ended Response Item 23). Another desired *direct classroom support,* stating "If someone came and helped me do it" they would be supported (Open-ended Response Item 23).

Other educators connected the need for curricular expectations to be considered in play. Teachers expressed a need for access to play *ideas in alignment with curriculum and standards.* One felt support would come from "Being able to tie it to the academic standards" (Open-ended Response Item 23). Macy expressed similar desires in her focus group interview. She explained her need for ideas that directly tied to the curriculum to increase play in her teaching:

> I think that if some of the ideas for incorporating play into the curriculum were already set out in the curriculum to give me some ideas would be helpful because then I wouldn't be spending a lot of time kind of researching... you know, you come up with things as you're teaching this stuff, but I think if it was more incorporated in some of the things, tools that I was using...if I had some more ideas, especially this first year as I'm learning all these different tools if they were just there kind of giving me some ideas on how to do it and what the items were that I needed to purchase, then I would know what I needed to

> get to my admin and that would just make things a lot more readily available to us instantly (Focus Group 1).

Kate also shared a desire for play ideas that could be integrated into the district curriculum. She said,

> We have to do so much PD, professional development, I think it would be great if the district could teach us how to incorporate [play], along with the things that they're wanting us to teach. Like they're saying, 'we need you to be teaching all these things. Here's a way you can incorporate play and kid-friendly ways to teach it.' I think that would be a great source. (Focus Group 2).

Marie responded with an idea for a play object that could be used in multiple subject areas. She described it, saying,

> I think it would be great to show, 'This is a play that you can easily change the subject for'. So this is how you could have one thing set up that it's easy to change the subject for so that you can incorporate play in lots of different areas. I don't know what that would be. I guess I'd have to go to the PD to find out (Focus Group 2).

For training to be helpful, the teachers in focus group one related the content and activities that would be most supportive. Both teachers explained situations where *ready made resources* were a result of professional development. Annie began by stating,

> Personally, I like 'make and take' kind of professional development. So it's like 'here is... all of these great activities that we can do. Here's some that we can create here before you leave.' So when you take them back, they're ready to go minus maybe like laminating or something like that. (Focus Group 1)

Macy responded by saying,

> sometimes I will try to incorporate bits and pieces of an idea that we talked about at a professional development, but I don't fully utilize the whole tool the way it's supposed to be, just because I can't create it. But if I were to create it there, it would definitely be utilized. So I agree. I have yet to be at a professional development that we do that so I'm all in if we do that. (Focus Group 1).

As our conversation continued, we discussed the ability of teachers to experience play themselves during professional development. Macy expressed her support to *personally experience* this practice:

> I think that's very good to experience it too. Because like I said, like play is just a hard term to really define I guess is, you know, there's so many different ways to play. And so and every grade level, even middle school kids love to play. It just looks different than what they play in kindergarten. And so having someone experience what some of that is... I think it will help them understand like, 'Okay, here's what it looks like, here's what it sounds like, here's what it feels like, go ahead and implement some of these things in your classroom.' And you can kind of figure it out. (Focus Group 1)

As another practical training solution, teachers recorded their desires to observe other educators implementing play-based teaching successfully. Responses coded as *observation of successful play-based learning* explain these desires. One teacher wrote, "I'd like to see it in action and learn how to do this effectively and efficiently" (Open-ended Response Item 23). Another added a rationale as to how observation of others teaching will increase their own willingness to incorporate PBL. The participant stated,

> If I can personally observe or experience the positive impact of games in other classrooms, such as increased student engagement, increased interest in learning, or

> improved learning outcomes, then I may be more willing to try to incorporate games into my teaching. (Open-ended Response Item 23)

Finally, one participant's response was coded *online group.* This participant wrote "A web group with ideas" would be supportive of their ability to increase PBL.

The sub-category *time* is explained by participants' desire to have more time to implement play. Two participants noted a need for "time," and "more time" as part of their open-ended responses on the questionnaire (Open-ended Response Item 23). Kate noted the importance of the time needed for play. She shared

> I think more time. I don't know if that's realistic, but like, just more time because I feel like play takes some time to like for them to get comfortable and really explore. Like you need more time. And that's not really something someone could come in and give me. (Focus Group 2)

Finally, the sub-code *greater confidence* is explained by participants' responses that indicate that personal confidence in using play could lead to their ability to increase its use. One participant stated simply that "more confidence" would be supportive (Open-ended Response Item 23). In her focus group, Annie explained her desire to confidently implement dramatic play despite perceiving that others might believe children are not learning. She stated,

> I just don't think it's quite as acceptable, I guess. For them to come in and one of my centers be... a dramatic play center. Like 'Well, where's the learning here?' It just feels like it's harder to defend sometimes I guess, but I would love to be able to actually do that. I've seen it done in first-grade classrooms, and I think it's really neat. (Focus Group 1)

Summary

Chapter four explored the findings from the data analysis of the study's quantitative and qualitative data. Data was organized under each of the three research questions as a method of explaining the teachers' perceptions about the PTLA, beliefs about play-based learning, and the need for support to increase play. Quantitative data from the questionnaire provided frequency counts that indicated participants' levels of agreement with statements regarding teacher's beliefs. The qualitative open-ended responses and focus group interview data provided depth and contextualized the quantitative data. In chapter five, the discussion will present conclusions drawn from the data, identify the strengths and limitations of the study, and outline implications for the field.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The goal of this research was to understand the current impact of the *Play To Learn Act* in the state of Oklahoma, the beliefs about play held by primary grade educators, and the possibilities for increasing play-based learning practices in early childhood classrooms through various types of support. This mixed-methods study was conducted using a sequential explanatory design (Creswell & Clark, 2018) and explored three research questions:

1. How is the Play to Learn Act influencing play-based learning in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade classrooms in Oklahoma?
2. What do primary grade teachers believe about the need for and effects of play-based learning in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade?
3. What do primary grade teachers believe about their role in play and necessary support to better implement play-based learning in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade classrooms?

The results of this research which emerged from both the quantitative and qualitative findings will be presented using combined themes. This chapter will converge the findings from the two sets of data to explain the resultant themes as they relate to existent literature and related theory.

Considerations of Play Legislation

Play legislation has proliferated globally since the passage of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) legislation in 1989. Leaders and citizens alike have recognized the need for the integration of play in educational settings. However, the method and frequency of implementation have varied in different areas. Some legislation mandates the use of play in educational settings (eg. Barblett et al., 2016; Becker & Mastrangelo, 2017; Yin et al., 2021). Since the US has not ratified the UNCRC, some states in the US have set their own standards for play in schools. This research focused on legislation in the state of Oklahoma, passed in 2021, which provides protections for the use of play in all early childhood classrooms, prek to third grade. Since the law did not mandate play, little follow-up occurred after the bill passed. It has been unclear if this legislation has impacted teachers in the state in terms of their beliefs about play or their use of play-based learning in their classrooms. Based on the resulting data from this study, there is some level of awareness of and support for the Play to Learn Act. Slightly more than half of the questionnaire participants indicated that they were aware of the PTLA and that they felt it had provided them with some support in using play prior to taking the questionnaire. When asked if they think it could be helpful in the future, 84% of the participants indicated their agreement. This points to an overall positive reception of the play legislation from primary grade teachers and suggests that there are possibilities for the bill to have a greater impact in the field.

Possible Legislative Support of PBL

Participants in the focus groups provided insight into other avenues of support the PTLA might offer teachers to increase their play practices. Two of the four participants were aware of the PTLA before participating in the study, and two were not. Despite this, all four teachers expressed satisfaction with the legal protection the bill provides. They perceived it to be positive and helpful knowing that administrators and other stakeholders could not force them, or any other teacher, to stop using play-based learning. However, some teachers in the study indicated that though they are not prohibited from using play, some implementation challenges still exist. Lack of awareness from stakeholders in the community such as principals, parents, and other educators presented a concern. Participants noted that if other teachers or administrators knew about the PTLA and supported it in the school, there was a possibility for an increase in play to occur in their classrooms and within the school community. Specifically, Kate expressed that it would decrease her feelings of being judged which could increase her willingness to implement play without the hesitation judgment imposes. These findings are in line with Barblett et al. (2016) who reported that teachers' levels of play implementation are influenced by perceptions of play held by other stakeholders.

The PTLA has the possibility to be a positive piece of advocacy for play if teachers are open to incorporating play practices. However, the existence of the bill did not necessarily increase the play practices of these four educators. All four participants had a positive attitude about the inclusion of play before the study and consistently made efforts to include play-based learning in their classrooms. Macy's assertion regarding the need for greater levels of support and resources in addition to the bill's existence resonates throughout other responses in the study. This finding is consistent with research in the field wherein teachers have indicated difficulty in implementing newly legislated expectations/practices without other measures of

support (Barblett et al., 2016; Yin et al., 2021). These findings are also consistent with the interview data from my pilot study of six Oklahoma primary-grade educators (Spivey, in progress). For the *Play to Learn Act* to have a greater impact on teachers' classroom practices, teachers' positive play beliefs must be examined and aligned with greater support.

Beliefs About Play

The NAEYC (2020) asserts that play be a primary pedagogical practice in learning settings through third grade. Existing studies that examine teachers' beliefs about play-based learning primarily focus on preschool, prek, and kindergarten contexts (Brown et al., 2020; Costantino-Lane, 2019; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Stipek, 2017). Thus, this research provides data to fill the gap regarding primary grade educators' beliefs about play. The majority of primary grade teachers in this study asserted their belief that play is beneficial for children. They also agreed that it supports classroom learning and development in multiple domains. This is an encouraging finding as it indicates that many primary grade teachers' beliefs are in alignment with the developmentally appropriate practice recommendations (NAEYC, 2020).

Beliefs About the Relationship Between Play and Learning

Belief is a complicated construct to study empirically and should be contextualized within knowledge and practice (Pajares, 1992). In this study, teachers' beliefs about the relationship between play and learning were varied. Since this study specifically focused on play in educational contexts, teachers considered their beliefs in relation to learning in their classrooms. Most teachers in the study reported a strong belief in the connection between play and learning which was characterized by one participants' response, "to play is to learn". Teachers noted that for young children, play and learning had a natural, meaningful, and essential connection.

However, teachers in the study also indicated that play led to learning under specific conditions such as when play had expectations, guidelines, and rules. This might explain why the majority of play examples provided by teachers were situated under the playful learning category with mostly teacher directives taking place within play (as explained in the next section). Some participants believed that children did not view play offerings in school as work or learning activities, which indicates that teachers intended to use play directly in the service of learning (Zosh et al., 2018). When play is in the service of learning, it sometimes no longer feels playful to children due to the criteria of play being met. Some play criteria identified by play researchers include active engagement of the child, child-initiated rules, and a lack of extrinsic goals, which are not synonymous with teacher-directed learning (Garvey, 1977; Gray, 2013). This practice is common in educational settings, however, play research indicates that children do not view an activity as play if it does not feel like play. Teachers may not understand this concept and expect children to engage in learning despite a lack of perceived playfulness by the child. Previous research indicates that difficulties in understanding the nuances of play can lead teachers who have positive play beliefs to rely on structured, teacher-directed learning (Biesta et al., 2014; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016).

A few teachers indicated that they minimally believed or did not believe there was a relationship between play and learning. These teachers expressed their belief that play and learning were mostly separate where play exists as a recreational activity, and learning occurs through direct instruction in classrooms. This belief was rooted firmly in the ideological framing of play and learning as dichotomous to one another (Nilsson et al, 2018; Toub et al., 2016). The dichotomization of play and learning is well documented and indicates that beliefs held by teachers regarding the relationship between play and learning impact their beliefs about the role-

play has in the classroom (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Martlew et al., 2011). For these teachers to utilize PBL, they would likely need to go through an ideological shift which may be more difficult as beliefs are not easily altered. Kagan (1992) asserts that preconceptions and deeply held beliefs are enduring making a change in belief challenging.

Beliefs About the Role of Play in Primary Grade Classrooms

Most of the teachers in the study indicated a need for play-based learning to occur in their classrooms to support students. This belief was associated with perceptions of how children learn naturally through play. Some teachers also expressed concerns about balancing play and learning while maintaining the belief that play should be included in their teaching. The need to balance work and play may come from instructional expectations or pressures from various stakeholders as identified by participants such as schools, administrators, coworkers, and parents. These pressures can reinforce beliefs that didactic teaching methods must be included in learning environments. This is congruent with current research in the field that indicates academic pressures and expectations to meet administrator-imposed curriculum regulations may hinder the use of creative teaching methods such as play (Costantino-Lane, 2019; Jay & Knaus, 2018; Ranz-Smith, 2007).

Despite these pressures, teachers provided numerous examples of ways they have implemented play in their classrooms and ideas for how they would like to implement play in the future. Kagan (1992) suggests that teachers may have a difficult time clearly explicating their beliefs, but providing examples of beliefs contextualized within specific teaching examples can be more successful. The examples of play implementations in this study reinforced teachers' expressed beliefs about the inclusion of play in their classrooms. Most teachers indicated that children should have access to play in all subject areas in their grade level. Teachers favored

integrating play with math over other subjects in both sets of data. Though all the percentages for subject area integration had over 80% agreement on the questionnaire, 96% of participants indicated that children should have opportunities for play in math. This was reflected in the qualitative data as well. During focus groups, participants stated that they found it easier to incorporate play into math lessons because of the availability of tools, and the perception that it was more hands-on, and open-ended than other subject areas. Science and social studies were favored for these reasons, though they were mentioned with less frequency overall.

Participants also expressed a desire to increase play-based opportunities for literacy concepts but felt that there were fewer hands-on, playful opportunities related to language and literacy generally and in their curriculum. Teachers provided examples of primarily math and literacy games used in their classrooms. These two subject areas typically are the most highly focused on during instructional time in classrooms as described by teachers in the study. This finding is analogous to prior research (Miller & Allmon, 2009). Previous studies indicate that teachers are unsure if children learn numeracy and literacy-based skills through play (Walsh et al., 2010; Ranz-Smith, 2007). Teachers in this study noted their perceived pressures related to teaching the literacy curriculum which is likely associated with the reading retention law in the state (Fuhrman et al., 2013). Despite the pressures teachers face regarding expectations around curriculum implementation, they maintained the belief that play has a role in primary grade classrooms.

In the review of the findings, I contextualized participants' play-based teaching examples using the play-based learning spectrum referenced in Chapter 2 (See Figure 1). On the spectrum, free play is the most child-directed play where there is little to no adult involvement or guidance, no goal or outcome expectation, and is child-initiated and directed (Gray, 2013). Next,

guided play has a mix of child and adult direction, children remain actively engaged, and the adult scaffolds through commentary and sometimes playing with children (Toub et al., 2016; Weisberg et al., 2013). Finally, playful learning has the most adult direction with the goal of attaining academic knowledge, though the learning activity remains playful in nature (Pyle and Danniels, 2017; Zosh et al., 2018). Throughout the study, participants provided greater examples of game-related play, which is situated under playful learning, than any other type of play. This may be due to teachers' belief or response to external pressures that teacher directives must take place in teaching for children to learn (Costantino-Lane, 2019; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Toub et al., 2016).

Multiple examples of guided play and free play were also provided by teachers in the study. Gray (2013) asserts that learning can result when children engage in free play, yet most of the examples of free play described by teachers in this study were included after children had completed seat-based work or as an incentive for children to pay attention during direct instruction time. Focus group participants provided multiple examples of play situations where students moved from direct instruction to free play and then to guided play during their day indicating access to multiple types of play throughout the day. If teachers adopt a nuanced conceptualization of play as Zosh et al. (2018) recommend, they may be able to apply play-based learning in multiple contexts using the play spectrum to meet the needs of learners in their classrooms.

Beliefs About Benefits of Play

Most of the teachers in the study indicated that they believed play offered many benefits to children. The quantitative data revealed that 92% of participants believed that play was beneficial for children, supported them in learning academic skills, and supported them in

developing social and emotional skills. Qualitative responses also indicated that students benefitted cognitively, socially, and emotionally, and that play fosters creativity, and problem-solving skills, increases motor development, communication, and teamwork, and decreases stress. Educational research confirms these beliefs (Brown, 2009; Feliciano & Dy, 2021; NAEYC, 2020; Nath & Szucs, 2014; Nijhof; 2018; Saracho, 2021; Sutapa, 2021; Tsai, 2012; Weisberg et al., 2013).

Teachers also cited their beliefs that play had pedagogical benefits that supported student learning processes better than directed teaching. They noted that play-based teaching facilitated a calm, joyful space to learn. They perceived that students enjoyed learning which increased student motivation towards learning and active and enthusiastic engagement with content. This was achieved through creating learning experiences that students were interested in and provided them opportunities to explore and interact with their peers. Other researchers had similar results when they planned content based on student interests. These creative, socially engaging, integrative learning experiences were preferable to children (Kobylak & Kalyn, 2017; Wohlwend and Peppler, 2015) and increased developmental outcomes (Cooney et al., 2000). Kobylak and Kalyn's (2017) study specifically compared student responses to learning after a pedagogical shift from direct instruction to play-based learning from the teacher's perspective. Teachers in this study also asserted their belief that PBL offers the ability for students to explore content more than directed teaching. This is in alignment with other studies and adds important data to the field that includes the voices of primary grade educators.

Teachers in the study also expressed that play allowed them to integrate content into their teaching. Previous research indicated that content integration met the varied needs of students in classrooms and was pedagogically supportive of students constructing knowledge (Fesseha &

Pyle, 2016). In line with this thinking, participants expressed how play supported greater connections to content. Some teachers in the study expressed concerns about the increase in expectations to cover content-area knowledge. Play could provide an avenue for those educators to meet student needs and curricular expectations. These findings provide a hopeful foundation for the implementation of play in primary grade classrooms. Since there is a lack of data in these grade levels, this research provides meaningful context utilizing various forms of play-based learning with first, second, and third graders. Beliefs do not automatically translate into practices (Kagan, 1992); therefore, it was necessary to examine ways that other support could support teachers in increasing or improving play practices.

Teachers Role and Need for Support

Educators of young children approach teaching using their preconceived beliefs about what constitutes good teaching (Pajares, 1992). Though most teachers in the study described positive beliefs regarding play, explicit descriptions of greater support were noted. In connection with these support needs, teachers' beliefs about their role in play are examined. The association between the teachers' role in classroom play and the support they identified to increase play will provide an outline for plausible methods for increasing play in primary grade classrooms.

Teachers as Meaningful Facilitators of Play

In this study, the role of the teacher was examined through both quantitative and qualitative data. In both sets of data, the role of a facilitator prevailed as the most common and preferred role for teachers. The questionnaire data revealed that 90% of teachers believed that their role in play was to facilitate play by setting up materials, scaffolding children's learning, and posing questions to support children's thinking. Qualitative data corroborated this finding. Teachers provided examples of ways in which they share control with children within play-

learning situations when taking on the role of the facilitator. The examples provided reinforce teachers' perceived need for balancing play and with curricular expectations as a requirement for utilizing play in educational settings as noted in a study by Costantino-Lane (2019).

In both sets of data, teachers also indicated that it is necessary to assume various other roles during play-based learning. This finding indicated that teachers may move in and out of roles throughout the day depending on the type of learning activity offered to students. Previous research indicated that when teachers had greater confidence in the practice of play-based learning, they offered a greater variety of play-based experiences along the play continuum (McInnes et al., 2011). However, for teachers to assume a supportive role in multiple play contexts, they assert that greater types of support are needed.

Communities of Support

Professionals in the early education field can support high-quality practices such as play through collaboration, trust, and various types of support (Mann, 2017; Yin et al., 2021). Teachers in this study cited the need for encouragement from principals and other administrators. Discouragement from administrators or colleagues can dissuade teachers from implementing play (Brown et al., 2020; McInnes & Birdsey, 2014). Teachers in the study asserted that a lack of support from the teaching community inhibited their use of play and that greater levels of support in these areas would increase their use of play. Also, multiple teachers identified the need for models of play-based learning from other teachers to improve their practice and for collaboration through sharing ideas and resources.

A few participants suggested that parental support could also increase their play-based practices. These stakeholders were identified least, but teachers indicated their beliefs that parents can enhance the overall support of play practices as suggested by Nell et al. (2013). If the

greater community surrounding teachers increased their overall support and knowledge regarding play-based learning, then teachers may have more capability to utilize this practice.

A significant need for support comes from policy-related initiatives. Many participants expressed the need for decreased pressures to implement curriculum in specific, directed, uniform ways. They likewise expressed a desire for more freedom to dictate the method of teaching content in their own classrooms. This reflects concerns from Henry Giroux (1985) that teachers have been disempowered in the teaching profession. Biesta (2016) acknowledges the more recent increase in harmful discourse hailing from various educational sectors which positions educators as simple machines who disseminate knowledge to their students.
He advocates for teachers to be educational decision-makers, consider their students, and reclaim their role in teaching (Biesta, 2016)! The intention of passing the PTLA into law was to advocate for play and provide support for educators to "regain the courage to teach" (Biesta, 2016, p. 45) through PBL by providing them protection.

The law also advocates for PBL to be the most "rigorous and developmentally appropriate way for children to learn (Oklahoma Play to Learn Act, 2021, p. 2). Yet, data from this study indicates that the pressures of academic performance prevail over the recommendations for play to be utilized. This could be because individuals are more affected by district and school policies, and the opinions of administrators than they are by state-level recommendations. This finding reiterates Macy's point that the bill itself does not do enough to support educators outside of the immense pressures that are placed on teachers to follow curriculum pacing and meet testing needs. Other Oklahoma educators may share this feeling. Statewide support such as professional development would provide all educators with a baseline

for play-based learning practices. Teachers need support within their community from all stakeholders, including those at the state level.

Preparation and Resources

Professional development has been identified as an important part of professional growth and increased professionalism (Barblett et al., 2016; Yin et al., 2021). Many teachers stated a need for professional development to increase or improve their play-based practices. Considerations for high-quality professional development (PD) were outlined in the first chapter of this paper. Some suggestions by Darling-Hammond et al., (2017) are content focus, and supportive of collaboration within job contexts that relate to suggestions made by participants in this study are, modeling of effective practice, expert support, and opportunities for feedback. These suggestions reflect the needs identified by participants in their responses. Participants included needs for research, modeling from experienced play users, ideas of successful play implementations, and suggestions for incorporating materials into their curriculum.

A major concern for teachers in the study was the ability to connect content to academic standards and curriculum in their schools. This is reflected in previous studies (Barblett et al., 2016; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Martlew et al., 2011; Yin et al., 2021). A point of access for educators may be the ability to adapt their prescribed curriculum more readily to integrate play which would satisfy district/school requirements and ensure they were able to teach in developmentally appropriate ways. This support could be included in a PD that considers primary grade educators. Lee (2004) asserts that for professional development programs to be effective, they should be responsive to the needs of the participants. Another consideration for training could be the inclusion of play with direct ties to standards. Since this study focuses only on Oklahoma, the state standards could be included as part of a statewide training or resource

given to all educators. Then, districts could offer additional training to meet the specific needs of teachers and children in their schools and provide support associated with their curricular materials and expectations.

Participants noted throughout the study that access to resources was vital in incorporating play in their classrooms. In association with PD, the participants expressed the need for more than just ideas to implement in their classrooms. A perceived lack of time was cited as an inhibitor to teachers in creating new resources to be used in play. Teachers expressed a desire for ready-made play resources to be offered during PD. It is important to note that these recommendations were made by educators who had previously established positive play ideologies and who already integrated play in their classrooms. Thus, it may be necessary for professional developments to provide a baseline rationale for the use of play in early childhood classrooms and an explanation of the benefits of play for some educators with a less favorable outlook on play.

Finally, teachers cited a need for more resources. Teachers desired funding and freedom to purchase items needed for highly engaging PBL. Another idea that emerged from focus group interviews was a resource room. Teachers suggested that having a centralized location where resources were housed within their schools and shared between colleagues would increase their practice. Community resource rooms are encouraged by Nell et al. (2013) and could be a reasonable and affordable solution for teachers to have more readily accessible play materials.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

The data from this research indicates a strong need for greater support in the advancement of play-based learning in primary grade classrooms in the state of Oklahoma. The Play to Learn Act is an important piece of legislation that lays the foundation of support for early childhood educators in the state of Oklahoma. However, for this legislation to truly support

teachers, greater action must take place through professional development, advocacy, and creating access to resources.

I want to acknowledge the need for an ideological shift. Teachers need to be trusted as professionals in their practice. To increase professional confidence, policies and expectations of educators must position them as decision-makers in their classrooms. However, many teachers are new to the profession and may not yet have the professional confidence needed to implement new pedagogies without significant support. In the state of Oklahoma, there has been a significant teacher shortage in recent years which has resulted in the state issuing a record-setting number of emergency certifications. For the 2023-2024 school year, 4,676 certifications were issued compared to 189 emergency certifications a decade ago in the 2013-2014 school year (Martinez-Kell, 2024). Teachers who are emergency or alternatively certified have a bachelor's degree, but typically have little to no teacher preparation. This statistic is further evidence of a need for professional development for early childhood educators. Throughout this paper, considerations for professional development that will best meet the needs of educators in the state of Oklahoma have been made. Sims and Fletcher-Wood (2021) suggest that teacher buy-in is an important component for creating lasting change through professional development. Advocates for play can fill this need by spreading awareness of the value of play in educational spaces.

The majority of teachers in this study had either a bachelor's or master’s degree in early childhood education or elementary education, meaning they went through a teacher preparation and certification program. A greater number of teachers completed a degree in elementary education which typically certifies teachers to work with students up to eighth grade. Some teachers in the study explicitly stated their belief that play remains meaningful for older students.

These findings signify teachers' value of play for older students, in this case, those in the primary grades, which is highly encouraging. Future research could examine teacher preparation programs that offer early childhood and elementary education degrees to discern what types of play-based teaching are included in each preparation track. Research from the state of Oklahoma indicates that teachers who hold traditional teaching certificates remain in the profession longer than their emergency certified counterparts (Lazarte-Alcala, 2021). This positions traditionally prepared teachers as leaders at their individual school sites which could increase play-based practices through mentorship.

Another possible future study could explore the types of play along the play spectrum offered in early childhood classrooms in relation to the roles that teachers assume during the different types of play. As Pajares (1992) points out, beliefs should be inferred through what people say and do so a study of this nature would contribute to the field of teacher beliefs and play-based learning in meaningful ways by examining the two ideas together.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the overall participant sample size was small. My original aim was to gain enough participation to ensure perspectives of educators throughout the state would be represented. However, despite attempting to recruit participants through multiple methods, my efforts resulted in fewer participants than desired. One possible reason for low participation could be due to the limited amount of time teachers have and their current levels of stress. When teachers were surveyed by the Rand Corporation, 78% of teachers reported significant job-related stress (Steiner & Woo, 2021). This statistic is 50% higher than the general workforce and may indicate that teachers lack the time to invest in exterior ventures such as research. This likewise led to a smaller number of participants in follow-up focus group

interviews. The low participant rate decreases the overall generalizability of the findings to the entire population of primary grade educators in the state of Oklahoma, but it does set the foundation for future research to continue based on the findings. The goal of this research was not to produce findings that would be generalizable in other states or parts of the world, but the framework utilized to conduct the study could be adapted to meet research needs elsewhere.

Attrition was another limitation of this study. I attempted to create a survey instrument that was straightforward and could be completed in one sitting, but some participants exited the questionnaire prior to answering the closed-ended questions. If those responses had been included, it would have increased the overall number of participants. However, I felt that the open-ended answers necessarily contextualized the statistical data, therefore I chose to only include fully completed surveys in the final data set. In future research, I recommend using a shorter data collection instrument, or one without open-ended questions, so that less time is needed to complete the survey which could support participants in completing the survey.

Another limitation of this study was the creation of the data collection instruments. I designed both the questionnaire and semi-structured focus group questions; therefore, they could include researcher bias. My own beliefs and desire to increase access to play in classrooms may have influenced my creation of the instruments and my communication during focus group interviews. To counter this, I engaged in reflection and memoing throughout the research process to ensure that my own biases were minimized and to ensure that participant perspectives were the primary focus.

I created the data collection instruments since no existing survey met the specific demographic needs (Oklahoma, primary grade educators) of the target population in the study. Therefore, the questionnaire was not validated as this was outside of the scope of this dissertation

research. However, both instruments were created after a pilot study that provided an opportunity for reflection and revisal of the questions in an attempt to decrease my own bias and reflect the needs of the participants (Tsang et al., 2017). Future research could officially pilot this specific survey instrument and revise it further to ensure its validity in the field. I recommend a survey that addresses the specific needs of primary grade educators be the focus of future research as this is still an underrepresented population.

Conclusions

Play is important for children of all ages, and in many contexts including educational settings (NAEYC, 2020). Findings from this mixed-methods, sequential explanatory study contribute important information to the early childhood education field as it fills a gap regarding primary grade teachers' beliefs about play. From this research, it is clear that teachers of primary grade children believe in the power of play in educational settings. The demands on educators are currently high and teacher stress is significant. However, young children should be learning through play as it is the most developmentally appropriate way for learning learn. This study provided many encouraging findings regarding increasing play-based learning, especially in the state of Oklahoma. The most salient finding from this research was that teachers recognize the benefits of creating a playful learning environment for their students. Professionals in the state must work collaboratively to advocate more readily for PBL. This research provided input from educators that can be used to produce professional development that is responsive to the intended audience. Recommendations made by teachers can also be used to create greater access to resources that will support educators in early childhood contexts as indicated by research in this study. Future research involving a greater number of Oklahoma educators could provide greater

insight into this phenomenon. No matter the steps taken, there is a clear message that must be spread- play is the way!

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Appendix A

Focus Group Interview Protocol

1. Please share your teaching context with the group.
2. Do you think children in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade should be playing while in school? Please explain.
3. What benefits are there for using play in the grade you teach?
4. How do you think play relates to learning in the grade you teach?
5. What is your role in the classroom? During play?
6. In what ways do students have opportunities for play in your classroom?
    a. How often do play experiences occur?
7. How do students in your class respond to play when it is available to them?
8. Are there specific subjects where students have more opportunities for play over others in your class? Why?

[Future play]

9. Are you interested in incorporating more play into your classroom? Please explain.
10. What do you know about the Play To Learn Act?
    a. Has the passage of the bill had any effect on your teaching practices?
11. What might allow or support you in incorporating more play in your classroom? Why?

Appendix B

Codebook of Qualitative Codes

RQ#	Theme	Category	Sub-category	
1	Current Awareness and Support	Highly aware		
		Unaware		
		Positive support belief	Sustained play belief	
		Not currently supportive		
	Possible Future Impact	Spreading awareness	Teachers	
			Parents	
			Administrators	
		Safety/Legal Protection for PBL		
		Resources/Support Needed		
2	Relationship Between Play and Learning	Perceptions of Interconnectedness	Strong connection	
			Conditional connection	
			Minimal/lack of connection	
	Role of Play in Primary Grade Classrooms	Current Implementations in Primary Grade Classrooms	Free play	Recess time
			Guided play	Language oriented
				Group work
				Project work
				Hands-on learning
				Directed play
				Centers
				Puzzles
			Playful Learning	Literacy games
				Math games
				Science games
				Social Studies games
			Multiple Applications	Experimentation
				Manipulatives
				Technology
				Art
				Dramatic Play
		Implementation Considerations	Strong Need Belief	
			Balance of Play and Direct Instruction	
			Perceptions of Access	Access to tools/materials

	Benefits of Play Incorporation	Developmental Benefits	Cognitive	Perceptions of ease Targeted skills Open-ended vs targeted skills math science STEM Critical thinking and problem solving
			Language and literacy	
			Social and emotional	Peer interaction and collaboration Empathy Relationships Self-expression Relieves stress and anxiety Confidence and self-esteem Growth mindset
		Pedagogical Benefits	Motor Skills Imagination and Creativity Holistic Development Motivation and active engagement Enhanced learning atmosphere Subject area integration Classroom management Assessment of children's understanding	
		Supporting Student learning Processes	Increased interest in learning Exploration and open-ended processing Enjoyment Fosters connections Supports concentration	Makes learning easier Unconscious learning Increases memory of content
3	Role of the Teacher in Play	Facilitator		

Barriers and Limitations to Using Play	Observer Co-player Director Uninvolved.		
	Policy Based Challenges	Standards Expectations	
		Testing/Test Preparation	
		Curricular Expectations	
	Lack of Community Support	Lack of Administrator Support	
		Lack of Colleague Support	
		Lack of Parental Support	
	Practical Challenges	Lack of Time	
		Limited Materials/Resources	Too costly
		Class Size	
		Lack of Physical Space	
		Student Behaviors	
	Personal Perceptions	Lack of Training	
		Personal Efficacy	
		Belief that Play does not Meet Learning Needs	
		Lack of Knowledge	
Support Needed to Increase Play	Policy Support	Greater Freedom in Curriculum Design and Assessment	
		Reduced Pressure/Greater Flexibility	
	Community Support	District Support	
		School Support	Funding
			Play Examples Provided
			Technology Support
			Colleague Support and Collaboration
			Administrator Support
			Access to Resources
		Parental Support	Parental Involvement
			Home/School Collaboration

	Personal Support	Implementation Desire Training Time Greater Confidence	Research Direct Classroom Support Ideas in Alignment with Curriculum and Standards Ready Made Resources Personally Experience Observation of Successful Play-Based Learning Online Group