Understanding the Value of Play: Recasting Playful Learning by Early Childhood Teachers

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to explore Turkish preschool teachers' views and implementation of play and playful learning in their own classrooms. Through semi-structured interview questions, the participating teachers' perspectives were investigated using a phenomenological research approach. A thematic data analysis approach was used to examine the gathered information. The current study's findings revealed that participating teachers have diverse perspectives on the relationship between play and learning. While many of them highlighted the significance of play for children's learning and development, only a few of them suggested how they can give a learning opportunity through play. They also noted that arranging the environment to learn through play was challenging for them. The findings emphasized the importance of changing teachers' stereotypical views of learning and realizing the benefits of playful learning for all children. As a result, the study's findings indicated the need for new government regulations and teacher training programs to assist teachers' knowledge and practice in offering playful learning.

Keywords: early childhood education, play, playful learning, preschool teachers.

1. Introduction

In various countries, there is growing concern about the disappearance of play from early childhood education (Nicolopoulou, 2010). The desire for greater academic success appears to outnumber free and child-initiated play practices in learning (Klem & Hagtvet, 2018). Despite the fact that all children are born with a natural ability to learn through play, there are significant differences between what research says and what is practiced in schools. As those words suggest, thinking play and learning in the same context retain their uncertainty and remain an unexplored area for research (Kangas, Koskinen & Krokfors, 2017; Tzuo, Ling, Yang et al., 2012; McInnes, 2019).

Play was recognized as a distraction from serious work in medieval times and the importance of strict education and discipline for children has been highlighted up to the present (DeMause, 2006). Play has been branded as frivolous due to the requirement for strong instruction and discipline for children (Smith, 2010). As a result, play is still seen as the antithesis of serious work and even learning. For all of these reasons, defining play is notoriously difficult (Zosh et al, 2018). First and foremost, it is critical to comprehend what play means to children (The Children's Society, 2009), as children's play is a complex process (Frost, Wortham & Reifel, 2008), and children have a better understanding of play and education than adults (Cowan, 2020).

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Another common misunderstanding is that the term "play" refers only to young children who engage in construction plays and toys (Cowan, 2020). Nevertheless, infants and babies also engage in play through their sensorimotor explorations (Trevarthen, 2017). According to Zosh et al. (2018), play is described as a spectrum that includes both adult-directed and child-initiated free play. The difficulty in defining play is due to the socially constructed nature of play, which includes aspects such as culture, context, and time (Cohen, 2006). For instance, while play is a universally observed behavior in children, culture has a significant influence on it (Gaskins, Haight & Lancy, 2007). As a result, when considering playful learning, it appears important to consider both cultural and developmental aspects (Frost et al., 2008).

- Play is a process during which children participate freely and with joy
- **Play supports children's developmental areas**
- Children can learn permanently through playful learning
- Teachers unsure how to distinguish free play time and playful learning
- Playful learning provide opportunity for learning by doing
- Difficulties implementing playful learning because of unsuitable environment

Against this backdrop, the argument for high-quality early education has grown stronger over time, and interest in research on learning through play has increased, and it is now a recommended approach in many Early Childhood Education (ECE) curricula (Danniels & Pyle, 2018). Play is approved as a work of children that they actively engage in during their early childhood years. The process of play also helps children to support their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development domains, as well as to foster their creativity, imagination, and problem-solving abilities (Cowan, 2020). Play also provides the connection between their real-life roles and their imagined minds, according to Vygotsky (1986). As a result of their social interactions, children also create knowledge about the world (McInnes, 2012). It's crucial to highlight that free play and playful learning are not synonymous, as playful learning encompasses a far broader range of activities (Cowan, 2020). Throughout the present paper, using the term of playful learning while thinking about learning and play at the same time helps us to create a more apparent idea. When attempting to identify playful learning, it can be concisely defined as **children's interaction with their world as a result of their need for inquiry (Parker & Thomson, 2019).**

The social and cultural contexts of the play, as well as its contextual and pedagogical components, are crucial from the standpoint of sociocultural learning theories (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2007). According to this theory, play cannot produce enjoyable learning experiences in the context of learning. One of the most significant needs for creating playful learning experiences is the teacher, who plays an important role in creating a suitable and enjoyable learning environment and experiences for the learners (Cicchino, 2015). In this light, it can be claimed that learning is becoming more widely regarded as a means of ensuring an appropriate framework for considering plays in the classroom (Kangas, 2010; Squire & Jan, 2007). Learning through play can be defined as both child-directed and adult-guided learning activities in a school setting (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2013). Playful learning can enrich the delivery of the learning process and improve children's learning experiences in the classroom (Kangas et al., 2017). As a result, researchers have attempted to create playful learning experiences that involve both free and teachers-directed play (Weisberg, et al., 2013). Integrating playful learning opportunities into learning activities can provide a number of benefits, including the ability to try out new ideas, take risks, test theories, collaborate with peers, and envisage new worlds (Mardell, 2019). Learning through play, according to Biordi and Gardner (2014), is one of the most appropriate ways to transition from early education to primary school. Also, some descriptors for playful learning

experiences are meaningful, socially involved, actively engaging, iterative, and joyful. Each of these descriptors contributes to children's learning performance and cultural relevance (Parker & Thomson, 2019).

A wide range of empirical studies have been conducted to investigate teachers' perspectives on the relationship between play and learning in various national contexts (Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland & Wollscheid, 2019). Participating teachers in some studies report having little knowledge of play and playful learning (Fung & Cheng, 2012; Gray & Ryan, 2016; Howard, 2010). In Gray and Ryan's (2016) study, for example, participant teachers described playful learning as pointless because they were afraid of wasting teaching time by devoting the learning process to play. Furthermore, teachers stated that incorporating play into daily activities is difficult and time-consuming for them. Another study found that teachers lacked the knowledge and understanding needed to implement playful learning, and that schools lacked the space, materials, and funding needed to promote playful learning (Moloney, 2010).

1.1 *Overview of Turkish ECE curriculum: A reflection of play-based learning*

In 2013, the National Early Childhood Education Curriculum in Turkey was revised, and the concept of play-based learning was centralized as both a teaching strategy and a discipline. One of the curriculum's main features is the emphasis on "play," and it recommends that play be an integral part of the learning process by including free play times in the daily schedule (MoNE, 2013). However, because of the criteria associated with play, calling the curriculum play-based is **inappropriate. The MoNE's [Ministry** of National Education] Preschool Education Curriculum includes some objectives and indicators that are determined by the children's age and developmental characteristics (MoNE, 2013). Furthermore, the curriculum differs in terms of its philosophical foundations (Akrer, 2017), as different theoretical ideas were combined while developing its theoretical framework. The Turkish Preschool Education Curriculum allows teachers to be flexible in the teaching and learning process and to apply their ideas to their teaching practices. Although the Turkish Preschool Education Curriculum is not designed to be play-based, the current study emphasizes its implementation because it will address the pedagogical and practical issues that impede the implementation of a play-based approach.

1.2 *The present study*

Despite the numerous benefits of playful learning, its significance is sometimes overlooked (Cowan, 2020), especially in early childhood education. Many countries have updated and presented their ECE curriculum as being play-based, however it is difficult to have seen this idea being implemented in practice. Depending on these concerns, the current study's main goal was to investigate Turkish ECE teachers' views on playful learning in the context of their teaching environment for children aged zero to six. Participants were chosen from various cities and institutional contexts to investigate broad trends and patterns in Turkey regarding playful learning understanding.

2. Method

The current study investigated the viewpoints of 20 early childhood teachers on playful learning in their teaching and learning process. Teachers from several cities in Turkey were chosen to represent contextual and individual diversity. To that end, the current study used a phenomenological approach to collect data, which was grounded in qualitative epistemology. The phenomenological research approach, according to Creswell (2013), explores individuals' experiences from their point of view in order to address the questions of what contexts and

conditions influence and are influenced by participants' experiences. The most prevalent data gathering strategy in phenomenological research is interviews (Mustakas, 1994). As a result, in order to answer the question of what early childhood teachers think about playful learning, the current study used the phenomenological research approach.

2.1 Participants

The participants of the current study were chosen using a purposeful sampling strategy in order to reflect interesting phenomena and engage information-rich individuals (Patton, 2015). The study comprised 20 female early childhood teachers from various cities for this purpose. All of the teachers who took part in the study had a bachelor's degree from an early childhood teacher education **program. Table 1 contains more detailed information about the participants teachers'** profiles.

Table 1. The participant teachers' demographic information

	Year of Experience	Graduate Degree	Enrolling Course Related to Play	Type of Institution
PT$_1$	10	Bachelor Degree	Yes	Public
PT$_2$	8	Bachelor Degree	Yes	Public
PT$_3$	12	Bachelor Degree	No	Private
PT$_4$	8	Bachelor Degree	Yes	Public
PT$_5$	3	Bachelor Degree	Yes	Public
PT$_6$	1	Bachelor Degree	Yes	Public
PT$_7$	1	Bachelor Degree	Yes	Private
PT$_8$	2	Bachelor Degree	Yes	Private
PT$_9$	3	Bachelor Degree	No	Public
PT$_{10}$	4	Bachelor Degree	Yes	Public
PT$_{11}$	2	Bachelor Degree	Yes	Private
PT$_{12}$	12	Bachelor Degree	Yes	Public
PT$_{13}$	29	Bachelor Degree	Yes	Public
PT$_{14}$	4	Bachelor Degree	Yes	Public
PT$_{15}$	2	Bachelor Degree	Yes	Public
PT$_{16}$	5	Bachelor Degree	No	Private
PT$_{17}$	17	Bachelor Degree	No	Public
PT$_{18}$	3	Bachelor Degree	No	Private
PT$_{19}$	15	Bachelor Degree	No	Public
PT$_{20}$	3	Bachelor Degree	Yes	Public

As shown in Table 1, the participating teachers have a diverse variety of teaching experiences in their profession and continue to educate. Six of the instructors had no education linked to play in early childhood education, neither in their undergraduate years nor in their teaching profession.

2.2 Data collection tools and procedure

Because phenomenology is a way for obtaining detailed information about human perspectives, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participating teachers to learn about their views on playful learning in their teaching context. The researcher also collected reflective journals to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the collected data. The semi-structured interview questions were developed after a review of related literature in the field (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Kroll, 2018; Wu, 2018). After the researcher developed the initial questions, another researcher with expertise in Early Childhood Education checked the language and meaning. The questions were finalized after minor alterations, such as the order of the questions. The interview form includes 5 demographic and 12 main questions to reflect teachers' views on playful learning for children's learning and their teaching process. The main questions

were on participants' understanding of what playful learning is and its effectiveness in the development and learning of children. Furthermore, specific questions were asked to better identify their habitual teaching practices and play preferences during their teaching process.

Individual interviews with participation teachers were conducted and recorded via Zoom meetings. All of the meetings were set up in collaboration with the participants through e-mailing and messaging regarding the most appropriate day and time. Before starting the meeting, the purpose of the research was explained, and their permission was obtained via e-mail. Before posing questions, a short conversation was held to help participants feel relaxed and allow them to express themselves more freely, as proposed by Moustakas (1994). Each interview lasted between 45 and 50 minutes.

2.3 *Data analyses*

In the current study, data analysis was conducted using a thematic data analysis method to address the inquiry of Turkish ECE teachers' views on playful learning in the context of their teaching process. Before beginning the coding procedure, the transcribed text was resent to the participating teachers for member checking to confirm that their statements and recorded responses were consistent (Creswell, 2008). It was attempted to identify specific themes for common ideas that came up regularly by attentively scrutinizing the participants' responses. The coding structure was guided by theoretical knowledge and the relevant literature in order to construct an analytical framework. This iterative coding process was carried out via a dialogic relationship between theory and empirical data (Creswell, 2013).

The researcher coded the entire data after assuring data saturation about participant responses. The data was then shared with the second coder to guarantee that the expert opinion was obtained. Nearly half of the data was coded by the second coder, an expert in the field of Early Childhood Education. The final themes and codes were determined on a dialogue between the researcher and the second coder after cross-checking. The researcher arrived at the following three main themes as a result of this procedure: (1) Teachers' understanding of play, (2) Teachers' understanding of playful learning, and (3) Implementing playful learning. As shown in Figure 1, the relevant literature (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Wu, 2018; Cowan, 2020; Gray & Ryan 2016; Parker & Thomson, 2019; Kangas et al., 2017) is extensively examined in order to expose the participating teachers' views on playful learning.

Teachers' Understanding of Play

- The sense of play
- Supporting developmental areas
- Interactional function

Teachers' Understanding of Playful Learning

- Permenant learning
- Free-play vs non-play confusion

Implementing Playful Learning

- Learning by doing
- Learning and play connections
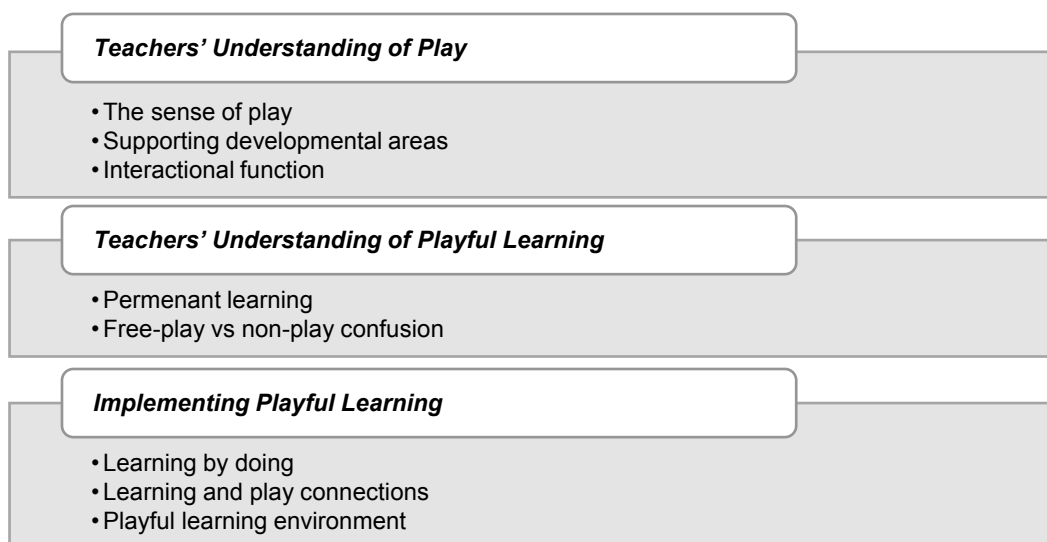- Playful learning environment

Figure 1. Themes and categories were refined depending on the responses of participants.

3. Findings

The current study involved 20 early childhood teachers from different cities in Turkey to investigate their views on playful learning. The study's findings revealed that participants' **responses were frequently centered on three main themes; (1) Teachers' understanding of play, (2) Teachers' understanding of playful learning, and (3) Implementing playful learning.**

3.1 *Teachers'* understanding of play

To begin, participants were asked to express their understanding of the concept of play. Over half of the teachers (n=14) indicated that play is a process during which children participate freely and with joy. "*...Regardless of whether there is a specific purpose or rule, children engage in play freely and with enjoyment in all contexts*" (PT$_2$). Another participating teacher noted, "*A child likes playing with everything he/she observes from the environment by designing it in his/her own imagination*" (PT$_{16}$).

Many of the teachers who participated in the study said that play improves children's overall development as well as particular developmental areas including cognitive, social, physical, emotional, and language. One of the teachers, for example, stated, "*There is a dynamic interaction between play and mind. Pretend play is a great way for children to use language. For me, play has an impact on the mind, and the mind has an impact on the play.*" (PT$_9$). "*Play is an important tool for me to interact with children because the process of self-expression becomes more solid and easier through play,*" said another participant teacher (PT$_7$). Furthermore, one of the teachers expressed her opinions in the following excerpt:

> "In terms of psychomotor development, play enables the child to relax, release extra energy, and feel more refreshed. In terms of social and emotional development, play helps children to adapt to rules, socialize through engaging with their environment, and feel a sense of belonging to a group. In terms of cognitive and language development, play allows the child to solve issues and interact with his or her surroundings." (PT$_8$)

Another key quote from one of the participants' teachers showed the importance of play for children's whole development.

> "**I don'**t believe that one development area is affected just by the play. When a child is playing with Lego, for example, he or she can utilize their imagination, talk, or turn it on and off at the same time. Both cognitive and motor development can be addressed here. As a result, I can claim that play is a tool that influences the child's whole development." **(PT$_{11}$)**

3.2 *Teachers'* understanding of playful learning

Second, participants were asked to describe how they support children's learning through play. Eight participants (n=8) reported that they use play-based learning approaches into their own teaching practices. According to one of the participating teachers, "*Play is the most effective way to provide learning permanently because I believe it is the process when the child realizes his/her intense curiosity.*" (PT$_3$).

The responses of participant teachers to the question of comparing children's learning through free play time, which is one of the activity types in the MoNE Preschool Education Program, and playful learning revealed that teachers were unsure how to distinguish the difference these two concepts in terms of the time, purpose, and rules for play. "*While one of them provides the opportunity to learn regularly and with rules, the other is without restrictions,*" one of the teachers explained (PT$_3$). According to another teacher, "*although the child learns informally*

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during free play time, he/she learns in a formal way during learning through play. The only thing they have in common is that learning happens in both situations" (PT$_9$). Similarly, one of the teachers emphasized free play time as a component of the assessment process by stating "*In free play time, we can observe what the child learns*" (PT$_4$). Furthermore, one of the teachers stated that both free play and playful learning contribute in the learning process when given varied instructions.

> "We can observe the plays that children create during free play time. These are the periods, in my opinion, that contribute the most to children's creativity. The first thing that comes to mind when it comes to learning through play is educational games. These are what I call planned games because there is a goal for acquisition and some instructions for accomplishing it. Both of them have similar points in that they have fun while contributing to the child's development." (PT$_{14}$)

3.3 *Implementing playful learning*

Finally, the participant teachers who took part in the study were asked about their approaches to learning through play. While almost all teachers agreed that it is necessary to reflect playful learning on teaching practices, few teachers indicated what procedures they implement. One teacher stated, "*Children both have joy and learn through play. For instance, while teaching a concept, we may produce more effective learning by integrating children in the process by turning it into play rather than instructing them*" (PT$_8$). "*I think discoveries of children and their learning should be integrated in the teaching of children*" (PT$_5$) one of the teachers said, and "*Children must play until they reach satisfaction on their discoveries*" (PT$_6$). One teacher went into great depth about their playful learning process. In addition, one of the teachers said that she is not competent at planning learning process through playfully and needs more understanding about it (PT$_{18}$) in response to being asked do you have enough knowledge for effectively implementing playful learning in your classroom?". Another teacher who took part in the interview mentioned:

> "Play, in my opinion, is the most effective way for children to learn. Because, as stated in the literature, a child's job is to play. The more I provide a topic or concept in a playful way, the easier it is for the children in my classroom to learn and remember. They frequently play the games and desire to play them again and again. Active games, in particular, where children can burn off excess energy, are a top priority for them. For example, there are several water activities that we do in the garden. These plays are quite appreciated among them." (PT$_{16}$)

Teachers have expressed some difficulty in determining if their classrooms are ideal for implementing learning processes through play and where they benefit from introducing playful learning activities. "*In general, I believe that our nation's preschool classrooms are not suitable for play-based learning,*" one of the teachers said (PT$_{10}$). One another teacher said that "*I normally create my own playful learning activities based on the objectives in the national program book, or I employ play activities inspired by my colleagues. I can't say that any source, including the preschool education program, assisted me in planning such activities*" (PT$_{18}$).

One of the participating teachers, on the other hand, said that she is having some difficulties adopting learning through play in their classroom. The teacher expressed this problem as follows; "*Sometimes children get away from the goals of the learning process and I don't want them to be disconnected from their play activities. Then I don't know how to deal with this situation.*"

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4. Discussion

The key findings of the current study are discussed concerning the research question of what are the views and interpretations of Turkish ECE teachers on playful learning in the context of their teaching environment? Concerning to investigate the main research question, the current study found three major themes: (1) Teachers' understanding of play, (2) Teachers' understanding of playful learning, and (3) Implementing playful learning.

The participants' early childhood teachers were asked to explain their views on "play" in the first half of the interview questions. Many of the participating teachers agreed that play is enjoyable and satisfying for both children and adults, according to the findings. Furthermore, the participants agreed that play opportunities can help children in both specialized and overall developmental areas. Baker and Ryan (2021), who did the study to discover answers to the question "what is the role of play and what do children feel like during play," obtained similar findings. The researchers found that children feel choice, wonder, and delight while playing. Another significant finding revealed that these feelings are shaped by the cultural environment, implying that defining "play" based on cultural context is critical. In accordance with this, several studies have hypothesized that children's play and emotions vary by culture. As a result, the concept of developmental and culturally appropriate practices is critical for children's learning. Mardell (2019), on the other hand, stated that play has both subjective and objective elements. As a result, observations of children's play revealed that play involves both psychological states (feel like) and observable behaviors (looks like). Another major aspect of the pedagogical discussion on play is the role of play on children's development. Hunter and Walsh (2014) conducted a study to investigate teachers' perspectives on play, and the results revealed that nearly all participating teachers value play and believe that it helps to children's holistic development. Furthermore, Pyle and Luce-Kapler (2014) concluded that play in kindergarten contexts meets children's developmental needs and provides opportunities for developmentally appropriate practices.

Teachers' views of playful learning are the second thematic code. The findings revealed that the concept of playful learning is defined differently by the participant teachers. Almost all teachers emphasized the connection between play and learning, seeing play as a constant support for children's development. In terms of setting rules, however, more than half of the teachers indicated that free play and playful learning are not the same. A considerable body of literature has also investigated teachers' perspectives on play-based learning (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Bennett, Wood, & Rogers 1997). Wood (2009) found that teachers saw play as a multidimensional continuum with two edges: free play and non-play activities. Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) said that ECE researchers have challenged the dichotomization of play and learning ideas. To that purpose, Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) conducted a review of 62 research studies on teachers' perspectives on playful learning. According to the review of literature, teachers have a misunderstanding about free play and learning. Pyle, Prioletta and Poliszczuk (2018) discovered two types of teachers in their investigation. Free play is useful in fostering children's language and social development, according to one teacher group, but a structured learning process is required to improve children's reading and writing abilities. The second teacher group, on the other hand, incorporated many sorts of play into their practices and believes that play benefits children's diverse range of skills as well as their academic learning process. parallel with these findings, the current study also revealed that participating teachers struggle to find a balance between play and learning processes since time and classroom management is a major problem for them. The reason might be similar to Gray and Ryan's (2016) argument that teachers have little possibilities for training and professional development in the area of playful learning. In line with the current study's findings, Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) said that time management is a major challenge for teachers because play and learning are mutually exclusive activities. Similarly, several studies have found that teachers struggle to position themselves in play and learning processes in terms of

being non-intrusive and respecting children's agency as independent learners (Wood, 2009; Bennett, Wood & Rogers 1997).

Concerning the last theme, the current study found that two participant teachers responded that play and learning should be integrated, even though they do not reflect properly on their teaching practices. The remaining teachers were unable to precisely describe the relationship between play and learning. The current study's findings may indicate a gap between participating teachers' beliefs about playful learning and their effective implementation of it. In relation to this conflict of beliefs and practices, several studies have found that teachers are hesitant to use playful learning because of the school context, which has embraced a rigorous ECE curriculum (Cheng 2001; Foote, Smith & Ellis 2004; Lynch 2015). Furthermore, some of the researchers found that teachers are afraid of changing a communally accepted strategy, which is one of the reasons for their implementation challenges (Cheng 2001; Howard, 2010). According to Barblett, Knaus and Barratt-Pugh (2016), several of the participating teachers were unfamiliar with play-based learning as a pedagogical practice. Furthermore, one of the participants indicated that teachers' lack of understanding was caused by insufficient professional development methods in schools and poor pre-service teacher education. Another finding of the current study was that nearly all of the participating teachers stated that their environment is not conducive to implementing playful learning. According to a review of relevant literature, Barblett et al. (2016) revealed that participating teachers struggle with changing the environment for play-based learning. According to Moon and Reifel (2008), the participating ECE teacher described the environment for playful learning as offering varied props and materials so that the children can choose what they want to play with, how and when they want to play.

5. Conclusion

The current study's findings have important implications for ECE teachers, school **administrators, and government policy. According to the study's** findings, some of the participating ECE teachers had difficulty implementing playful learning due to a lack of knowledge, poor time management, and poor classroom management skills. In light of these findings, it is reasonable to assume that participating teachers need ongoing professional support in order to embrace new knowledge, skills, and implement evidence-based practices on playful learning. School administrators should be on the lookout for ways to encourage teachers' playful practices in order to promote teachers' professional development opportunities and the spreading of playful learning.

State-run organizations can give context-based playful learning trainings to teachers in order to accomplish professional development. It should not be overlooked that children's play agents are culturally shaped; therefore, understanding children's cultural background and family culture is the first step in developing proper professional training. As a result of the trainings designed specifically for the regions and conditions in Turkey, it will be possible to establish a lot more meaningful understanding for playful learning and a culturally appropriate model. Furthermore, teacher education programs can revise their course content or create a new course to give the information required for playful learning practices. Finally, school administrators may give an appropriate environment, resources, and time to ECE teachers who wish to use playful learning.

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