EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS' PERCEPTION AND PRACTICES IN PLAY
PEDAGOGY: A CRITICAL NARRATIVE INQUIRY

Milan K.C.

A Dissertation

Submitted to
School of Education

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Philosophy in Educational Leadership

Kathmandu University
Dhulikhel, Nepal

November 2024

AN ABSTRACT

of the dissertation of *Milan K. C.* for the Degree of *Master of Philosophy in Educational Leadership*, presented on 22 November 2024, entitled *Early Childhood Teachers' Perception and Practices on Play Pedagogy: A Critical Narrative Inquiry.*

APPROVED BY

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Georgiana Duarte, PhD

Dissertation Supervisor

Play is the central focus of the early childhood curriculum as a natural and purposeful behavior. Research shows that play drives the development of young children's learning and development. Children's play is considered critical in the holistic development and learning of young children. The philosophical foundation of the study includes research by Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, who believed that children learn best when they engage actively with hands-on learning rather than when they are instructed. Specifically, play has been keenly shown to foster learning and development in all the domains of early childhood development. Play pedagogy is acknowledged as the most effective way to teach young children as it is linked to developmentally appropriate practice. Developmentally appropriate practice is when teaching strategies respond to and match the child's age and developmental needs. However, early childhood educators in Nepal follow content-centered learning rather than developmentally appropriate practice that is responsive to their individual growth and needs. Play pedagogy is new in Nepal and as a consequence, our teachers lack sufficient training opportunities related to play theory and practice. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore early childhood development teachers' perceptions and strategies with regard to play. Child development and constructive grounded theories were reviewed and examined to build the constructs of this specific study. The study took place in Gandaki Province among six early childhood teachers from four community-based schools. In this critical narrative study, I

strived to understand their perspectives and their classroom decisions with respect to play in the context of Nepal through formal interviews and observations. The methodology utilized in the study involved data collection that consisted of in-depth interviews, field notes, observation of the teachers and continuous critical reflectivity.

The data in this study was carefully organized based on each key question and qualitative responses were carefully analyzed. A consistent finding of this study revealed that teachers understood play and learning as two different concepts and activities. Therefore, they could not integrate play and learning in their responses throughout the interview. Also, the findings indicated that even though play activities were suggested in the early childhood curriculum of Nepal, teachers were not integrating them due to a lack of observation, support, and planning developmental activities. The findings on this lack of understanding were consistent across the entire sample and also reflected other key issues of organization and safety. This study confirms the need for a better understanding of play pedagogy and its value to children's learning and development. Also, results confirmed that teachers critically need sufficient knowledge about child development and the importance of play in early child development education. Critical analysis of this study solidified the challenges that new teachers face as well when they lack training or education in play pedagogy. As I conclude this study, I recommend further research to ensure and support educators in child development and play pedagogy in Nepal since these are the early years and foundation for later growth and success.

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शोध सार

शैक्षिक नेतृत्व तथा व्यवस्थापनमा दर्शनशास्त्रको स्नातकोत्तर डिग्रीको लागि मिलन के.सी.को शोध प्रबन्धको शीर्षक "बाल शिक्षाका शिक्षकहरूको खेल शिक्षणबारे धारणा र अभ्यास"एक आलोचनात्मक कथा अनुसन्धान : ७ मङ्सिर २०८१ मा प्रस्तुत गरिएको थियो।

Georgianna Duarte

....

जर्जियाना डुआर्टे, पीएचडी

शोध निर्देशक

प्रारम्भिक शिक्षाको पाठ्यक्रममा खेल बालबालिकाको एक प्राकृतिक र उद्देश्यपूर्ण व्यवहारको रूपमा मुख्य केन्द्र बिन्दु मानिएको छ । खेलले साना बालबालिकाको सिकाइ र विकासलाई अघि बढाउँछ भनेर अनुसन्धानले पनि देखाएको छ । साना बालबालिकाको समग्र विकास र सिकाइका लागि खेललाई महत्वपूर्ण मानिन्छ । यस अध्ययनमा दार्शनिक आधारको रुपमा पियाजे र लेभ भाइगोट्स्कीका अनुसन्धानहरू समावेश गरिएका छन् । उनीहरुका अनुसार बालबालिकाले निर्देशन पाइरहनुको सट्टा, अनुभवमा आधारित सक्रिय सिकाइमा संलग्न हुँदा सबैभन्दा राम्रो सिक्छन् भन्ने छ । विशेष गरी, खेलले प्रारम्भिक बाल्यकालको विकासका सबै क्षेत्रमा सिकाइ र विकासलाई प्रोत्साहन गर्ने कुरालाई प्रस्ट रूपमा देखाइएको छ । खेल शिक्षाशास्त्रलाई विकास अनुकूल अभ्याससँग सम्बन्धित भएकोले साना बालबालिकालाई पढाउने सबैभन्दा प्रभावकारी तरिका मानिन्छ। विकासअनुकूल अभ्यास भनेको शिक्षण रणनीतिहरू बालबालिकाको उमेर र विकासको आवश्यकतासँग मेल खाने र त्यसमा प्रतिक्रिया जनाउने प्रक्रियालाई जनाउँछ । तर, नेपालका प्रारम्भिक बाल शिक्षाका शिक्षकहरूले बालबालिकाको व्यक्तिगत विकास र आवश्यकतालाई सम्बोधन गर्ने विकास अनुकूल अभ्यास भन्दा विषयवस्तु केन्द्रित सिकाइलाई पछ्याउने गरेको पाइन्छ। नेपालमा खेल शिक्षाशास्त्रको नयाँ अवधारणा हो, जसका कारण हाम्रा शिक्षकहरूलाई खेलको सिद्धान्त र अभ्याससँग सम्बन्धित पर्याप्त तालिम अवसरहरूको अभाव छ । यस गुणात्मक अध्ययनको उद्देश्य प्रारम्भिक बाल विकास शिक्षकहरूको खेलसम्बन्धी धारणा र रणनीतिहरू अन्वेषण गर्नु थियो। बालविकास र संरचनात्मक आधार सिद्धान्तहरूको समीक्षा गरी यस अध्ययनलाई विशेष किसिमले निर्माण गरी तयार पारिएको छ । यो अध्ययन गण्डकी प्रदेशका चार सामुदायिक विद्यालयका छ जना प्रारम्भिक बाल शिक्षाका शिक्षकहरू माझ गरिएको थियो। यस आलोचनात्मक कथात्मक अध्ययनमा, मैले नेपालका सन्दर्भमा खेलप्रतिको उनीहरूको दृष्टिकोण र कक्षाकोठामा लिने निर्णयलाई औपचारिक अन्तर्वार्ता र अवलोकनमार्फत बुझ्न प्रयास गरेँ । यस अध्ययनमा प्रयोग गरिएको विधिमा गहन अन्तर्वार्ता, क्षेत्रगत लेखन

(फिल्ड नोट्स), शिक्षकहरूको अवलोकन, र निरन्तर आलोचनात्मक परावर्तन समेटिने तथ्यांकन सङ्कलन समावेश गरिएको थियो ।

यस अध्ययनको तथ्यांकनलाई प्रत्येक मुख्य प्रश्नका आधारमा सावधानीपूर्वक व्यवस्थापन गरिएको थियो र गुणात्मक प्रतिक्रियाहरूलाई ध्यानपूर्वक विश्लेषण गरिएको थियो। अध्ययनको एक स्थिर परिणामले देखायो कि शिक्षकहरूले खेल र सिकाइलाई दुई फरक अवधारणा र क्रियाकलापका रूपमा बुझेका थिए । त्यसैले, उनीहरू अन्तर्वार्ताका क्रममा खेल र सिकाइलाई एकीकृत गर्न सकेनन् । यसबाहेक, परिणामले के देखायो भने नेपालका प्रारम्भिक विकासको पाठ्यक्रममा खेल गतिविधिहरू सिफारिस गरिएको थियो तर शिक्षकहरूमा अवलोकन, सहयोग, र विकासात्मक गतिविधिहरूको योजना अभावका कारण ती गतिविधिहरू एकीकृत भएका थिएनन् । यस बुझाइको अभावमा प्राप्त परिणामहरू सम्पूर्ण नमूनामा समान थिए र यसले संगठन र सुरक्षा जस्ता अन्य मुख्य समस्याहरूलाई पनि प्रतिबिम्बित गरेको थियो । यो अध्ययनले खेल शिक्षाशास्त्रको राम्रो बुझाइ र यसको बालबालिकाको सिकाइ र विकासमा मूल्यको आवश्यकता पुष्टि गर्छ । साथै, परिणामहरूले देखायो कि शिक्षकहरूलाई बाल विकास र प्रारम्भिक बाल विकास शिक्षामा खेलको महत्त्वबारे पर्याप्त ज्ञान आवश्यक छ । यस अध्ययनको आलोचनात्मक विश्लेषणले नयाँ शिक्षकहरूले खेल शिक्षाशास्त्रमा तालिम वा शिक्षा अभाव हुँदा सामना गर्ने चुनौतीहरूलाई प्रस्ट बनायो । निष्कर्षमा, म नेपालमा बाल विकास र खेल शिक्षाशास्त्रमा शिक्षकहरूको समर्थन र सुनिश्चित गर्नका लागि थप अनुसन्धानको सिफारिश गर्छु, किनकि यी प्रारम्भिक वर्षहरू आगामी वृद्धि र सफलता को आधार हुन् ।

....   ७ मङ्सिर २०८१

मिलन के.सी.
उपाधि उम्मेदवार

This dissertation entitled *Early Childhood Teachers' Perception and Practices on Play Pedagogy: A Critical Narrative Inquiry* presented by Milan K.C. on *22 November 2024.*

APPROVED BY

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I understand that my dissertation will become a part of the permanent collection of the library of Kathmandu University. My signature below authorizes the release of my dissertation to any reader upon request for scholarly purposes.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is my original work, and it has not been submitted for candidature for any other degree at any other university.

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Milan K.C.   22 November 2024

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my dearest children, Biwansh Khatri and Birangana Khatri. Both of you have inspired me and given me the courage to complete this study. Despite the many obstacles and challenges I faced in life, your loving appreciation always motivated me- I love you both!

Lastly, I would like to dedicate this study to my husband, who patiently encouraged me throughout the dissertation process and shaped the way I view education as a progressive journey - I love you forever!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

"Play is the work of childhood."

-Jean Piaget

This dissertation has been a challenging and transformative journey for me. I must acknowledge the support received from many respectable and lovely personalities to complete this voyage in one or the other forms.

First, I must express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Dr. Georgianna Duarte, who guided me like a "Guru" and carried pride in the achievement of their students. She was a Guardian Angel to provide strength whenever I needed and infinitive support to remain focused on the goal. I was blessed to have such unbelievable encouragement from her throughout this dissertation.

I am grateful to the Dean, Prof. Bal Chandra Luitel, PhD for selecting me as an eligible candidate to conduct this research. I must thank Prof. Mana Pasad Wagley, PhD, Prof. Dhanapati Subedi, PhD, Associ. Prof. Shesha Kanta Pangeni, PhD, Head of Department, Asst. Prof. Rebat Kumar Dhakal, PhD, for providing feedback on completing the research. Likewise, I am equally grateful to Asst. Prof. Shree Krishna Wagley, PhD for giving me insightful feedback and adding critical aspects to reshape this research. My special thanks to Dr. Meenakashi Dahal, who widened my knowledge of early childhood development education.

I would have never completed this dissertation without the unconditional loving support of my parents, my husband, and my children. I am very thankful to my MPhil colleagues for giving genuine feedback whenever I discussed my research. Their feedback created a stimulating atmosphere that helped me to complete this study.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABBREVIATION

ACEI	Association for Childhood Education International
CDC	Curriculum Development Center
CEHRD	Center for Education and Human Resource Development
DAP	Developmentally Appropriate Practice
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECED	Early Childhood Education and Development
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ELYF	Early Learning Years Framework
IPA	International Play Association
MOEST	Ministry of Education Science and Technology
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OMEP	World Organization for Early Childhood Education
NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young Children
TASP	The Association for the Study of Play
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Child Rights Convention
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific Educational Scientific Cultural Organization

LIST OF FIGURE

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins with the research agenda of play pedagogy and its benefits in the professional field of early childhood development. The research study also briefly narrates the pedagogical foundation and challenging areas of children's play. Furthermore, it presents the study's purpose, rationale, and limitations based on the research.

Early Educational Experiences Building the Foundation of Inquiry

Scene Setting

After completing high school in 1997, I secured a professional teaching profession in a private school to teach early childhood students. As a curious and untrained new teacher, I used to recall and follow my own teacher's teaching pedagogy as a role model. During that time, the teaching pedagogy was just reading and writing. The teachers used strategies primarily using textbooks and blackboards. Students were instructed to remain seated without any movement in the classroom. I never witnessed teachers doing any kind of play activities or using teaching materials in class while teaching young children. Rather, I observed teachers instructing children to copy either from the board or from the text books and I also noticed a lot of ineffective teaching behavior, like screaming and punishing when a child attempted to play inside the classroom. During those times, I never observed children excited to learn, specially inside the classroom, but they looked happier in the recess while having free play time and during games period that was organized only once a week. I can still recall the same feeling from my childhood Games period was scheduled only once a week for 40 minutes and it was an important time for me to play freely. We were allowed to play freely with different kinds of play items of our own choice, like skipping rope, badminton, table tennis, and basketball. My friends and I desperately waited for this period to arrive, but we felt time was never enough for us. We were so engaged in play that time just disappeared since we had so much fun. If those teachers had carefully observed our excitement during the game period, they would have realized that play should have been

planned daily. If they had realized the value of play, they might have integrated it into daily routines rather than just once a week.

Likewise, various life experiences built the foundation of my curiosity and motivation to conduct this research, including my motherhood. I was curious and insecure about my child attending such a traditional school and teaching approach, so I started a primary school. This was a venue for learning, professional growth, and confidence to bring changes in the traditional pedagogy for my child as well as other children. Another important turning point in my professional growth was the international opportunity to visit Germany and observe their educational system. I had the opportunity to work as a volunteer teacher in an international school in Germany. Here, I observed different teaching pedagogy and instructional experiences. My observations noted the excitement of children and their eagerness to learn. This completely challenged my thinking and belief towards teaching since previous thinking was that children were not enjoying the learning process. Therefore, I became more reflective and thought about the effective pedagogy that could bring changes to traditional teaching styles. After completing my Master's degree from Kathmandu University in Early Childhood Education (ECE) I gained in-depth knowledge about play pedagogy and its importance in education. Through observation, experience, and reflection, I realized that play pedagogy was essential and had important value in the instructional classroom of young children. I tried to adopt this teaching pedagogy in my school but had many challenges in my efforts to implement play pedagogy. There might be various reasons why early childhood development (ECD) teachers are not able to plan play-based learning activities. If those challenges and benefits of play had been explored in the Nepali context, then we would be able to implement play-based learning in Nepal like in other countries. As a result, I found it necessary to explore the perceptions of teachers who are also facing challenges like me, to integrate play and learning for children's holistic development in Nepal.

Play Pedagogy

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the term pedagogy is defined as "the art, science, or profession of teaching." Many education professionals also define pedagogy as the theory, method and philosophy of teaching and it concerns the interplay between culture and different ways to learn. We encounter pedagogy every day in

teaching practice in areas like relationship, time and space (Friesen & Su, 2022) determined by teachers' perspectives and practices. In his "Pedagogical Creed," John Dewey stated that "education is a process of living, not a preparation of future living." Based on Dewey's interpretation, I argue that pedagogy is best understood through the educator's teaching beliefs, actions, experiences, and reflections. While exploring the play way method in early childhood education, I found many names used to relate learning through the play approach by different writers and researchers. Some of them are Play-based learning, Playful learning, Purposeful Play, and Play Pedagogy. However, I have used the name 'Play Pedagogy' throughout the research study.

From the time of Frobel (1887), a father of kindergarten who argued play is essential in early childhood, research has shown that play is clearly related to all areas of development. Throughout this study, these developmental domains are described in detail in relation to play. Play pedagogy is a powerful pathway to make active participation of young children in a learning context where children engage freely, with adult guidance and in a structured play National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2022). Active participation will make learning more joyful than just listening to teachers passively. When children are given concrete, hands-on learning materials to play, they gain a better understanding of the subject matter. It is a constructive pedagogy that is linked with high-quality ECE in global policy and research (Marbina et al., 2011; Nilsson et al., 2018; Wall et al., 2015). Play pedagogy in Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) has been explored by many researchers and is clearly a fundamental component of ECD (Brown, 2020; Frost, 2005; Wood, 2008). It is considered a viable pedagogy with broadly applicable goals and learning results as it allows children to explore different ways of solving their problems and gain autonomy. Various international studies focus on the practices and study of playful teaching and learning, connecting play with holistic development (Harvard University, 2021). Play and learning mutually support one another, connecting all domains of social, emotional, physical, cognitive and language development (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2017; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2016) which is also clearly reflected in early childhood curriculum of Nepal (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2019).

Since Piaget (1963) defined play as cognitive development, play pedagogy is perceived as an intensely interpersonal realm, a strategy of open-ended negotiation and improvisation for both children and adults (Wood, 2013). For example, it is through observation and open-ended questions that Piaget formulated his theory of cognitive development and play. The work of Piaget and this interview strategy with children has been replicated in many countries. Generally speaking, play is regarded as an enjoyable, impromptu, non-goal-directed activity that might involve flow, surprise and anticipation (Brown, 2009; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). From many definitions of play and playfulness given by theorists and researchers, we can understand certain widely accepted characteristics of play, such as active engagement, intrinsic motivation, non-goal-directed, nonliteral, and freely chosen. These definitions of play indicate that there is a need for children's play; therefore, it is placed at the center of the curriculum in many countries. Engaging in play is one of the most important behaviors of being human, as well as the natural instincts that all children possess (Brown, 2009; Duarte, 2015). That indicates that play pedagogy is the best method to make children more creative, effective problem solvers, physically fit, and able to gain better coordination. In order to understand play pedagogy and to improve effective teaching skills, educators need to have basic knowledge about how children learn and receive information.

Play is the natural way of learning (Harvard University, 2021) because it allows children to develop autonomy and independent motivation to learn by making them involved in personally relevant activities and teaching them about themselves and others. Children show their exceptional ability for exploration, creativity, and decision-making through play. It helps learners to lead their own learning process, take risks, make decisions and explore new possibilities (Brown, 2020). Piaget (1963) believed that children's play was vital for their growth and development of cognitive ability. According to his idea of play, child's surroundings and play should support more language and cognitive growth as they become older. Vygotsky's play theory is distinct from other play theories because it covers constructional play, object-oriented exploration, and rule-based games. It helps us to understand that in the early years, play is a medium that satisfies the needs of children through imaginary dramatic play, which is not always possible in the real world. Vygotsky stressed the importance of communication to keep the play fluid

and ongoing. This children's natural desire for play is placed at the center of the curriculum in play pedagogy to enhance the brain and body.

Critical Aspects of Implementing Play Pedagogy

There are essential key elements in successfully implementing play pedagogy. First, it is vital to understand the benefits of play and the development of young children. In order to effectively implement play activities, the teacher must understand where the child is at cognitively and developmentally in order to select the best match in strategy and activity. This involves education and training. Second, the teacher must understand the value and importance of divergent materials to foster creative thinking and challenge possible outcomes. Essentially, the teacher must carefully understand the value of divergent materials and their role in fostering play. Third, the teacher must design her physical indoor and outdoor environments to promote and support problem-solving and open-ended thinking. Fourth, the teacher must ensure that the plan and evaluation of play are planned and evaluated through observation and evidence of practice.

The Challenges of Teachers Implementation in Play Pedagogy

The challenges that teachers face in rural and urban Nepal correlate with the critical aspects of implementing play pedagogy successfully. Teachers lack education, training, and supportive feedback in the classroom, which will help them acquire knowledge and skills in play pedagogy. This challenge is explored in different ways throughout the study. Second, the teachers need a solid understanding of developmental stages in cognition, language, and motor development. These areas of development are critical in play and are also keenly addressed through the research interview. Unfortunately, many Nepali classrooms lack supplies, but more importantly, the teacher is challenged with the importance of understanding the value of play materials and how some materials facilitate a multitude of types of play and complex thinking while other materials are closed and limited in their play value. Similarly, the teachers are challenged by the administration's provision of spaces that are not conducive to a variety of play or furniture that will enhance the physical indoor and outdoor spaces to foster play and learning.

Play Deprivation & Decline in Play

However, when there is no play in children's life, they miss uncountable opportunities for socialization, which affects their emotional development and ultimately leads to serious brain damage and lots of behavior issues. Pellis et al. (2014) found huge negative impacts on brain development due to the deprivation of play in different areas: lack of problem-solving skills and social-emotional skills, including positive peer relationships. In the same way, Brown (2014), a play researcher, stated that the absence of play can create many behavioral issues, such as the inability to regulate emotions, lack of self-control, inability to maintain good relationships, and many psychological diseases. In his many play researches, he is trying to warn society to maximize play opportunities to avoid the negative effects like life-long poor communication skills and inability to control emotions that lead to poor resilience. Peter Gray from Boston College (As cited by Brannock, 2023) also revealed that since there has been a decline in children's play over the past century in the United States, there has been a rise in psychological disorders like depression, anxiety, narcissism, and suicide. Even in Nepal, after COVID-19, children are more attracted to digital devices, so in ECD centers, play activities should be prioritized both in school and at home. As a teacher, I have also experienced many behavioral issues in students these days. This aggressive behavior and inability to control their anger might lead to poor peer relationships. Clearly, children organize and work out their challenges and problems through play. When play is absent, children are left frustrated and have no venue to dramatize or discuss problem-solving. Likewise, such harmful behavior can cause many accidents in adolescents.

The aim of education is to teach or impart different skills, such as better communication, problem-solving, cooperation, and creativity, so play gives opportunities to gain such skills. Wood (2005) states that play and playful activities definitely lead to the development of higher knowledge, learning, and understanding of new skills, especially in the areas of social and cognitive domains. From the Early Learning Framework of British Columbia, the Ministry of Education (2019) has considered play pedagogy as essential for learning and well-being. It further states, "Play-based learning opportunities in primary grades challenge children and contribute to strong communication, critical thinking, ability to make friends, take responsibility, collaborate,

persist, investigate, solve problems, innovate, acquire reading, writing, numeracy, and digital literacy skills, and cross-cultural understanding" (p. 22). Similarly, the ECD and Education Curriculum Development Center of Nepal (Curriculum Development Center [CDC], 2020) has mentioned that the play area is as essential as other areas like creative area, mathematical area, science area, dramatic area, language area for the ECD classroom environment. Even in the UN convention, play is mentioned as a basic right of children, so all articles other than article 31 are interrelated with play, showing the fundamental necessity for the growth and development of children. Play is often described as 'children's work,' as it is intensely enjoyable for them. Therefore, teachers need to consider and integrate play in the instructional environment with suitable tools to perform the activities best.

During my lifetime, teachers perceived learning to only occur inside the walls of a school. In contrast, play was perceived and only valued outside the classroom. Teachers usually plan and organize play through different sports activities with the purpose of physical development and a small break from academic routines, not the way of learning. In the past, teachers believed play was a barrier to learning and a waste of time. Therefore, teachers discouraged play because they didn't fully understand the benefits of play. Currently, we understand play as an essential activity in and outside of the classroom. Research has shown that through play, many executive functions are developed in young children (Coelho et al., 2020). Since early childhood is an important phase of human development where solving problems lays the foundation for future growth and development (All for Kids, 2023) therefore, play activities are essential in this period to solve problems, self-regulate, cooperate, take the lead, and follow. When children actively engage in activities, they demonstrate their higher abilities, so at that time, they get the opportunity to learn important life skills. In this context, I felt it necessary to know that in Nepal, our ECD teachers plan different activities to engage children to function properly in real society.

Despite many initiatives to develop quality in ECED in Nepal, I have experienced that ECD teachers are unable to practice play pedagogy in the classroom, which has to be urgently addressed. Without addressing this problem, we are still far away from reaching the quality educational goal in the early childhood period. Among many factors that can

be improved to bring changes to the present situation of education, I would like to highlight the benefits of play in ECD and the urgent need to widen teachers' knowledge and understanding of play pedagogy. Specifically, this study has explored play pedagogy through stories narrated by teachers, their experiences, problems, and reflections while trying to implement play pedagogy.

<div align="center">**Statement of the Problem**</div>

For the past few years, I have been trying hard to gain in-depth knowledge about play pedagogy but have been unable to implement it in the classroom. This pedagogy is new in our context, and our teachers lack sufficient training opportunities, which creates little space for innovation in teaching young children. The world's largest research organization for the education of young children, the National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], has focused on play pedagogy as a core factor of Developmentally Appropriate Practice [DAP]. NAEYC has defined DAP as "methods that promote each child's optimal development and learning through a strength-based, play-based approach to joyful, engaged learning" (NAEYC, 2020, p. 5). NAEYC has shown various benefits of play through research, which indicates that learning and teaching through play pedagogy is most effective for child development. However, in our context, educators follow age-appropriate rather than developmentally appropriate learning. When learning is focused more on age-appropriate rather than understanding the developmental level of children, their development needs are not addressed, which affects all areas of development. Since play has been proven to contribute to a holistic upbringing by positively intervening all the domains of ECD, Nepal has also developed new early childhood curriculum guidelines that emphasize play-based learning activities (ECD curriculum, 2020). Even though play activities are suggested in early childhood curriculum, are teachers receiving enough guidelines to practice play-based methods in ECD classrooms? Based on my experience and that of many educational professionals, there is little evidence of play-integrated curriculum activities.

In spite of the extensive research on play globally, play pedagogy is not well understood by many teachers and parents. As play in Nepal is understood as a barrier to learning due to this cultural stigma, adults want their children to study most of the time. To understand play pedagogy first, there should be sufficient knowledge about child

development and ECED. The largest portion of a child's brain develops from birth to age 5, almost more than 90% (Center for Education and Human Resource Development [CEHRD], 2022), which makes the early years of education significantly important. It is proven by research (Duarte, 2015) that inventive ideas develop when children engage in dramatic play, which helps them become fluid thinkers and effective communicators (Yawkey & Pellegrini, 2017). According to Keung & Cheung (2019), play strengthens the neurobiological executive systems that the brain needs to make judgments; therefore, play pedagogy creates high-quality learning opportunities. Play-based learning is found to be essential for learning (NAEYC, 2020; Yogman et al., 2018). However, in our context, many teachers still follow traditional reading and writing practices to complete the curriculum and satisfy the parents; therefore, the values of play are ignored. Many parents expect only focused academic work and do not understand how play can be integrated into the curriculum. Parents and teachers do not understand the value of play.

I have worked with ECD teachers for many years and observed them preparing for primary school readiness. However, I have not observed them planning for play activities. Teachers find it difficult to document play activities as written records in textbooks and copies are easy evidence to showcase their effort, so play activities are neglected. Suppose ECD centers are planned for the optimal development of children. In that case, play activities should be the basic approach of teachers because educators are change-makers who bring innovation to education and can develop an enabling learning environment for sustainable development (Cheng & Yu, 2022). It is important to understand the play pedagogy of teachers who are directly engaged with young children in Nepal. Four major gaps in the research contribute to the lack of understanding research in play pedagogy. While many early childhood studies and documents in Nepal focus on education, there is little to no evidence of focused play research in Nepal on teachers and children. In other countries, there are policy statements on play (England, US, Wales, Ireland, Canada). However, there are no policy statements on play in Nepal. I have not identified any organization that is based on play research. Whereas in the United States and Europe, several organizations focus on children's play (IPA, NAEYC, ACEI, OMEP, TASP). Similarly, in the major universities of Nepal, limited courses focus on children's play and brain development. In contrast, in other countries universities, students have

opportunities to enroll in courses that focus on children's play. The cultural stigma about the play is taken as a barrier to learning. Finally, there is no research organization or lab school that exemplifies and demonstrates a play pedagogy in Nepal.

Many research studies conducted in early childhood education in Nepal by many researchers describe the status of ECED in Nepal. Dahal et al. (2022), in their research of ECED of Nepal, found that teachers are not qualified sufficiently enough to provide quality education in Nepal due to the lack of proper training in child development. However, I didn't find any research that gives a clear understanding of the play perception and practice of ECD teachers in Nepal. In this context, I was curious to know if teachers are implementing play pedagogy as suggested in the curriculum. If ECD teachers lack an understanding of child development theories, how can they integrate play and learning? During two decades of my leadership in ECED, I have witnessed fewer play opportunities provided to children at school and teachers face difficulties implementing activities-based learning. As per my knowledge in our own school, due to teachers' and parents' perception of play as a distraction in learning and that it should happen outside the classroom, I am facing a challenge in practicing play pedagogy. Hence, I would like to argue that we need to make learning meaningful for the children of Nepal. Nepalese children are missing the joyful learning experiences of learning through play. Therefore, this study was conducted to explore early childhood teachers' understanding of play pedagogy.

This study explored my following intentional and focused queries about play. Are ECD teachers competent enough to plan developmentally appropriate play activities to support learning? Are ECD teachers of Nepal trained enough to understand the benefits of play? Do they have easy access to coursework in play? Does Nepal's available ECD training help them understand child development theories that give them sufficient knowledge to plan playful learning activities? Is the ECD training in Nepal accessible to all teachers who are working with young children to practice play pedagogy? Are the classrooms equipped with basic play items to practice play pedagogy? Hence, I was eager to learn about the play practices of ECD centers in Nepal because if we identify Nepal's educational and systematic challenges regarding play, wouldn't it be easy for teachers and caretakers to implement play pedagogy? Lack of play opportunities can negatively

impact the overall development of children. Young children of Nepal might be missing out on skills that are developed by free play, guided play, and structured play. To provide a play-based learning environment in ECD classrooms, I found the critical need to explore the perspectives of teachers and their pedagogical practices about children's play in Nepal. Through interviews and observations of teachers regarding play practices, materials, and policy mandates, this study identified the urgent need to resolve. It is very important to build an action plan to strengthen educational practices, make play policy guidelines to highlight the importance of play, and train teachers to create more quality play-based learning environments.

Rationale of Study

Play pedagogy demands an informal way of teaching children by providing various play materials for high engagement in learning. It aims to enhance the potential of each child by allowing them to freely explore problems and find their own solutions. I have watched many ECD teachers and classrooms in Nepal lack sufficient play materials and pedagogical knowledge. They are facing difficulties in conducting play activities. They are still following the traditional rote memorization method. I was deeply interested in this area of study because research shows that play is a very effective tool for teachers. ECD teachers are unable to give children the freedom to play and self-exploration, which is a child's basic right and inherent characteristic. When teachers lack the knowledge of play benefits in ECED, they are unable to plan, observe, create, organize and document play activities. This research has explored the problems of play pedagogy and identified the challenges to implement because the main focus of the study was on the perception of ECD teachers towards play pedagogy, their play beliefs and their play experiences.

This study tried to present an in-depth knowledge of play values. It recognized the urgent need to support teachers in integrating play and learning and open doors for teacher training for play pedagogy and work in the holistic development of children. This research has created a platform of information to help educate and empower teachers in their decisions on observing, planning, and documenting learning through the play method. The results of this study have the potential to provide information and make the school authority and local government more receptive and informed of the need for play materials and a playful learning environment in school. From my study, ECD teachers

were empowered to collaborate with parents and the community to make both school and home an enabling environment for young learners to build a strong foundation. Finally, after completing the study, I am very hopeful that these results will empower other educators in the future to conduct further research in play pedagogy and understand the value of play and its deep relationship to the learning and development of young children.

Purpose of the Study

The study aims to explore the perceptions and practices of ECD teachers about play pedagogy. Also, the study aims to make critical observations on that perception and practices and emerge with contextually relevant advocacy in this field.

Research Questions

In line with the study context and the research problem, I realized play pedagogy in ECED as an important area of research. The demand for play pedagogy in the new ECED curriculum to bring changes in traditional practices encouraged me to develop the following research questions.

1) How do teachers perceive play pedagogy in ECED centers?
2) How do teachers practice play pedagogy in their school?

Delimitation of the Study

This study has focused on the perceptions of early childhood teachers towards play pedagogy and their play experiences and beliefs. While there are numerous theories defining play, the majority share commonalities. For the purpose of this study, there are five elements of play commonly shared by prominent play researchers: 1) intrinsically driven, 2) freely selected, 3) pleasurable, 4) nonliteral and 5) active engagement. I will use these play elements as tools to build perception and to understand the play practices of ECD centers to identify the overall approach and whether it is aligned to play pedagogy. Therefore, my research will explore play and learning through play from the narratives of teachers; I will not touch other areas of play pedagogy. There are several delimitations of the study. First, there is an important consideration and impact of observing teachers unfamiliar with observation or interviews. The second limitation is that the study sites selected are by geographic accessibility, so there are many regions of Nepal not being considered in the study. Third, an important limitation is the education level and teachers' understanding of the ECD curriculum. Fourth, the limitation is the

time that this research study has to be completed within a specific time frame to fulfill the requirement of an academic degree. The following chapter addresses the extensive research on the definition and beliefs of play as it relates to children's learning and development.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter presents a review of the children's play study, starting with the thematic presentation of play pedagogy and some concepts of it in the opening section. It highlights the need and importance of the implementation of play pedagogy with some literature and reflections. The second section outlines some empirical literature. This chapter also presents the challenges faced by teachers in implementing play pedagogy in ECE. The third section covers the theoretical grounds of play pedagogy and concludes with the huge benefits of play pedagogy in ECD and learning. The fourth section of the literature review explains the policies for ECED and the fifth section reveals the research gap.

Understanding Play Pedagogy as an Educator

This section consists of a brief understanding of play pedagogy through the understanding of play values, knowledge and its importance for child development and learning for immediate change in traditional practice in ECD classrooms, which is presented with some reflection and literature. The following review will examine several significant areas of study. First, I will review the important area of the definition of play and play pedagogy as it pertains to the important area of growth and development in young children. Second, I will specifically address the areas of play pedagogy and the various theoretical perspectives. The third area will describe in detail the various ways in which observation of young children's play can be used as an authentic assessment tool for understanding their cognition, language, skill development and emotional maturity. A fourth area of literature will address teaching strategies to foster, enhance, and support growth and development through play. While this study addresses free play, this particular section will reflect how teachers can be intentional in their planning and play observation skills. The last section will address how teachers can adapt and design classrooms that foster more effective learning through play and playful strategies.

The Complexity of the Play Definition

Play has both subjective and objective dimensions (Harvard University, 2016). In different contexts, the definition might be different, but play exists in every culture and is defined in its own ways in terms of observation of particular behaviors and perceived experiences. Many philosophers and researchers have tried to define play by adding broader categories in both aspects. Mostly, wordplay is defined by many adults as free activities conducted by children who are self-chosen without the fear of failure and their playfulness behavior (Bruner, 1972; Erickson, 1963).

According to Rubin (1983), children need opportunities to freely select their play materials, space and time to play. For example, Rubin proposes that children need opportunities to pretend and actively engage in play. He defined play by describing the five essential natures of play: Intrinsically driven, freely selected, pleasurable, nonliteral, and active engagement.

Similarly, Piaget (1962) believes in active play, but he focused more on stages of intellectual development and how each stage is uniquely different as the child matures. These are the intellectual stages: 1) sensorimotor stage (0-2 years old), 2) preoperational stage (2-7 years old), 3) concrete operational stage (7-11 years old), and 4) formal operational stage (12 years and older). For example, in the sensory-motor stage, from birth until two, the child plays with the objects in a simplistic manner and has discovered their own bodies in play. So, he defined play as a medium for cognitive development. He explained that there are five stages of intellectual development and each represents a different level and type of play.

Vygotsky (1976), who learned from Piaget's work, focused on the language and social interactions of children's play. For example, Vygotsky believed that language promoted, supported, and sustained the play of children. He also proposed that social skills and social interaction were key learning areas of play. Vygotsky defined play as social interactions with peers, toys and adults, and considered language as the cornerstone of sustaining play.

However, a leading early childhood organization, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), reviewed and formalized its definitions of several theorists, so its definition of play is eclectic. "Play is an important vehicle for

developing self-regulation as well as for promoting language, cognition, and social competence" (NAEYC, 1992, p. 257). Hence, they highlighted the importance of play viewing as a medium of exchanging social and emotional aspects

Likewise, Smilansky (1968) has defined play by categorizing the four different types of play children engage with: functional play, conditional play, games with rules, and dramatic play. Functional play is considered a type of play where children engage in activities that utilize muscles or the sensorimotor. Young children seem to be enjoying their work in early classrooms, but their behavior appears extrinsically motivated when there is teacher-directed instruction without play activities. Likewise, theorists and researchers, one after the other, added their perspectives to define play and commonly agreed upon certain characteristics of play as self-chosen, self-directed, intrinsically motivated, guided by mental rules, imagination and creativity.

While reviewing the various literature, I encountered the wordplay central to human growth and development in all stages of life. Play was also understood to be the synonymous word limited to free play, where children engage voluntarily with other children, but the benefits of adult engagement in children's play were less realized in the past. From the previous literature, it is found that play helps children to become actively engaged, independent and creative learners in their context. For young children, play enables them to learn and interact in positive ways. "Play has both short and long-term benefits for children (Hiresh-Paseket al., 2009)". Bowman et al. (2000) have also found play and learning internally connected to the young child's self-identity and confidence to become independent in the learning process. Therefore, through play, children develop their cognitive, language, social, emotional and motor skills.

Terminology in Play Research

Throughout this research study, the concept of play will be defined as five elements. They include: 1) intrinsically driven, 2) freely selected, 3) pleasurable, 4) nonliteral and 5) active engagement. These elements will help me build perceptions and understanding of my participants' responses. Throughout this thesis, the term elements will be consistently used.

The Value of Play in the Early Childhood Classroom

Play is most often taken as problematic by teachers and parents, as well as many adults who think play is a distraction for learning in school and at home. Usually, in many ECD centers, it is still practiced as reward time for children after the completion of rigorous academic learning or during recess time. The value of play is critically misunderstood and ignored by many adults (Frost, 2005; Johnson, 2019; Sutton-Smith, 2012). However, play researchers and play experts have shown great value of play in the learning process (Duarte, 2018; Wood & Attfield, 2005). They claimed it was the most powerful and effective way of teaching in the early childhood period. During play, children are physically active by taking risks and trying to control their bodies. They are socially and emotionally interactive by engaging and negotiating the rules, and they collect lots of experience that helps in cognitive development. Paisi (2013) suggests that play activities enable children to learn, enhance creativity, and pursue educational pursuits without feeling tired or bored. Hence, it is vital that teachers utilize play as a more effective instructional tool in the classroom to engage children in all areas of development and not just cognition.

Understanding the value of play and the adult's role in scaffolding will optimize the play opportunities for children. Equally important, teachers should build on children's playfulness with their peers. As play reflects the real world, play pedagogy should be accepted and valued as an effective positive approach to children's learning during the early childhood period. While analyzing the literature, it is revealed that play pedagogy has higher efficacy in ensuring the learning of a child as it incorporates collaboration and teamwork. But in our context, this is yet to be realized by educators who just focus more on accomplishing the assigned curriculum by reading and writing than planning activity-based learning, which gives challenges to children. Implementing play pedagogy requires a playful school culture where play is valued and well-understood.

Play Pedagogy and Teaching Strategies in Early Childhood Education

Observations and documented research show (Cheung, 2017; Bautista et al., 2021; Moan et al., 2019) that many classrooms are teacher-directed and organized in structured ways. For example, teachers make the majority of curriculum choices and children are passively engaged. Sadly, these teacher-directed classrooms did not build on

the child's curiosity and emotional interest in learning. Rather, it makes children. How can learning take place when children are frustrated? Play is a natural behavior, but it is not considered a pedagogical tool in many classrooms to help motivate and engage children. So, to make children intrinsically motivated and enjoy the learning process, teachers need to be more engaged and supportive, incorporate children's interests and strengths and identify their developmental stage.

Neuroscience research has shown that 90% of children's brain growth is by the age of six years (CEHRD, 2022). At this period, children create rapid neuro connections. Brown and Vaughn (2009) have found that complexities aroused during playtime will increase neurons' hard wiring connections at the highest rate. In this context, play pedagogy can be an effective strategy to connect more neurons at the highest speed, which also helps to develop executive functions if enough stimulation is provided for growth and development. Usually, it is very difficult and challenging to implement play pedagogy due to the lack of time, space and materials (Harvard University, 2016). The core principles that describe play pedagogy as suggested by Harvard research pedagogy of play (2016) are: 1) Playing with an educational purpose, 2) Learners leading their own learning, 3) Experiencing choice, wonder and delight, 4) Connecting life inside and outside the classroom, 5) Learners reflecting on playful experiences, 6) Cultivating a culture of playful learning for adults, 7) Fostering trust and welcoming negotiation, and 8) Collectively studying the paradoxes between play and school. To incorporate play pedagogy in early classrooms, teachers should reflect on their daily practices so that they can develop the appropriate learning environment for student-led activities to improve their performance and collaborate with parents. The following five sub-sections explain play pedagogy and its critical relationship between the development domains. This study considers the important area of assessment as a valuable area for accountability for learning through play, so it is a separate section.

Play and Language Development

Learning is a social activity that involves a great deal of children's language. While playing, children learn rules and are able to negotiate; that is the foundation for social skills in order to adjust to society as adults. Children learn better through such social activities when they encounter challenging situations. Play benefits language

development (Weisberg et al., 2013) as it creates opportunities to interact with others. American Academy of Pediatrics (2013) states that "Through play at recess, children learn valuable communication skills, including negotiation, cooperation, sharing, and problem-solving skills as well as coping skills, such as perseverance and self-control" (p. 184). When children are more involved in play activities in early childhood programs, they get opportunities to interact with other children and they learn turn-taking, sharing play items, listening and interacting with others help in social development. "Children's play promotes optimal language development, thinking skills, and physical, social and emotional well-being in early and middle childhood" (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 21). From all the scholarly viewpoints, it is important to notice that play benefits children's language development, as stated above. Instead of thinking of reading and writing as the only way to develop language, playtime creates an opportunity for interaction, and due to it, children can easily learn language.

Play and Emotional Development

There is an undeniable relationship between play and positive emotional development (Johnson, 2019; San et al., 2021). During play, children can express and elaborate on ideas from their own point of view. Expressing their thoughts and feelings with peers and adults will make them more confident, develop high self-esteem, be independent, and be able to collaborate with others. These emotional developments at a young age lead to more empathetic behavior and develop a positive worldview. They will feel safe, secure, and able to handle different emotions efficiently, and they will have the right to express those complex emotions safely. If children are deprived of opportunities to play, they are not able to develop social skills and have opportunities to express their diverse emotions, which ultimately leads to violent behavior. Deprivation of play may significantly cause devastating results if their physical and emotional needs are oppressed (Duarte, 2018). The absence of play creates negative emotions. Therefore, the effectiveness of play is also seen in the emotional development of a child as a child learns to learn fairly and collaborates in learning through play.

Play and Social Development

While children play, they often demonstrate improved language skills and a variety of improved social interaction skills by using play materials. Also, it is through

play that children show creative use of play materials and problem-solve as they interact with peers. (Wood & Attfield, 2005). Their research shows that social development and play have a strong relationship and should be utilized in the classroom as tools to enhance language and social skill development. Play creates the environment to interact with each other and share valuable life lessons (Voice of Play, 2023). During play, children meet different age groups to interact with and learn imaginary games. It gives them opportunities to build new relationships and learn to collaborate. Playful children are more social due to the chance to interact with many people, as play allows us to see alternatives to violence and hopelessness; it teaches resilience and perseverance and provides optimism (Brown, 2020; Voice of Play, 2023). Children will learn social and cultural norms during play. By observing others, they will start learning about the shared symbols of body and verbal language. It is through play that they start negotiating, develop self-control, and learn cooperation skills. Play helps to develop different social skills. Therefore, play has an important role in enhancing and building social relationships and a medium of learning in the classroom.

Play and Motor Development

Play provides opportunities for gross and fine motor skill development (Sutapa et al., 2021). Through play, children develop an active, healthy body through the use of gross motor skills. For example, when a teacher provides different learning activities such as puzzles, grasping toys, and sorting activities, it helps the child develop small specific skills in their hands and fingers. Other activities should include opportunities for gripping, spooning, pegging, pouring activities, weaving, and sewing to develop and strengthen these skills. Similarly, gross motors are the large muscles and they are also best developed through play. For example, running, skipping, jumping, dancing, hopping, walking and playing with large toys helps develop large muscles through play. Brain research (Gesell, 1924) has shown that children learn better and have long-term memory when they are provided with opportunities for physical development. From his research, we can understand that movements give stimulation and triggers to develop new neuron pathways; therefore, the physical development of children is directly connected to brain development.

Play and the Learning Environment

In many educational circles, the first teacher is perceived as the parent. The second teacher is described as the classroom early childhood teacher, and the third teacher is the instructional environment. All three teachers have a significant impact on the child's learning and development. Six important areas suggested for quality ECED classroom setup include physical space, visual appearance, age-appropriate furniture, health and hygiene, learning areas and expenses (Joanna, 2023). All six elements should prominently foster a play environment. The first is the area of safety to foster safe play. The furniture must be of developmental size for the children, and the equipment and materials must be age- and developmentally appropriate to prevent injury, choking, or swallowing. The safe play environment must also consider the durable size, round edges of furniture, accessibility of furniture, and safe walking area for young children (Workman & Ullrich, 2017). The second area is the element of fostering creativity in young children. Fostering creativity in the classroom requires open-ended materials and equipment and instructional strategies that are creative and open-ended. The third area addresses clear organization and labeling of the environment so young children can navigate the play space through symbols, photographs and print. The fourth element is flexible spaces where children can construct and deconstruct their play area. The fifth element of a quality play space is one that is interesting and aesthetic to all the areas of development. For example, a quality aesthetic environment would involve these senses, artistic elements, and natural features such as plants, pets, and natural artifacts. Finally, the environment must reflect the educational goals; these environmental elements require teacher education, planning, and policy concerns.

Play and Assessment

All parents want to know what their children learn in school, and it is important for teachers to listen to and observe young children's play. Assessment in ECED is a continuous process as it is not done to translate grades but to show the development level of children (DeLuca, 2019). The different approaches of assessment, such as assessment as learning, assessment for learning and assessment of learning framework, will help to meet the purpose of the assessment in ECED (Pyle & DeLuca, 2016). To make play more productive and enjoyable, it is important to assess children's play. The indicators of

playful learning choice, wonder, and delight (Parker & Thomsen, 2019) are observed in young children as they engage with materials and other children. Based on play pedagogy, through teachers' special observation, teachers can learn about how children think and their developmental levels in each domain. To assess young children, teachers must observe them while engaging in activities because children demonstrate their abilities while working and playing (Frey et al., 2019). Teachers need extensive education and information to conduct quality observations and interviews. There are numerous observation scales developed by educators, theorists, and psychologists to be used in the classroom to collect data on children's growth and development (Johnson, Christie & Wardle, 2005; Parten, 1932; Pellegrini & Smith, 2003; Rubin, 1983). However, it is important that teachers have opportunities through training and education to learn how to observe, document and plan for learning through play. Ham and Dekkers (2019) have highlighted that to bring changes in education; there should be changes in the professional development activities, so teachers should develop their skills to address the need of time. In another study, Ham (2022) revealed that primary-level teachers have to adopt and bring changes in classroom practices as needed. As educators, through training, on-site teacher engagement, and play observation, we can learn about the interrelationship of play and children's language, social, emotional, and physical development.

Empirical Review

The meta-synthesis from 62 studies in 24 different contexts of Norway conducted by Moan et al. (2019) to identify play-based learning perception the findings revealed teachers' challenges and obstacles while practicing play-based learning in their regular classroom practices in six different categories: 1) policy mandates and curricular concerns, 2) parental attitudes and beliefs, 3) teacher education and qualifications, 4) collegiate peer pressure, 5) structural challenges and 6) children's characteristics. Among the above issues, policy mandates and curricular concerns were the most concern issues identified while interacting with teachers. Due to the policy and curricular concern's all the other issues are followed and interlinked with each other issues. They also found that two different groups of teachers practice plays as free activities and some integrate varieties of play in a classroom while teaching. The teachers who practiced free play

believed that through play, interaction opportunities widen and it supports social and complex language development. Another teacher believed that through the integration of play, children can enhance their various advanced skills and academic skills for reading and writing. In this study, teachers have mixed experiences regarding play-based pedagogy as they have perceived its usefulness in based learning, so I also agree with their experiences concerning the usefulness of play-based learning based on research.

A study in Ontario, Canada, conducted by Pyle et al. (2018) collected data through interviews with 12 teachers to explore the play perspective of teachers and learning literacy that focused on the challenge of teaching literacy in a play-based learning framework. The teachers informed about the major challenges for integrating play and literacy learning across three different teaching practice contexts: 1) teacher-directed instruction, 2) teacher-supported play and 3) free play. The results showed that there was a need for more research in play pedagogy to be implemented in early childhood classrooms according to the context. In our context, it is also important to identify the challenges to implementing play pedagogy and to help apply activities as suggested in our curriculum.

Similarly, an exploratory study through reflections of various works of literature by Allee-Herndon and Roberts (2021) for emotional development found effective functioning, self-regulating and social-emotional development have high connections between each other and play opportunities increase them during the early childhood period; such essential skills make a huge impact for future academic achievements. So, they recommended building a strong rationale towards a purposeful play-based learning environment. They recommended that educators, researchers, and policymakers gain in-depth knowledge to make children strong, resilient, and compassionate, and they also suggested strong implications for the pedagogy of play in the classroom.

Investigative research by Keung and Fung (2020) conducted in HongKong with 29 teachers found that play-based environments were an important indicator of children's educational outcomes. Based on their findings, it is clear that educators need to consider the context of the school's location and the various practices/ strategies of the teaching faculty. Teachers' many complexities regarding play practices compel them to modify

their planning. Similarly, in the Nepali context, teachers feel pressure to complete the curriculum and avoid play activities.

Another study was conducted by Pyle et al. (2020) in Ontario, Canada, where there is a high value of play in early childhood programs. The findings of this research showed that there was a slow change from traditional pedagogical practices towards play-based learning. They further added that the effective implementation of playful learning in schools requires the collaboration of administrators, teachers, parents and policymakers. Similarly, in Nepal, we must be cognizant of the importance of collaborative efforts of home, school, and educational policymakers to empower teachers through training programs. To fulfill these purposes, we first need to conduct play perception research in the Nepali context.

Similarly, in Nepal, many researchers conducted research studies to improve the quality of education in ECED. The research study by Bhandari (2017) indicated that the quality of government-funded early childhood centers in Nepal needs to improve. One of the major factors is teachers' professional development and training. Bhandari further argued that kindergarten teachers need more exposure to developing a quality learning environment, and they should be encouraged to attend seminars, workshops, discussion forums, and educational tours to become more professional and fulfill the vision of our education policy and its mandate. Bhandari's research confirms that there is an urgency for coordinating different actors accountable for improving the quality of ECE, which is directly related to the need for teacher training.

There are many researchers who have conducted studies to improve the quality of ECED, but I didn't find any research conducted on play pedagogy to explore teachers' perspectives in the context of Nepal. From the above research study, we can understand that play pedagogy is contextual, as it depends upon the knowledge and competency of teachers. Based on my two decades of ECD experience as a teacher and principal, I firmly concur that this research is valid and insightful, as I have witnessed the absence of play-based learning opportunities in ECD classrooms. Interacting with many ECD teachers, I have experienced their views aligning more with traditional rote learning practices. Based on my observation, I believe empowering teachers through supportive training programs is necessary. Hence, I realized that it was vital to explore the

perception of ECD teachers towards play pedagogy. Therefore, this study helps to understand ECD teachers' challenges and identify specific areas where they need support to implement a play-based curriculum to enhance children's learning and development.

Theoretical Review

I have used different theories as a theoretical ladder to shape and guide my study (Creswell, 2009). These same theories are linked to the results and implications of the study. While exploring my research, I have considered child development theory, constructivist theory and critical theory as the strong foundation for my research study.

Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory

Piaget (1962) studied children's cognitive development and believed that play begins from birth. His cognitive development theory focuses on the role of play in children's cognitive development. His theory centers on mental processes like perceiving, remembering, believing, and reasoning, and play serves as a context for developing these processes. According to Piaget, play first consists of imitations and it later develops into three different principles- practice play, symbolic play, and games with rules. He believes that practice play is for sensory pleasure, and symbolic play helps children to differentiate between reality and fantasy, sharpens children's senses, develops creativity and imagination, and builds vocabulary. Likewise, games with rules develop throughout a person's lifetime. Play serves several purposes: motor skills development, refining sense organs, and fostering creativity and imagination, which are most required in learning. Piaget viewed play through various development lenses; thus, we can get valuable knowledge of play and develop a child's needs. I used this theory because my topic, play pedagogy, also demands learning through engagement, participation, interaction, brainstorming exercises, and mindfulness. This theory is essential to developing a deeper understanding of the subject matter while analyzing the collected data and making meaning. Another theory important for play is Vygotsky's social development theory.

Vygotsky's sociocultural cognitive development theory

Since language is considered one of the biggest cognitive accomplishments during the early years, Vygotsky's theory has made a big contribution to understanding the concept of language development and play. According to Vygotsky (1984), language is a social-mental tool allowing children to continue to explore, play and learn as they face

new environmental challenges. Vygotsky's theory shows that language and play are intricately intertwined. As children start mastering language, play provides opportunities to stretch their innate curiosities through various simple questions put forward by children to adults. Dynamic interaction between intentional adults and children in a playful environment helps in building complex vocabulary. Vygotsky states that play is a source of children's development: "Play is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development" (1967, p.16). I believe that play-based learning also incorporates his Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) ideas. Vygotsky (1978) stated that "a child's greatest achievements are possible in play, achievements that will tomorrow become her basic level of real action" (p.100). His theory viewed social interaction between adults and children that makes ZPD appear earlier in play than in other activities.

Vygotsky's theory examined children's cognitive development along with social and cultural implications of learning and development. I have used Vygotsky's theory because his work suggests that learning and development must be matched and play is clearly a reflection of the child's developmental level in all distinct areas: social, emotional, physical, and cognitive. Researchers call this dramatic play when children grow and get involved in various play activities where they transform characters, time, place, and animals. Dramatic play is a kind of symbolic play where children imagine to take the role of someone else. Usually, in such plays, they imitate the actions and speech of other persons. When many children are involved in play and pretend to act out others' roles, it is called socio-dramatic play. Many researchers use terms like dramatic play, make-believe play and dramatic play interchangeably. Researchers have found that play aids naturally in young children's cognitive development (Brown, 2020; Johnson, 2020; Yawkey & Pellegrini, 2015). Play promotes social and emotional development when children have opportunities at home and school. Play promotes language development, so understanding and promoting play is critical for optimal development. So, I kept this theory as a theoretical lens of my study. In my experience, play pedagogy is the best medium that encompasses a developmental domain approach. The theories of Piaget and Vygotsky are always linked to play alone and with peers. Their theory keeps the child at the center of instruction. Due to the broad scope of their theory, I have selected this

theory to guide my entire research. The work of Vygotsky has helped guide my research study in data collection, instrument design, and data analysis, as well as clearly designing the study.

Freire's Critical Theory

Paulo Freire (Freire, 1970) believed that education is a means of social transformation when it is made meaningful and impactful. Instead of making a person passive by depositing knowledge in their mind, education should empower them to think critically. According to Freire, the "bank style" education is a means of oppression that continues to oppress society (Nugraha, 2024). Through play, children are empowered to choose, imagine, think and create. Freire emphasized the importance for developing critical consciousness through education and to challenge and transform their realities. Consistently through dramatic play, children are transforming their realities and learning new skills, roles, vocabulary, and contexts. For Freire, education is not just theory but practical action and reflection. Similarly, children put their feelings and ideas into practical reflection and action through play. He argued that education should be made relevant to the cultural context by integrating learners' experiences and backgrounds. When children play, they incorporate their experiences, observations, ideas, feelings, and thoughts into their play. For example, children of Nepal reenact hiking a mountain or swimming in a lake based on their geographical experiences. Similarly, their culture provides many spiritual holidays that they can re-enact in their play. This cultural context is personal, creative and reflective.

Education is a means of practicing freedom, social justice, and empowerment (Freire, 1970). Through play, children make hundreds of social and emotional choices of sharing, taking turns and equity in their play. Education is a tool for liberation rather than domination. Luitel et al. (2022) stated that critical pedagogy has the power to reshape the future; likewise, play pedagogy also has the power to enlarge children's potential to become future critical thinkers. Critical awareness begins when learners become aware of socio-political inequalities and take action to bring changes. For example, children are met with hundreds of opportunities for inequality in terms of space, time, and material and must make choices through play to share and express their understanding of fairness and justice. This is often guided by the educator's open-ended questions when she asks,

"What can we do if we don't have enough space for this game, or what can we do when we don't have enough blocks to share with our new friend?" We need to acknowledge that such interaction will help them critically analyze the situations and explore alternate solutions. In the current early childhood education practices, the issues raised by Freire are still there because teachers are following the conventional method of depositing knowledge rather than unfolding children's creativity. Therefore, I am using Paulo Freire's critical theory as it gives valuable insight to bring the voice to voiceless children who are oppressed by adults in many aspects, like forcefully attempting to stay in a formal setting without movements, instructed to do the task not appropriate for their age and development level and deprived to play.

Policy Review

A policy review involves the review of prominent and impactful literature that influences and shapes policy. Often, policies are based on national or global studies. The following review addresses such studies as they pertain to the development and education of young children in Nepal.

Early Childhood Development Policy of Nepal

After reviewing the ECD policy framework of Nepal (2019), the government seems more alert toward the development of early childhood and has started investing in ECD through multi-sectorial initiatives, including social protection, nutrition, health, responsive care and early learning opportunities. In the policy, I found the term 'play' to be mentioned in provision no. 10.1.1. This provision clearly states that play materials and play areas are important infrastructure in ECD centers of Nepal. The education policy provision no. 10.3 has explained the quality of a child-friendly environment for children. Whereas provision no. 10.3.4 has mentioned providing the materials for the holistic development of children in all ECD centers. Policy developed so far in the context of Nepal, I came up with this understanding that plays an important component in building a strong foundation for early age, but it is not practiced in the early classroom as suggested and also, there is a lack of supporting training to empower ECD teachers to understand play pedagogy.

Early Childhood Development Education Curriculum of Nepal

Similarly, I reviewed the ECED curriculum of Nepal (2021) to find out how the curriculum has been prepared to address the new policy. In the curriculum document, I found that in ECED, all the teaching and learning should be conducted informally, understanding the needs of the individual child's developmental stage. Likewise, giving freedom to children for learning opportunities, teachers are suggested to conduct various activities to develop skills across all domains of ECD: physical skills, emotional skills, social, cultural and moral skills, cognitive and intellectual skills, health, nutrition, safety and environment, language skills, pre-mathematical concepts, art and creative skills, environmental science and social studies. The pedagogical strategies to achieve those skills in the curriculum have been suggested to be conducted through play activities. However, I found that play lacks a clear definition: "Play-based learning is not clearly defined or explained within Nepal's ECE curriculum and is often misinterpreted by stakeholders" (Gautam & Hansen, 2022, p.2). In this context, teachers might not understand the importance of play activities, as mentioned in Nepal's ECD curriculum. Working closely with teachers, my experiences about the play pedagogy, as suggested in the curriculum of Nepal, is quite challenging for teachers to practice in a classroom due to the way a play is perceived as a barrier to learning and traditional understanding of teaching that happens only in formal settings. Reading the policy frameworks and policy orientation from various countries provides positive validation for play as a key characteristic of effective practices in ECE. NAEYC's (2020) publication and position statement have also clearly defined play to understand the importance of play-based learning. Likewise, the British Columbia Ministry of Education (2019) has highlighted play benefits clearly in their curriculum document and perceived play pedagogy as the best medium for children to reach their potential.

National Strategy for Early Childhood Development

Likewise, I also reviewed the National Strategy for Early Childhood Development for 2021-2031, which is ten years of planning to develop ECED through various strategies. This document suggested developing a strong foundation for young children by forming working Committees at the central, provincial, and local levels to support the ECE program. The committee should have a common goal: to empower and enhance the

knowledge of ECD teachers to support the holistic development of every child and to prepare a conducive and stimulating learning environment in ECD centers. But to date, I have not found a formation of such committees in Gandaki Province. I also reviewed the parenting education book of Nepal developed by CEHRD (2022), which was prepared for parents to guide their children at home, where play is mentioned as an effective method for learning.

In the context of Nepal, due to the new education policy (2019), it may be a transitional phase of different approaches to teaching in ECE as there are limited training programs for understanding play and its benefits conducted for early childhood teachers. In Nepal, according to the research findings of Khanal et al. (2017), policy is introduced to uplift the holistic development of young children. Still, there are huge differences in the quality due to less accountability and poorly enforced sustainability measures. They further strongly recommended improving the quality for children living in remote geographical locations and children from poor socio-economic backgrounds who are deprived of quality services in ECD centers due to the scattered accountability and the provisions being poorly enforced. Due to the differences in perceptions of play in traditional instructional academic practices and the new play-based learning approach, the adoption of new play pedagogy may vary between the teachers. From various perspectives, it is necessary to explore the play perception of Nepalese ECD teachers. This study is very important because international literature and scholars have highly stressed this area in order to institutionalize the practice of play-based learning in ECED.

Research Gap

ECE is one of the specific goals mentioned in the United Nations' sustainable development goals for 2030 that aims to improve education. ECE is crucial in bridging the gaps in knowledge and ability between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers at this age. Many studies reviewed above revealed that play pedagogy enables children to acquire a solid foundation for life. Going through the related literature, this study identified methodological, theoretical, empirical, policy and practical knowledge gaps in Nepal as there lacks a comprehensive study focusing on how play-based learning has been perceived and practiced in Nepal 's ECD centers. Moreover, there is a lack of empirical evidence because several studies have been conducted to improve the quality of

ECD programs. Still, the focus of their studies did not provide any evidence of the play pedagogy perspective of ECD teachers in Nepal in a qualitative approach.
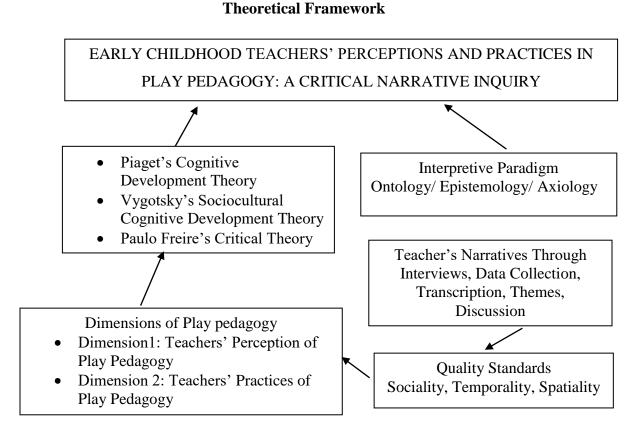
A large number of studies conducted for ECE of Nepal indicated that teachers are not trained enough to adopt new pedagogical strategies for the ECD curriculum. Since the practice of play-based learning in Nepal has not been adequately documented, I am keen to study teachers play pedagogy perspectives that have not yet been explored. I found a methodological gap as there is very little evidence that shows previous studies conducted on children's play in Nepal in qualitative methods. In terms of the policy gap, there are no play policy guidelines. In terms of the theoretical gap, there is no model ECD center that has identified the practice of play pedagogy. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a qualitative study to find out the perception of ECD teachers of Nepal in play pedagogy as vast scientific literature on play has shown beneficial effects on fostering development areas, particularly cognitive, academic, emotional and social development of young children. This study is a step towards filling the contextual gap in ECED to improve the pedagogy and enhance the achievement level of children. It will also address the absence of the teacher's voices to explain their experiences and problems while implementing this new play-based curriculum.

While Nepal has adopted the UN Rights of the Child and is legally accountability for adhering to this treatise, it is absent in many actual classroom practices. Children's right to relax and play and engage in cultural, artistic, and other recreational activities are also mentioned in the article. There are four major gaps that create challenging situations when implementing play pedagogy in Nepal. They include: 1). There are limited organizations that are based on play research, and 2). Lack of accessibility of university courses and professional teacher training throughout Nepal to focus on children's play and brain development 3). Lack of lab schools that demonstrate and exemplify a play-based curriculum in Nepal and 4). Lack of clear definition of play in early childhood curriculum in Nepal. In this context, I would like to argue that since our new curriculum is made by realizing the necessity of time, then resourceful humans should be developed to implement the curriculum with the necessary training support for teachers. Although progress has been made to improve the quality of ECD centers, there is still a gap between policy and practice. This scenario prompted me to explore the issue of play-

based learning, drawing on the qualitative data obtained from teachers regarding their perceptions and practices in their classrooms. Until and unless the teachers value play pedagogy as the most effective method for the development and learning of children, they won't be encouraged to follow the curriculum. Based on the above-mentioned four significant gaps, I like to argue that it is vital to conduct this study to explore ECD teacher's perception of play pedagogy and their practices inside and outside the classroom.

Figure 1

Early Childhood Teachers' Perception and Practices on Play Pedagogy

Theoretical Framework

This section clearly describes the theoretical framework through this diagram. Firstly, I began my study with the introduction, definition of play, play values, and its importance in children's learning and development with an examination of literature. My theoretical framework for this exploratory study is based on the extensive work of Jean Piaget as it pertains to the cognitive stages of children's learning and play. Similarly, I used the widely renowned work of Lev Vygotsky because his theories focus on the

developmental aspects of children's language and social development as they pertain to learning and development through play. These two significant theories are a critical cornerstone in understanding the complex nature of play. Paulo Freire's critical theory was also used as a lens to recognize the oppressed voices of children and teachers throughout my studies in building rapport, interviewing the teachers and analyzing the data. Clearly, I used multiple paradigms, Interpretivism and critical paradigm, to explore the varied realities of teachers for knowledge generation because each teacher brought a unique background, education, experiences and characteristics.

Summary

This chapter clearly presented information on play pedagogy, theories, and current research. The various theories are globally accepted as premier perspectives on children's play. Each theory was carefully explained and a diagram summarized the key theoretical framework. In the following chapter, I will detail the study's research methodology. This will include extensive information about participants, instruments, data collection, and analysis.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains the philosophical foundation, elaborating epistemology, ontology, and the axiology of this study. It also includes details about the methodology used, the research design, the data collection process, the data analysis method, credibility and the ethical considerations.

Philosophical Foundation of Research

It is very important to understand the philosophical foundation, as all research methodologies are found on the basis of philosophy (Voros, 2007). To improve the quality of ECED, my study aims to investigate teachers' perceptions of and practices in play pedagogy. I believe that early childhood teachers' perceptions and experiences may vary between teachers due to the different assumptions they carry and the school context. It also depends upon the level of training opportunities and the availability of resources. I completely agree with the ideas of Gergen (2009) that persons are not limited to their own but to many relationships and the environment. The play has an important relationship with critical thinking skills because, through play, children make hundreds if not thousands of decisions regarding what, how, when, where, and for how long the play episode will last. It is through play children develop social and language skills (Vygotsky, 1967). Therefore, my philosophical foundation has aligned with the theories of Piaget (1966) and Vygotsky (1978), who suggested play as most essential during the early childhood years because it is the main driving force in ECD. I strongly value Piaget's cognitive theories as they state that knowledge develops gradually by adding new information and restructuring the earlier ways of knowing. He linked this process with the nature of play that develops with children's developmental stages. This theory helped me to understand and view the contribution of play through various developmental lenses, and it explains the integration of developmental domains in early childhood. Play opportunities provide the understanding of children's developmental stage and early childhood teachers' perception towards play, which directs them to effective instructional planning. For example, if a teacher plans for a specific play

activity focused on language and literacy, she/he can then maximize the learning as the observation unfolds because they have an opportunity to adjust and scaffold for maximal learning.

Ontology as the Nature of Reality

As my research aims to explore the early childhood teacher's perspective in play pedagogy, my ontological standpoint is to understand the multiple realities of my study participants, but the multiple truth depends upon power structure, hegemony relationship, social structure and patterns that create reality. Ontology provides a clear concept of the nature of reality in the specific topic and the issues as it elaborates the horizon of the research (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). I believe that people experience and perceive reality in different ways according to the guidance they receive from their environment. Similarly, play theory emphasizes cognitive development in young children and Vygotsky's theory hypothesizes that play is an important tool for language development and understanding the reality of the world because, in role play, they find situations to solve problems. The reality of my research is inside the human mind and it is subjective in nature and is shaped by power, politics and economic values (Ponterotto, 2005). My research questions have helped to explore the narratives of early childhood teachers' knowledge, feelings, and experiences in play pedagogy.

However, reality does not rely on a single truth; the truth is created by humans by interacting with the context. Similarly, in children's play, teachers' perceptions may vary regarding different contexts, availability of resources and the accessibility of training. The challenges and issues might also be different from teacher to teacher while implementing a play-based curriculum. Together with the change in the context, truth for the same person differs and in the same context, truth may be different for different persons because power structure makes the truth. I believe in the words put forward by Goertz & Mahoney (2012), who described ontology as making the concepts of the research which is most necessary for the issue raised because it specifies the inert and experimental spectacles (p. 207). So, my ontology lays in an exploration of the multiple realities of my participants. It guided me to reveal the teachers' stories, particularly how they perceive play, implement play activities, and how they relate play to learning.

Epistemology as Rational Inquiry

As a researcher, it is important to understand what it is that we can know and how what is assumed to exist can be known. So, researchers have to focus on how individuals come to know what they know, what knowledge actually is, and where the limits of human understanding lie (Smith, 2022). As my ontological belief is subjective, and from subjective beliefs, there come values, logic, and perceptions. I agree with the idea of (Carson et al., 2004) that the process of gaining knowledge constitutes a rational inquiry; epistemology is mainly concerned with how researchers can unfold knowledge to reach reality. Reality is different due to varied understandings of phenomena. However, knowledge is gained through subjective ways, such as by making observations of the power relationship and power structure of the society. Furthermore, the practices and systems created by the power dynamics determine the lives of marginalized people (Laliberte, Rudman & Aldrich, 2017). So, this epistemological belief has guided me towards close contact with study participants and lively communication at their convenience. Therefore, I was able to have a deeper, closer relationship with ECD teachers to collect their stories and observe them in multiple subjective ways to obtain in-depth information. So, the knowledge is constructed and co-constructed in my research. In terms of this study, the truth is generated from the perspectives of ECD teachers and their practices. In my study, I explored and interpreted teachers' experiences by feeling their feet in their natural context through face-to-face interviews and in-depth observation, blending my participants' stories keeping the strong stand of interpretive and critical paradigm.

Axiology as the Role of Values

As I believe in diversity, I understand that people have different values. So, this research has a great role of value while generating the meanings. While interpreting and making meaning from the stories of teachers' values might influence both the participants and the researcher. However, in this regard, I was very careful to remain unbiased by giving more value to my research participants. Since "axiology" refers to the moral considerations that must be made while developing a research endeavor (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). It is all about human nature and the relationships they develop in the environment in which they are engaged. So, I valued each of my participants' context and

their views. The role of value is vital in making meaning of the study because people make meaning of anything based on it. In my research, the information that I collected from my participant about their experiences and understanding of play-based learning influenced their value system and while interpreting the information, there is an influence of my value system.

It is difficult to conduct value-free research. There is the role of value in my study, so my research is value-laden, blending the values of my participant and mine, as argued by Cohen et al. (2018). I equally believe that the values also come with human flourishing, advocacy and inclusiveness. Being a critical narrative researcher, I explored my values and beliefs along with the values and beliefs of my participants, which helped me to explain what, why, and how values are constructed and followed in human life. The value bond between the researcher and participants is maintained throughout the study. I solely believe that in qualitative research, the researcher is an integral part of what is being studied and cannot be detached from it (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this context, the value of the researcher and research participant influenced their views while participating in the study interaction. I have given value to my participants as a source of new knowledge and respect his/her ideas throughout the study. Thus, the axiology of my research heavily relied on the perspectives of my research participants' experiences. At the same time, I was able to unfold the narratives together with concepts of advocacy regarding children's play. These concepts of play are also the challenges teachers are facing daily.

Multi Paradigmatic as Research Paradigm

In my study, I have used a multi-paradigmatic research design using two paradigms: interpretive and critical. The search for knowledge in this qualitative study is to understand the lives of people, not only limited to the time and place but beyond that. I believe that "narratives do not spring from the minds of individuals but are social creations" (Smith & Spark, 2005, p. 3). Due to this perspective, I took extensive time to learn and listen to my participants and their perspectives. My purpose is not only to present the narratives of my participants but also to completely understand the complexity of their narrative. I conducted extensive reflection and interpretation so that I could provide support and advocacy to the participants.

My ontological, epistemological, and axiological beliefs, as mentioned above, lead me toward an interpretivist research paradigm. The interpretivist paradigm allows researchers to perceive in-depth experiences of a particular social context (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2019), as there is no right or wrong. The reality and knowledge are socially constructed by humans. This research paradigm concerns the basic beliefs about reality and knowledge of an individual's subjective experiences. It also helps to broaden the knowledge of the subjective world and patterns of thoughts and beliefs about the self and the rest of the world, which guide and direct the researchers' actions. Interpretivism is a comprehensive system of connected ideas, beliefs and attitudes that provide a deeper understanding of subjective phenomena. Thanh and Thanh (2015) opined that "Interpretive researchers do from subjects, typically from people who own their experiences and are of a particular group or culture" (p. 25). It focuses more on participants' daily lives and their narratives, and it helps them understand the complexities of society they adopt in their external world. In this context, this study streamlines the subjective reality of the participant's experience regarding play pedagogy. All the participants are studied individually through in-depth interviews because various aspects, such as their context, beliefs, stories, opinions, and sharing, are different from each other.

Interpretivists constrict the notion of understanding the experiential arena of real existence (Cohen et al., 2007). So, it is considered the most practical area in research by Cohen et al. (2018). It is concerned with the different factors related to the context. Therefore, I used an interpretive paradigm to connect with my participants and collect their different stories regarding their perceptions of play pedagogy. As the beliefs and practices of people are indefeasible to each other (Bevir & Rhodes, 2012), I listened to and observed my participants' behavior, actions, and beliefs as they presented them in the form of narratives. Being an interpretive researcher, I collected the experiences of the participants and interpreted their responses for information patterns, and to develop new information.

Hence, criticalism is also an important goal or cornerstone of this research study. Specifically, my goal in the exploration of teacher perceptions and strategies to more clearly understand their perspectives and their classroom decisions with respect to play.

The ultimate goal was to fundamentally embrace and support teachers by helping them through the examination of their practices, as well as social change of understanding and practices of play.

Critical Narrative Inquiry as a Research Design

The ontological and epistemological assumptions are important to justify the choice of methodology in this study. In this regard, my research paradigm directed me towards qualitative method and critical narrative inquiry as my research approach. My main objective was to tell the stories of ECD teachers regarding play pedagogy perspectives, experiences and practices. However, I am also advocating for changes in the existing situations of ECD teachers and children. Therefore, I used narrative inquiry as my approach to gain participants' experiences through the thick, rich stories they share and at the same time, I used critical lenses to bring the phenomenon to raise their voices. According to Connelly & Clandinin (1990), "Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives" (p.2). Their lived experiences within social and historical contexts are mediated by power relations and they shape social realities (Ravenek, Laliberti & Rudman, 2013). Therefore, this approach best fits my research to describe the personal stories of research participants, collect detailed information, and understand and present real-life situations. Creswell & Creswell (2018) have described a qualitative approach to adopt further understanding and examine the ideas of numerous individuals or groups of personalities about a societal or human concern. Moreover, in this study, I have examined the stories and perceptions of teachers, as well as my own voice regarding children's play experiences and reflections and made an attempt to bring their voices to the forefront.

Since a narrative story has a beginning, a sequence of opening events and an ending (Greenhalgh & Hurwitz, 1999), I was more alert while listening to the stories of my research participants. Using the critical narrative approach as my guide, I was able to learn more about what, why, and how my participants behaved, reacted, expressed their thoughts, and constructed the meaning from their recognizable experience patterns. Critical reflection also provided a framework for the deconstruction of those collected stories and exploration of assumptions about knowledge, power, and reflexivity. I was keenly interested to know the meaning that my participants construct through which they

make sense of their world and their experiences and practices of play pedagogy. It guided to raise deep critical questions about the phenomenon: why it happened? What has to be done to bring changes in the situation? So, this research was designed to systematically collect, categorize and critically analyze the data received from the various sources.

The Role of the Researcher and Positionality

As an early childhood practitioner for the last 20 years in early childhood education, my professional experiences and practices have shaped my study. As an educator, I always try to bring some changes to the teaching approach of early childhood education. I have always been engaged in many training programs to share my knowledge with other ECD teachers through workshops short and long-term training courses. I consider myself a life-long learner and actively seek out educational opportunities to enhance my knowledge and skills. So, after the interview with teachers, I realized that it is very important to look for diverse ways to find professional advocacy. Previously, this study was designed for narrative inquiry, but I was compelled to change it into critical narrative inquiry with the goal of raising the voices of ECD teachers that came in their narratives. To bring change to their situation and their teaching practices, which have impacted the lives of many children.

Being a qualitative researcher, I tried my best to become non-biased while collecting data analyzing and interpreting their experiences (Creswell, 2014). While selecting participants, I tried to minimize biases and selected teachers who were unknown to me. Among six participants, four of my participants were teachers whom I never met before, and only two participants I met in training programs but not personally, so I know nothing much about their personal and professional lives. Throughout this process, I consistently strived to understand and document their perspectives carefully and accurately. This research study provides an atmosphere of positive engagement and empowerment for the participants. I clearly communicated the purpose of the study, shared the key questions, and the methodology of my scholarly inquiry of exploring how teachers perceived children's play. I informed my participants of their rights and that they had multiple opportunities to continue or discontinue the study. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1998), the researchers have to be compassionate and careful while listening to their participants "in order to grasp a deep understanding of the information that is being

exchanged" (p. 316). My participants were also reassured that any answer was valued and respected. Finally, I communicated the process of collecting the data and met all participants in a comfortable work environment. These decisions were to ensure that all participants were clear about their roles and responsibilities in the interview. Four key elements were consistent throughout the study: 1) rapport building with each participant, 2) comfortable setting for the interview, 3) respectful climate and time allotment, and finally, 4) reassurance of respect for their answers. Data was collected through note-taking and recording after the participants had agreed to this process. Also, throughout the study, participants were reassured of confidentially.

I believe that it is critical when one possesses knowledge. It is very important to impart this knowledge to other teachers through advocacy. Certainly, the rural geography and access to information are challenges to these teachers; therefore, I will strive to provide each educator with access to resources and information. Mentoring has been my nature as an educator, mentor, and trainer of my own teachers. So, I try to model this advocacy in my research study. Supportive, responsive listening conveys respect, and I practiced this with each of my participants. Modeling curiosity, interest, and a playful attitude throughout the interviews modeled to these participants that they are valued, but also playfulness is a positive attribute. Curiosity is a vital element of critical narrative inquiry.

Critical Inquiry is the process of a researcher gathering important data from the participants. Then, I engaged in evaluating the response information, ideas, and assumptions. This analysis is from multiple perspectives to create a well-reasoned analysis and understanding. (Hickson, 2015). I viewed it through the practitioner's perception. I showed empathy, interest, and compassion as they shared their stories and ideas. Since the process of this research study was based on critical inquiry. It began with building rapport with each participant and ensuring that everyone had numerous opportunities to explain their thinking and perspective. Once the surveys were completed, I moved into a reflective mode of tabulating the data based on developmental domains for each question. I did not rush this process due to reflection and connecting their ideas to theories and perspectives. Once the data was tabulated and reflections returned to theories, I then identified the eight emerging themes of the data. The themes

made me realize the lack of understanding of play was a serious problem. This critical reflection allowed me to re-examine the data and realize it was a systematic problem across the entire group of participants. Critically thinking about each of my participants, their education, and their experience encouraged me to re-examine the consistencies across all of their answers.

Study Sites and Selection of Participants

The site of my study was early childhood centers in four public schools in the Gandaki Province. From four schools, I choose a total of six early childhood development teachers. For the purpose of this study, each region represents a diverse population. The sampling section is diverse and thoughtful. Sampling is designed to get in-depth information on a topic. This was possible because the participants were selected from persons who have experience or are exposed to the area in which the information is required. As the name suggests, purposive sampling chooses samples for a specific purpose. The proposed work was carried out in the qualitative research discipline. According to Hammersley (2013), the application of qualitative research methods helped us comprehend complex phenomena, get an in-depth understanding, and examine the perspectives and experiences of participants. I preferred this approach for my research because it helped to explore the perspectives of ECD teachers towards play pedagogy and their challenges in implementing a play-based curriculum.

Sources of data included 1) data from the teacher interviews and 2) observation of teachers' practices inside and outside of the classroom in the school area. The interviews were conducted using research guiding questions, field notes, and observations from the teachers. Then, the data was transcribed and sent for further processing to find codes, categories, and themes for meaning-making and construction of new knowledge related to research problems. The transcribed data was discussed with the participants to validate the meaning of the transcription and to update it as required.

Demographic Table of Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Training	Teaching Experiences	ECD Center Location	Number of Meeting Times
1	Female	40-45	SLC	Short Term	20 yrs	Urban	3 Times
2	Female	40-45	High School	Trained 390 Hrs.	14 yrs	Semi-urban	Multiple
3	Female	35-40	High School	Trained Short Term	15 yrs	Village	3 Times
4	Female	25-30	Bachelors Running	No Training	4yrs	Semi-Urban	2 Times
5	Female	30-35	B.Ed.	No Training	7 yrs	Urban	2 Times
6	Female	40-45	SLC	Short Term	20 yrs	Urban	3 Times

Participant 1: Participant 1 is an ECD teacher of a community-based primary school located in the urban areas of Pokhara Metropolitan City. She is a decent lady of 40-45 years old from the Magar community who can speak both Magar and Nepali languages fluently. Among seven children, she was the third child of her parents and they were both farmers. She was born and raised in Sindhuli village and migrated to Pokhara with her husband for job opportunities. She completed her school leaving certificate (SLC) and started the job to support her family and now it has already been 20 years working with young children in the same school. Now, she is separated from her husband because he married another woman and lives with her three children who are doing different jobs. Her youngest child was eight months old when she started this job. Whenever I visited her school, she welcomed me with great honor and as I started the interview, she was quite shy at first. Therefore, to make her feel comfortable, I shared my teaching

experiences, and then she opened up and able to answer all my questions without any hesitation.

Participant 2: Participant 2 is an ECD teacher from a semi-urban area of Pokhara Metropolitan. Among five children, she is the third child of her parents. She migrated to Pokhara from Mijure Dada village. Her father was in the Indian army and her mother was a housewife. After completing school leaving certificate (SLC), she started working in a daycare center to become financially independent. She joined a private institution to complete her high school. After working 15 years in the village, she was transferred to this ECD center for the last 5 years. Her husband is employed in a foreign country and has two children, both of whom are studying. She chose this career to support her family. She got many opportunities for a training diploma and learned some computer skills. Now, she can send emails and make documents for this achievement, and she is very proud. She honestly shared many incidents about her teaching journey.

Participant 3: Participant 3 is from Kristi village near Pokhara city, a very hardworking ECD teacher aged 35-40 years who manages both home and job despite a one-hour walking distance between home and school. She is a mother of two sons, and her husband is a foreign employee. She completed high school and started working in this community-based school for the last 15 years. She recently received a diploma training in early childhood education.

Participant 4: Participant 4 is from the semi-urban area of Pokhara city. She is 25-30 years old and a very friendly ECD teacher who was comfortable and able to open up very easily during the interview. She has one child, and her husband is employed in a foreign country. She was from the school's local community. She has not completed the final year of her B.Ed. and is hoping to complete it in the next examination. She has been working in this community-based school for the last four years but has not received any training yet.

Participant 5: Participant 4 is an urban area of Pokhara. She is a 30-35-year-old lady who has completed a B.Ed. and she has received a Montessori basic training course. She is a mother of two sons and her husband runs his own hotel. Her husband encourages her to join his hotel, but she wants to continue teaching. She migrated to Pokhara from Madi

village after getting married. She has received 8 years of experience teaching young children. She has a high value for physical play.

Participant 6: Participant 6 is a mature lady aged 40-45 and has gained 20 years of teaching experience. She works in an ECD center located in the heart of the city. She is unmarried and stays alone near the school. She is from a local community near school and she loves to work with children. She has received some short-term training courses and has completed a school-level certificate (SLC). She says even though she doesn't have her own children, she loves to always be surrounded by young children, and they are her source of happiness.

Method of the Study: Teacher In-Depth Interview

The Teacher Interview was based on research by Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1962), and Kenneth Rubin (1983). The items were created to best reflect and mirror the intent of my three research core questions. The interview questions consisted of 12 open-ended items, and teachers had opportunities to add their ideas, provide examples, or recollect experiences. The participant's response would be recorded verbatim in a journal and on an electronic device.

In terms of observational data, I collected information through direct classroom and outdoor area observation. I wrote lengthy notes as I observed them in class. One hour was allotted for each teacher, so therefore I was consistent in gathering information about their teaching strategies. These notes were critically analyzed later in the analysis process. I would assess if they verbally encouraged or extended play. I would also document if they planned, observed, or provided play materials in the classroom to foster the play of their students.

Interview Procedure & Observation

I conducted an in-depth interview with each teacher privately in a confidential office space after the school had closed. The interview lasted approximately one hour and started with a building informal conversation. During the interview, I allowed the teachers to stop at any time, and I assured them of the confidentiality of the data. I maintained anonymity, and the results will be shared with them after they are published. The interview consisted of twelve guiding questions based on the research purpose and research questions. I prepared simple, non-threatening and probing questions for my

participants. I observed each participant's ongoing behavior in their natural setting for two hours and recorded exactly what I saw regarding teachers' play behavior inside and outside the classroom. As required in qualitative research, I have kept account of the collected data using the available tools. The interview was based on the identified items in the Teacher In-depth Play Interview.

Information Collection Methods

As per my ontology, epistemology, and my research paradigm, I captured the personal, social, and educational experiences and training of the ECD teachers' and their perception regarding play-based learning. For this, I recorded the participants' views about their experiences in their practices of play. The in-depth interviews were conducted using qualitative techniques with twelve open-ended questions that involved the participants in a focused conversation. Observation and discussion were also the key methods used to generate information in this study. Based on the two research questions of this study, I documented the findings on two distinct instruments. First, the interview was spontaneously documented during the interview. The observation of each teacher was based on data obtained by a review of six teachers' documents and the observation of the teacher engagement. The interview was conducted first to build rapport and trust and to verify the philosophy of the teacher. Following the interview, the observation was scheduled and conducted within one week of a time period.

Field Work

With the prepared guiding questions for information collection, I went on the fieldwork visit. Wolcott (2005) has argued that the primary problem in the research endeavor is the relationship between fieldwork and data gathering. In the first step, I requested the preschool leader's authority to let me spend some time with ECD teachers for an interview regarding play pedagogy. Then, I asked permission to observe the school practices and took permission from the school principal a day before I visited. I allocated the time of the interview according to my research purpose and needs. I extended the time if the participant required further time to explain. After getting permission, I approached the research participants and developed a good relationship to conduct an interview in a comfortable way. I realized that trust-building and understanding each other are very important before an interview. I made every effort to build trustful

relationships to make them comfortable to share their experiences and understanding. I observed them, interviewed them, and observed school culture. Before, during, and after the interview, I was always aware of my relationship with my study subjects.

Data Interpretation and Meaning-Making

The study data included teacher interview data and the observation conducted by each participant. As mentioned in my fieldwork procedure, I conducted each interview with my six research participants for triangulation validation. As I mentioned earlier, I prepared interview guiding questions for the purpose of the interview and used both guiding and probing questions during the interview. I took various steps in the writing process or collecting data through interviews and observation to validate "lead to more valid reliable and diverse construction of realities" (Duwadi, 2009, p. 71). I tried my best to make the interview environment an easy and comfortable situation for the participants to express their feelings and experiences about play values and knowledge. I transcribed the interview by using the naturalized transcription method and noted down what was said, how it was said, the chronological order of their experiences, the body language, and the context of the school. The transcribed information was coded, similar codes were grouped, and themes were created by linking with the research questions. The data received from the participants was grouped under the themes and analyzed by using my knowledge and experiences as recommended by Cohen et al. (2007): "Qualitative data analysis involves organizing, accounting for and explaining data; making sense of data in terms of the participants' definitions of the situation, noting patterns, themes, categories and regularities" (p. 461). I tried to make meaning from the analysis using re-storying as a technique for writing the narratives, including context and place from the stories. I went for filtration to maintain naturality. I maintained thematic structures, as well as social and cultural referents, in my analysis and writing. I gave value to the setting and life of people and did not do any harm from any
aspect.

Quality Standards of the Study

Quality standards are the measure of the truth value of qualitative researchers or whether the study findings are correct and accurate. I have maintained the required quality of research from its start to the end and paid more attention to the practice of

those teachers as well as answers to my research questions that were designed for the research. My research is qualitative; before it is critical narrative inquiry, I followed the structures of qualitative research. I understood that the sincerity of information is more important than its volume. I have maintained the quality standards by the best method, guided by philosophical consideration, whereas the findings are research question-driven. I have extended my participation in the research work as per the need of the research work to search for thick, rich, raw data. I used appropriate research methods based on the ontological and epistemological beliefs of my research. I paid full attention to the significant components of critical narrative inquiry, such as truthfulness, transparency, reliability, criticality, and credibility, to ensure quality, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Furthermore, I also maintained components like lifelikeness, personal reflexivity, transferability, and trustworthiness in narrative inquiry. For transferability, I believe that this research will benefit ECD teachers and concerned people who work with young children to implement play pedagogy. I used dependability to ensure trustworthiness, stability and consistency in research. I included all the information and data I received in my research as realistically and truthfully as possible to give attention to verisimilitude.

I used my critical self-awareness and applied my pedagogical thoughtfulness and critical reflexivity as a process of realization of my own practices and my participants' practices, as Taylor and Medina (2013) recommended. I frequently engaged with my participants for credibility, followed by a debriefing and member checking, like triangulation, to add value to my research. Member checking is found to be "most critical for establishing credibility" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I collected information in the natural setting of the informants so that the information received was more authentic. Connelly and Clandinin (1994) have explained narrative inquiry as a methodology to describe participants' personal stories by considering sociality, temporality and spatiality. Being a critical narrative researcher, I tried to bring the personal, social, and cultural dimensions into the story of my participants and attempted to bring their voices to the forefront with greater respect and compassion. Knowledge gained by considering sociality will provide an in-depth understanding of the subject matter.

Likewise, I built temporality, as suggested by Connelly and Clandinin (1990) in the story of my participants, as a time of experience and how they experience the subject

matter is very important. Greenhalgh and Hurwitz (1999) suggest that narrating a story should include a beginning, a sequence of events, and an ending. Furthermore, past, present, and future experiences have an influence on how a teacher experiences the situation. I brought this aspect to my research to assure credibility. Similarly, the context, setting, and environment built into my story address spatiality. Since the study was conducted in varied geographical locations, cultural influence experiences were carefully studied. The environment had a significant influence on the research participants' experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), so the location of the story is very important. Therefore, sociality, temporality and spatiality were maintained by giving special consideration to context, setting, time and social and critical aspects in my research.

Critical Reflectivity

In this study, I have linked critical reflectivity together with the elements of stories' sociality, temporality and place to add to the quality criteria of critical narrative inquiry. As I interviewed the research participant, I was reflecting critically on the pacing and the content of their responses. I allowed repeated responses and encouraged an expansion of each answer to ensure that I understood and documented it. As I analyzed the data, I listened to the recorded interview and reviewed my recorded notes, summarizing and tabulating the data on a frequency table for each item of the survey. I also reflected upon their years of teaching, experiences, cultural background, work environment and administrative support. I made sure to document their complete responses to ensure validity and accuracy. I certainly revisited the theories of play and fostering play in the classroom as I analyzed my participant responses for each item.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues are an integral part of qualitative research, so from the beginning till the dissemination of the research report, I followed all the ethical considerations as per the research ethics and the guidelines provided by Kathmandu University. I asked permission in advance before entering the research schools. Before signing the consent letter, I informed the participants about the purpose and aim of the study and explained to them in detail how the results would be used and the social consequences of the study that they would have on their lives. Being a critical narrative researcher, relationships are highly valued, so I gave special consideration to the ethics of care and gave my best

effort to develop a good relationship with the participants first to make them feel safe and secure in sharing their experiences. All my participants were given the right to refuse if they felt uncomfortable participating and they had full rights to withdraw at any time. I kept all the obtained data confidential throughout the study. All participants were numbered to ensure anonymity and respect their privacy. The full confidentiality of their information is maintained without any kind of force being used to collect information. When they participate and provide information, their anonymity should be guaranteed for no harm. I have maintained seriousness against the misuse of the data. The research design, participant selection, data collection, analysis, and reporting are accurately done without altering the findings to satisfy my prediction.

The writing in my research is my own original and credits are given to all those writers and researchers from whom information is taken. I am equally conscious of the originality of the writing and also grateful to various writers and organizations for their contribution to enriching this research taken as reference. In all steps of the research process, I engaged in ethical practices, giving special attention during data collection, writing and disseminating reports. The storage of confidential data will be locked in a secure location or encrypted on my laptop. Moreover, I have strictly followed the ethical guidelines of Kathmandu University School of Education. I have approached this important work with curiosity, exploration, and an inquiring mind. Similarly, the same attributes are used by children in their approach to play.

CHAPTER IV

TEACHERS' IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW RESULTS

"Play is the highest form of research."

Albert Einstein

Chapter Overview

Just as in children's play, they are discovering problems and asking the big questions. The above quote illustrates that children's play is very much like research. We are examining the problems and asking the important questions. In this chapter, I discuss early childhood teachers' narratives on making perceptions about play pedagogy. The first section highlights the rapport-building and the data collection process. The second section presents six ECD teachers' narratives through play interviews about how they understand play. In the third section, I tried to understand teachers' perceptions and developed themes by addressing the research questions that emerged from the opinions and perspectives of teachers. The fourth section presents a discussion of the themes relating to some literature. This chapter also presents the theoretical grounds of play pedagogy and concludes with the huge benefits of play pedagogy in ECD and learning. For each set of results, I have identified the foundational theory and described the importance of the results as they relate to the theory.

Data Collection Building Rapport Summary

In order to begin the process of collecting data, the researcher planned carefully to identify an appropriate location and to build rapport with all participants. The location of conducting interviews is very important because teachers have more time to focus on the interview where they can recall and describe those incidents related to my study. Since my area of study is about the perception of teachers regarding play pedagogy, school is the best place. I met all my participant in their ECD centers to conduct qualitative interviews. This research consists of 12 open-ended, in-depth interview questions, 11 of which are in 5 categories. I will briefly describe it here: 1) Cognitive development through play, 2) Social development from play, 3) Emotional development related to play, 4) physical development from play, and 5) learning about safety from play. One open-

ended question is about teachers' perception regarding the role of educational leaders in creating enabling play pedagogy-based learning environments.

Research Interviews

Five research interviews were scheduled for time right after the program was over. This was important because teachers had more time to focus on the interview. Only one participant arranged a meeting time on a Saturday morning after the parents' teachers' meeting was over. That meeting was arranged by the school for a new academic year. Due to the location, participants were encouraged to recall those past memories that shaped their perceptions. For example, they showed me flashcards of letters and pictures to clarify their classroom practices and how they use them every day. They were able to explain their daily routine, which was stuck on the board. One of the teachers showed me the television and shared that she uses it regularly to teach rhymes and lets them watch television after they complete their written work.

The amount of time was important for the participants to feel relaxed and at ease throughout the interview. Therefore, the amount of time spent with participants also determines how I was able to build rapport and become a trustworthy person with whom they felt safe to share their experiences. They were encouraged to recall those past memories that shaped their perceptions. I met three participants three times, spending 1 hour each time. Two participants twice, spending one hour each time and one participant I met multiple times. These differences were due to schedule, distance, and the needs of the participants.

Another important area of rapport building was to establish a positive emotional climate. The emotional status of my participants is described in the way they reacted when they met me and when I put forward my questions. The moment they saw me in their school, they were very happy and welcomed me, but when I started the interview, two participants were quite nervous, three were very comfortable, and one was excited and happy all the time to share her experiences. They demonstrated nervousness by moving their hands from the table, folding and again keeping them on the table and sometimes tapping legs. From these frequent body movements, I realized that they were really nervous. One participant told me that she was feeling nervous at the moment, so I stopped for a while and try to make her feel comfortable by telling her that "*no answer is*

right and wrong. It's all about your own experiences that you are sharing". Two of them were comfortable because they gave answers to every question without hesitation and told me that they had very little idea about play pedagogy and were very interested in learning about it.

The education level and training received by each participant were very interesting. As a researcher, I wanted to know and have a deeper understanding of how they perceived play. What was their understanding of the play? When I inquired about their educational background, I found that two participants had only completed a School Leaving Certificate (SLC), three participants had high school degrees, and only one had a bachelor's degree in education. The training opportunities they received revealed that none of the participants had training in play pedagogy. However, one participant had received training for the Montessori teaching method and explained that she has some knowledge about educational activities but lacks resources and is unable to do those activities in her class. Another two participants had received short-term training for child development, but they revealed that they needed play-based learning training to conduct play activities in class. Finally, two remaining participants received full credit training for ECED, but they were not confident enough to give examples of how to conduct a based learning environment. It's very sad to know that one participant has never received any kind of training yet.

Teacher Play Interview Description

The Teacher Play Interview was designed for teachers to share their experiences while organizing play activities and was constructed to gain in-depth knowledge about play pedagogy. This interview is directly correlated to the key questions of the research study. It is vital to establish rapport with participants and to conduct an interview. The Teacher Play Interview was developed to explore teacher attitudes and understanding. The challenge was that play pedagogy was new in the Nepali context, and our teachers lacked sufficient education and training opportunities to focus on play. Based on an extensive literature review, it is clear that play pedagogy is very important in ECED as an important area of research. The demand for play pedagogy in the new ECED curriculum to bring changes in traditional practices resulted in an interview-based format that consists of 12 questions. The 12 questions fall into five different categories. They include

1) cognitive development through play, 2) social development from play, 3) emotional development related to play, 4) physical development from play, and 5) learning about safety from play. One question was about teachers' perceptions regarding the role of educational leaders in creating an enabling play pedagogy-based learning environment. These questions are clearly related to the study's purpose and rationale for research. The sample questions included: 1) How would you define children's play 2) Do you believe play is important for child development? The play interview consisted of twelve important questions about perceptions, strategies, leadership, and policy as it relates to play. The following section shows the documented results for each interview question.

Question One Results: The Definition of Play

The following data results are based on the key questions of the research study, which is to understand teachers' perceptions in early childhood development centers to enhance the holistic development of young children by improving teaching practices, communication, and the overall educational environment. It contributes to creating supportive and effective learning experiences that benefit children during their crucial early years. The main research questions are:

1) How do teachers perceive play pedagogy in ECED centers?

2) How do teachers practice play pedagogy in their school?

This particular question is found in the theory of Jean Piaget (1962) and Lev Vygotsky (1967). Clearly, the answers are important because they are related to cognitive and social areas. Emotional and linguistic understanding of play. In response to the question, the cognitive domain was included in only one participant's responses. The other five participants did not mention cognitive as part of their definition. For example, one participant mentioned five times physical development through a ball activity. However, it was unclear whether she was more concerned for safety rather than physical development.

The open-ended questions instrument entitled "The Teachers Play Interview "consisted of twelve open-ended questions in an interview format. The following sections were organized based on the participant's responses to each interview question, which is clearly linked to the study's key questions. The first question was formulated to establish the participants' understanding of the play. The question probed each individual as to how

they would define the play of young children. For example, the researcher was keenly focused on whether the participants would mention any developmental area as it is related to play. Therefore, the following section summarizes the responses based on the following developmental areas, as well as a focus on safety. These include: 1) cognitive, 2) social, 3) emotional, 4) physical, and 5) safety. Language is subsumed under cognitive domain. The other column captures their comments, queries, and reflections.

In terms of the social domain, we know that social skills are clearly fostered though play (Vygotsky,1967). As I examined the data for social inclusion as part of the definition, only one participant mentioned social development as important to the definition of play. Similarly, the other five did not mention social development as part of the definition. During the interview, they expressed issues with children fighting for play materials and were not able to understand that through play, they can learn social skills like sharing and turn-taking. One of my participants honestly shared that due to her negligence, there were two accidents in her class that were life-threatening for her students. When teachers neglect to teach social skills, then there is a high chance of such accidents. Play gives more opportunities to learn social skills. Similarly, four participants mentioned emotional development as part of the definition and they mentioned that *"children become happy while playing and it gives inner peace"*. However, the participants did not mention how play helps emotional development or why it is important to learn emotional skills. Whereas Vygotsky (1967) pointed out that play is not just a leisure activity but a dynamic process through which children actively construct knowledge, skills, and social understanding in collaboration with others. All the participants were concerned about the physical domain and safety but did not report concerns about emotional and social development or learning. In terms of perspectives on safety, the comments of the participants reflected a lack of education and training. Similarly, teachers were facing difficulties in defining play and the results show that they were not able to describe play as a medium for developing holistic aspects of child development.

Questions Two Results: Play is Important for Child Development Results

It was interesting to listen to the responses to my second question. It clearly asks the participant if they believe that play is important for all areas of development. These

include: cognitive, 2) social, 3) emotional, 4) physical, 5) language, and 6) safety. This unique question is based and rooted in the work of Jean Piaget (1962) as well as the language and play research conducted by Vygotsky (1967). Results will show answers that reflect gaps in understanding how language and social development are important. Four participants reported that play was important for cognitive development, which is grounded in Piaget's important cognitive work. However, two participants did not regard it as important for child development. This was interesting because they were only able to connect play with physical development and did not report that it supports the other areas of learning. The participant who said play helped in cognitive development shared her experience of using materials while teaching said that "*this year, our principal gave us flash cards of animals and fruits. I show this card regularly, therefore now they can recognize the picture and say the names easily whenever I ask", "I found that child learn very easily from the play.*"

Three participants shared that play was important for social development. This was quite fascinating, given the age of these children and how important social development is for positive growth and development. Results showed that only two participants considered play to be important for emotional development. This is very concerning if we are focused on the mental health of young children. Not surprisingly, five participants found play to be beneficial to physical development. They did provide examples of physical play all the time. However, they felt comfortable complaining about the lack of playground and outdoor play equipment. This is unusual since later results show they have little value for learning and playing outdoors.

Language was not found by any participant to be valuable in play, which is an important gap based on the work of Lev Vygotsky, who argued that language was vital to the quality of play of young children. Unfortunately, none of the teachers were able to share their experiences that play fostered vocabulary development in their students, whereas Vygotsky proposed that vocabulary, grammar, and language proficiency were important benefits of play. For example, they said they sing rhymes regularly but could not make the connection. Those songs would have helped children develop better communication if the teachers would have understood the connection. Research shows that songs enhance their linguistic skills. They didn't talk about how they role-modelled

language and repeated many times while introducing new words and corrected grammar and pronunciation during play (British Council Malaysia, 2024).

Reflection Discovered in Research: Safety & Play

Finally, safety was identified by two participants as being important to play, but they could not explain that through play, they learned safety skills. Play is really about taking risks (Brussoni, 2020). For example, choosing a friend is taking a risk. Choosing a toy is taking a risk. Finding a space and challenging oneself is taking a risk. Being an early childhood educator, I am knowledgeable about the risk factors involved in play. It's not about letting them face dangerous situations. Rather, they need to test their limits through play (Brussoni, 2020). My participants displayed confusion between risk and hazards in play when they shared their experiences of accidents. Those accidents that happened in class and on the playground were hazards. This is an important distinction because the teachers had the important role of removing and avoiding accidents before they allowed children to play. Only one participant talked about the play risk observation during slide play, and her students tried the opposite way; she was scared, but they were successful in climbing up from the slide. She connected this incident with new ideas of play. The other five participants just explained that it is very risky for children to play freely in a high teacher-student ratio. She didn't talk about the risk in play that actually helps children to test their limits and boundaries and learn safety skills for themselves (NAEYC, 2023). So, play gives them a chance to be more competent in trying new things.

Question Three Results: Does Play Support Learning?

This item is clearly addressing the importance of cognitive development and play. As per the work of Jean Piaget (1962), cognitive development was clearly supported by children engaging in daily play. The results of this item were profoundly interesting, given the participants were teachers in an early childhood program. Clearly, the experiences of these teachers showed that over four teachers believed that play supported academic learning. Two participants did not believe that play supported academic learning. Three participants reported that play supported social learning. Similarly, play supported emotional learning by four participants. Physical learning through play was only identified by one participant, yet safety was identified by no one was being part of

the play (Gessell, 1924). Finally, only one participant found play supporting language development. This is critical, given what we know about language development being supported and promoted through play. It was shocking to know that none of the teachers found that play supports all areas of learning (Brown, 2009; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1967). One participant focused on play as competition as she could only understand play with the proper games in the field between two groups. They frequently shared their discontent with their teaching position, and one participant also shared that it is better to see games on mobile devices than play them as a waste of time. Clearly, when teachers lack the understanding of how play supports learning, they are not able to create such an environment. The specific conversations regarding how play is important to child development revealed some interesting perspectives, which showed that the majority of the teachers do not understand how play supports the development of children.

Question Four Results: Do you believe Play is Important for Learning and Development inside the classroom?

It was quite shocking to know that only two participants found that play was important for cognitive development in the classroom. Based on the extensive literature review of Jean Piaget's work in cognitive theory and play, it was found through children's intellectual tasks and materials that children develop through stages of cognitive growth. These stages are fostered through intentional teaching and the teacher's understanding that it is through play that children grow cognitively. This finding is clearly related to the teacher's gap in understanding the importance of cognitive growth in play. The other four participants did not find play as important for cognitive development in the classroom. In terms of social development, no participant found that play was important for social development. This is a critical result because children have a window of opportunity for social skill learning from birth through age seven. Children learn social skills through play and if play is not perceived as valuable for social learning, children will not develop these important social skills. Similarly, only two participants stated that play was important for learning emotional skills in the classroom. Research (UNICEF, 2018) clearly shows how important emotional development in play is for the early childhood classroom. Only two participants reported that play was important for physical development in the classroom. Safety was not mentioned as a critical factor by any

participant. This finding is consistent with earlier questions in this survey, which emphasize the lack of concern for early childhood safety. Only one individual identified language as an important part of the play. Finally, the play was not identified as important for language development. Again, language is repeatedly identified as being unimportant in play or that play fosters language. One participant identified the academic areas of math, science, and literacy as being learned through play. Based on my interview notes, the participants seemed very concerned that play was a waste of time and that television was useful for teaching language, and they perceived play as competition. During the interview, these participants were told several times that only the outside was appropriate for play.

Question Five Results: Do you believe children's Play is important for learning and development outside?

Academic learning and language were not identified by any participant in the study as being valued outside as part of the play. Research by Pelligrini (2011) and Vygotsky (1978) shows that play needs to take place in and out of the classroom and that all areas of development are supported through play. Clearly, there is a distinction between what teachers promote, guide, and support in the classroom versus in the play areas outside. This has been shown in many studies where researchers found that teachers relate academics to inside and play to outside environments. The results for this item are very interesting and yet concerning because cognitive and social development were not regarded by any participant as being valuable in play outside. On the other hand, emotional development for three participants was found to be part of play outside. Similarly, and surprisingly, only two participants identified physical development and learning. Traditionally, in many countries, the United Nations report reveals the fact that play is only perceived as valuable in the outdoor environment and it is typically related to physical development and not to language, social, or emotional development. Duarte (2015) shows that dual language development gains sustainably outside. Based on notes, three participants reported that children were happy outside and enjoyed outside play. However, their responses were unclear because they did not make the connection between emotional and social development gains and play. These results confirm to me,

as a researcher, that my participants did not understand the value of play and its role in emotional and social development.

Question Six Results: Do you believe there are benefits of play?

This item seems a bit redundant because I wanted to give participants an opportunity to be clear about whether there were other benefits they believed derived from children engaging in play. Consistent with other results, four participants believed and reported that cognitive gains were made through children's play. Social benefits were also reported by four participants, who mentioned that *"children will learn how to make the team and play in their own community after school."* Only two participants reported language learning. Emotional learning was identified by three participants as a benefit of play because they saw children happier in a playground than in the classroom. "*play gives mental happiness, children become happy from inside, they look happier outside than in a classroom,*" but they cannot connect with emotional benefits of play rather connecting this happiness with the feeling that when children don't have to read and write and are allowed to play freely, they are happy. This is consistent with earlier results reported in this study, in which my participants were unable to describe how play benefits all areas of development and learning. Participants were encouraged to provide examples, but they could not articulate a connection between development, learning and play. This finding is of grave concern, given the importance of social and emotional learning in the early years. Again, physical development was reported by four participants as important in play and they provide extensive examples like *"play helps to digest food, children will get good sleep after they are tired, they will be busy and less time to play games in mobile"*, connecting play mostly with health benefits.

Only two participants identified the language benefits of play. This is very depressing because one of the goals of the early childhood program is language development, and four teachers were not able to understand how play and language are intricately linked with each other. Understanding this relationship can offer valuable insights in fostering effective communication skills (Vygotsky, 1967). Through play, children repeatedly use and hear words, which reinforces their understanding and usage. Unfortunately, no respondent reported learning safety through play activities. Through experiential learning, children develop safety skills that are necessary to navigate their

environment safely. My participants, due to the lack of knowledge of play benefits, cannot use play to teach safety skills. For example, a child, while using scissors to cut papers, learns about the potential hazards of sharp objects and how to handle them safely. It is an opportunity to teach safety protocols to young children through repeated exposure to safety concepts in a playful manner.

Question Seven Results: Do you plan to play?

The planning question was very important because it addressed the question of whether the teachers are able to implement the suggested play curriculum or not in the daily play practices of early childhood centers. Planning for play in an early childhood classroom is critical to make learning developmentally appropriate for each student. The result showed that none of the participants reported planning for play activities or lesson plans in the classroom. One of the participants answered, "*I have planning in my mind*," and most of them expressed, "*I feel sad my students are lacking from play activities.*" They complained that due to the pressure of completing the curriculum, we had no time to plan play activities. It seems like they are unaware of the play curriculum and are just following the old tradition of reading and writing as the major components of the curriculum. Planning determines objectives that teachers want children to learn from play. It helps to select the activities that align with the objectives that match the development level of children. It provides direction to educators and guides them on the right actions to take.

Question Eight Results: Do You observe and document play?

This question provided my participants with opportunities to reflect on their play practices and observation skills. Since each child is unique and has their own strength and needs, documenting children's play is essential to understanding their interests and needs. By observing children's play, teachers can track their students' progress, interests, and preferences to develop appropriate learning opportunities based on play patterns. The results show that none of the participants reported or shared how they observed and documented the play of their students in the classroom inside and outside. They did not report using a checklist, anecdotal records, video, recording, or portfolio. No participants reported using any form to document observation of children while playing. One participant shared her experience of her students playing slides from opposite direction

and she found it quite challenging but students were used to it. She also added that this incident made her realize that play facilitates good coordination of children's bodies, the ability to take risks, and the confidence to try different ways. Most of the participants answered that they observe students' free play for safety reasons.

Question Nine Results: Do you encourage play?

Encouraging young children to play is very important because play supports holistic development across all domains: physical, cognitive, language, social, emotional and overall well-being. It helps in problem-solving, develops creativity and imagination, releases the energy of the child, and reduces stress naturally. All participants reported that they verbally encouraged the children to play through language. However, only two reported that they physically model or join children in play during circle time. No participants reported that they were encouraged through signage in the classroom or through the curriculum activities. Two participants shared that "*I sing action songs every day and encourage my students to follow me. They also enjoy following their teachers*, so they repeatedly request her to sing and play again. Some teachers are concerned about the safety of play, but most of them had the same experiences. Due to the high teacher-student ratio, it is difficult to organize educational play activities. One of the participants observed and shared, "*developmentally delayed students need more encouragement to play than normal students*" because she noticed those students find difficulty in playing. This study does not examine the area of special needs children and play. However, there is extensive research on special needs children and play.

Question Ten Results: Do you believe children can play during an educational lesson?

This question is most important as it provides opportunities for the researcher to clearly understand the play perceptions of the participants. Play pedagogy is about incorporating play into educational lessons with academic objectives and enhancing certain skills of students. This approach enhances learning by making it more meaningful, memorable, and enjoyable for children. Teachers should have great values of play to plan and prepare effective educational play activities. Those types of activities are intentionally designed to align with learning objectives to arouse children's natural curiosity, creativity, and enthusiasm for exploration. The results reported that all the

participants believe that children can learn during lessons, but they need training that allows them to plan play activities that support learning and development. They also complained that they have limited resources for educational play materials and less play time due to reading and writing pressures. Their dissatisfaction with work pressure, limited play items, and high expectations of parents for reading and writing are from the beginning to the end of the interview. They also shared that they lack play items, but they bring from home some stuff to play for counting items. Participant also added, "Some *play can be easily arranged to support educational lessons,"* and "*I sing rhymes and do some physical activities for different themes, for example, color songs, animal songs, letter songs, etc.*" "*I make picture cards and let them make pairs.*"

Question Eleven Results: Do you allow children to play with educational activities?

The results for questions ten and eleven are precisely the same in content. The results for these two items show that participants believed that children can play during educational lessons and that they should allow children to play during educational time in the classroom. They gave different answers, "*Yes, I will allow if there are educational items in the classroom, but we lack educational materials. I use what I found in the surrounding, old stuff or donated items from organizations"*. One of them replied, "*I bring maize seeds to count and write letters. I do rhymes with actions. I take them outside and let them play freely. We have materials, but due to the obligation to complete the book and write in copy, we have less time to use them. Mostly, they have to copy from the board and write in books; otherwise, parents will not believe that their children are not learning in school.*" Some of them shared, "*Due to parents' demand, we have to focus on studies, but sometimes we give time for play. We need training to prepare play materials according to the curriculum. To conduct class in play pedagogy, we need parents' support as they have high expectations for reading and writing"*. One participant was very straight and immediately replied, *"Yes, I will if there are resources given by the school. But parents should also understand that it is important to play"." I usually divide them into groups and let them use free play materials on their own. In some activities, I do them in groups, and they have to wait for their turn to use the materials. I mostly show them pictures, draw in their copy, and help them to draw pictures.* Participants reported that due to a lack of time, educational materials and resources, they were not able to

conduct play. They frequently repeated that play should be conducted outside the classroom. Most of them had similar experiences regarding parents' expectations for more written work. For these two questions, no one reported a relationship of literacy, language, or academic content to play.

Question Twelve Results: What is the role of leaders in facilitating play pedagogy in the school?

The role of school leaders involves being a role model, training teachers, observing and supervising staff, and a life-long learner, demonstrating best practices based on research. Educational leaders are responsible for building effective schools and learning environments. This question addressed the problems teachers are facing in implementing play pedagogy in early childhood centers. School leaders have an essential role in identifying those educational problems and participating actively in problem-solving. I observed a huge gap in Nepal between existing education policies and practices despite the many initiatives taken in recent days to develop quality education in ECD centers. The participant interview results showed that the leader's role is to support them in play pedagogy training to understand, plan, observe children, and implement the play curriculum. Interviews revealed that school leaders need to promote, support and advocate for play. On a reflective note, teachers also need the support of leaders for advocacy to explain the benefits of play with parents, teachers of higher grades not to judge students for reading and writing skills and to develop a school environment where play is valued as a foundational component in early childhood development and education.

Teacher Observation Results in Play Practices

In this study, observation was also considered an important tool to identify the play practices in the ECED center. Participants were observed for two hours exactly in their workplace. I secured the permission of the respective school principals in advance of interviews and observations. The purpose of the observation was to explore the play activities of students conducted by teachers to support the growth and development of children. The following data results are based on the anecdotal records focused on teacher behavior inside and outside the classroom. As the participants were observed, their

behavior supported and confirmed many aspects of the individual interview and their lack of understanding of the play.

Observation Result of Participant 1

This ECED center is located in the heart of the city and they had very few outdoor play items and it looked unsafe and risky as the metals were rusted. As I reached the school at 10:00 am, according to the time given by Participant 1, all the students were inside the class for circle time and singing some rhymes, some students were trying to imitate the teacher's actions. After greeting each other, the teacher started keeping their classwork copies on a low table and the children were sitting in the mattress. Few students started writing as soon as they received the copy, but some were just staring, looking here and there as if they didn't want to write. The teacher said, *"These are newcomers and they are just three years old but parents are requesting to teach them the alphabet and they don't like to write but rather play all the time"*.

As I continued to observe, some children ran near the corner where there was a rack with a few puzzles, block pieces, handmade dolls and a slide. She called them time and again to complete the work, but they didn't listen to her. Rather than listening, they started chasing each other. She shouted and told them to be back at their table and join the read-aloud activity. Three of the students refused to come from that corner, and others repeated loudly what the teacher said: "*A for apple, b for a ball, c for cat, d for dog.*" During these 2 hours of time, I observed that she did not facilitate, foster, encourage, or verbalize play.

Upon reflection, I was critically reflecting on past experiences in school. Why did my participant only focus on reading and writing even though she told me that she got many ECED short-term training opportunities? Why didn't she do any activity to engage those students who refused to read and write? If she had invited them in a playful way rather than shouting, would the children listen to her?

Observation Result of Participant 2

My next visit was to the school outside the city in a quiet location, where they had a huge playground. I found this school more resourceful with all the safe outdoor play equipment than the previous one. The play metal items were painted and are in good usable condition. They had invited me for the visit at 11:00 am and when I entered the

classroom, the teacher was not there and students were running here and there. After ten minutes, she came inside the class, calling some of her students who were running outside in the playground. She said, *"Oh! You are here already. I was in the principal's office for some stationery items"*, *"I am the only teacher for these twenty-six students. It's really hard when I have to go out of the class "*, *"these children always like to go outside than stay inside the classroom,"* *"come inside quickly."*

All the children were rushing inside the classroom and she told them to take out the math book, page number 10. One boy started crying suddenly and said, *"I don't have a math book*." The teacher scolded him and said, *"If you forget your book tomorrow, I will not let you play next time."* The poor boy was feeling really sad in his tears. The students were struggling to write the numbers, but I saw them excitely coloring the pictures in the workbook. Some students were able to complete it, and some couldn't write it. Then she took out the flashcards and started showing the picture card. Everyone looked engaged and answered the teacher. In these two hours of observation, I found the teacher rarely moving around the class and predominantly sitting at her desk and instructing the students. She looked rushed to complete each period that was separated for individual subjects. As I critically reflected upon this observation, several questions came to my mind. Why were most of her children struggling to complete the task? If she had started teaching numbers with a song or a playful activity, would the students have enjoyed writing numbers? Even after six months of training in ECED, why doesn't she understand the value of activity-based learning? Is it because of the instruction from the school leaders to focus more on writing work or the pressure from parents? Does this teacher ever receive feedback or support from the administration when implementing playful activities? Was it because of the high teacher-student ratio she was unable to follow the playful learning method?

Observation Result of Participant 3

The third school I visited was located in a remote landscape, a village two hours away from Pokhara Metropolitan City, where one can see the great natural beauty of a full mountain range clearly from the top of the hills. The air was fresh and crisp around the school with the clear blue-sky view. They had a newly built playground separated from kindergarten and a brand-new PlayStation that was not like the previous old metal

ones. I went inside the class and everyone welcomed me with a big clap. I saw some students playing freely near the play area and some were writing but the teacher was busy preparing home assignments for students. She continuously encouraged students and said, "*After you finish writing, I will take you outside to play,*" but still, some students were not interested in writing and reading. After some time, she took all her students outside to play and told me that "*after having this play station, it is so easy for us to engage students. They enjoy playing here a lot*".

During two hours of observation, I found this teacher valued play more than other teachers because I saw her giving more play opportunities to children. However, I didn't see her engaging with children in play or organizing play activities to support learning. This observation was profoundly interesting and I pondered several questions. Why can't she create playful moments for the children rather than just watching them to avoid accidents? Why does she not take a more engaged role in the play without controlling the ideas of the children? If she had to play pedagogy training, then she would plan to play, verbalize play and encourage play. In her daily lesson planning book, I didn't see any play planning or play documents about students. Again, the observation supported the information I learned through the in-depth interview.

Observation Result of Participant 4

It was Sunday morning. I reached this school at 9:45 AM. Parents were dropping their children off at the school gate, and the teacher wasn't there yet. She arrived at 10:00 am exactly and went rushing inside the class as the entrance was crowded with children. Then, all the students went to their own classes, sang the national anthem, and started singing rhymes. The teacher gathered all of them near the chart board area, where all the different picture charts were hung to learn numbers, alphabets, and Nepali letters. The teacher, with her big stick, raised her voice a bit louder, pointed to the chart and started reading, and the children repeated her. They were also trying to be as loud as they could. For some time, it was too annoying, and it was hard for anyone to hear. Then, they started their daily writing activities, which were the same as in the previous school. However, after the writing work, this teacher started telling them a story about a Nepali storybook named *"Mero Sano Jhola."* I noticed that all the students were listening so quietly and eagerly. I really liked the way she was engaging the children because it reflected a sense

of understanding of playful learning. She also organized a group game, sitting in a circle and chasing another friend and keeping a handkerchief at the back of somebody, "*Ma Sanga Bhot Kukur cha Kaslai Tokla.*" this game reminded me of my school days when we used to play a lot in recess time. This was the first time I observed the teacher organizing play during observation sessions even though she admitted that games were in her mind, "*I don't have fixed planning when written work is over. I like to organize such games to make them happy, there are lots of physical benefits and they enjoy a lot*".

Upon reflecting, I became more critical, as the teacher was connecting play more with physical benefits than holistic benefits. She did not mention the learning goals related to the play. If she had had to play pedagogy training, she would have shared her experiences about previous purposeful play; rather, I found her understanding of play and learning to be two different things. Wouldn't there be more engagement in play-based interaction between students and teachers, as described by Vygotsky's socio-cultural play theory, as well as the scaffolding techniques to acquire new learning? Her spontaneous activities following learning did not reflect an intentional approach to planning and integrating play into the curriculum.

Observation Result of Participant 5

The ECED center was located in a peaceful area and they had well-structured outdoor play metal items separated for kindergarten. It was a hot, sunny afternoon. As I reached the school, it suddenly started raining heavily. All the students were inside the class, lying quietly in the low bed. Seems like they were moving their body, but to follow the teachers' instruction, they had to be in bed. A teacher told me that her students were resting after having tiffin time and she also had a quick lunch as soon as possible as there was no one to take care of students. Around 2:00 pm, they came out of bed, but a few students fell asleep, and even the teacher was trying to wake them up. She took out some toys from the big metal box near her table, made three groups of children at three different tables, and allowed them to play with them. She even gave picture books to the children. She came near me and said, "*Our morning routine is reading and writing, and the afternoon is playing time.*" To one of the groups, she gave mineral water bottle caps, which were collected from the school cafeteria and used for counting. She kept wooden blocks on one table where the alphabet was written on it, and a few children were still

running around as if they all liked to play with blocks. Some children were fighting for blocks and it looked as if there was a scarcity of block play items. Even the teacher was making turns for each group. She said, "If there had been *another teacher to support me, I would have done so many activities that I learned in Montessori training."*

As I continued to observe them, I saw her struggling to handle children even though the school had some teaching-learning materials. Time and again, children started chasing each other during playtime. She shouted and told them to be back at their tables. Three of the students refused to join any table but sat on a floor with a block, playing alone and imagining it as if it were a mobile. The bell rang for dismissal and the teacher kept the homework book in their bags and made a line to go to the waiting area for parents to pick up their child. During these 2 hours of time, I observed that she was trying to facilitate play, but she needed support and guidance. If there were two teachers in an ECD classroom, would it be easy for teachers to organize play-based learning? Is the unbalanced ratio of teacher-students really creating issues for such teachers in ECD centers who are trying to implement play pedagogy? Again, does this teacher need academic support in planning for play? These questions are critical for school heads and management committees to think about in order to increase the quality of ECD classrooms.

Observation Results of Participant 6

On my final day of observation, the teacher called me early in the morning to say that she was on leave due to a personal problem. Therefore, I postponed her until the next day. The school was near the highway that goes to Baglung. As I entered the school gate, I observed that the ECD center didn't have a separate play area for children. Rather, they have to share the same playground with middle school students. There were basketball and table tennis areas for senior students, but no play items outside for children. The classroom was carpeted neatly and individual sitting mats for students. Here, I saw lots of play materials in the racks and the teacher said "*I don't take my students outside as senior school teachers complain all the time that my students shout and run around, disturbing them. Even children like to play outside but there is no play area for our ECD children."* However, each year, I have to convince the school management committee for sufficient indoor play items to engage them inside the classroom."*

Written and reading activities were the same as in the previous schools, but the teacher allowed them to play again. I saw her engaged in children's play and asked them questions about their play. The classroom had a television time, so she let them watch rhymes for forty minutes each day. However, I did not see any activities or literature related to this media time. When the teachers turned on the television, they started dancing in the rhymes and some students really showed good moves. Through critical reflection, I thought this dancing opened up many opportunities for content learning through play.

While reflecting, this time, I became more critical. It took me towards deep thinking with lots of questions in my mind. Why the senior teachers didn't allow these little children to come outside in the playground to play? Why didn't they think it's essential for children to play? If the school leader and principal were able to explain the importance of children's play to these teachers, would they blame the ECD teacher or students? Why didn't they realize that outdoor play equipment was needed in school?

Observation Summary

After observing the six participants, each teacher faced similar and different issues in managing play pedagogy and developmental goals in ECED classrooms. I found very little evidence of structured play and teachers' engagement with children's play. I did not observe any instances where the teacher could have extended the play of children or enhanced it with her own ideas. I rarely observed any innovative play practices that teachers employed in their classrooms. After deep reflection, it was vital for teacher training in play pedagogy to be put into action. Several of these teachers had training but failed to put what they learned into practice. This calls into question the importance of follow-up and observation after any early childhood training. ECD teachers need support, guidance and feedback from educational leaders to plan and organize for playful learning and to more deeply understand the role of the environment.

In chapters five and six, these results are analyzed to identify themes with regard to teachers' perceptions and practices of play pedagogy. There are eight themes identified in this study, which are separated into two categories: 1) Teacher's perception and 2) Teacher's practices. In the first category, I reported six themes that emerged from play

perception, and in the second category, two themes emerged from play practices. Six themes are presented in chapter five and two themes are presented in chapter six.

CHAPTER V

TEACHERS' PERCEPTION OF PLAY PEDAGOGY

This chapter presents six different themes that briefly discuss the understanding of play perception through ECD teachers' play value and knowledge. Play practice themes will be addressed in the following chapter. The six themes regarding play perceptions were identified from the participants' interview responses. These themes include 1) Play Supports Intellectual Development, 2) Play and Social Benefits, 3) Emotional Development Through Play, 4) Play and Physical Development, 5) Safety and Hazards in Play, 6) Language Development and its Relationship with Play. The data shows the current understanding of play and the status of play pedagogy of six experienced educators in ECD centers of Nepal. The following themes are developed on the basis of structured qualitative in-depth interviews using the teacher play method. Again, this survey consisted of 12 items and the following section describes each prevalent and significant theme that emerged from the data. Through a critical analysis based on the research studies reviewed in chapter two, I will describe each identified theme and relate it to the detailed research on children's play.

The following themes are organized based on the sequence of the result table. The first theme I have discussed is the relationship between play and Intellectual development, as it was reported as a very important area of growth and development in young children. The second theme is about Play and Social Benefits because this theme showed the high consistency of teachers not reporting the social benefits of play. The third theme is emotional development through play and it presents emotional development was not reported as being related to play. The fourth theme is play and physical development. The fifth theme was safety and hazards in play, which shows how participants did not identify risk and hazards as separate, so they were unable to report the difference between risk and hazards in play. The sixth theme is language development and its relationship to play. In this theme, I have specifically identified language development and its relationship to play, but teachers lack an understanding of the connection between language and play.

Likewise, the seventh theme showed that planning for the play was not reported as an instructional responsibility or practice. Finally, the eighth theme, observation, and documentation of play, was the theme of prevalence when teachers did not report observation as important or relevant in recording or documenting play. Collectively, all the above-mentioned themes show a consistent pattern for the six teachers who did not report the value of play-supporting emotional, social, or linguistic play. While exploring the play perception of teachers, these eight themes have clearly reflected their understanding of play where the holistic connection is missing. Throughout the themes, I will use block play as an example to explain the holistic benefits of play because it is high-quality divergent play material. Since my participants are familiar with block play and they all mentioned it as an important medium to engage children, they should be aware of the benefits related to all domains.

Cognitive Development and Play Theme

Play promotes cognitive stimulation (Play Scotland, 2024) because through play, children have opportunities to explore themself and what they are doing. These experiences will help to develop more complex cognitive skills and strong neural connections and create future learning desires. For example, when children play with blocks, they develop many skills, such as problem-solving, mathematical skills, language and literacy skills, and other motor skills (NAEYC, 2015). Play also increases concentration and attention, which ultimately supports cognitive development. Since play is their inherent nature, it provides stimulation to learn through play. During role-play, children invent scenarios and perform everyday roles that extend vocabulary through dialogues.

According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, play is essential for the development of young children's intelligence. Einstein said, "Play is the highest form of research." In this research, during an interview, four participants reported that play supports cognitive development and that they have high value for play but could not navigate or make connections. They also did not give examples as evidence to support this. Two participants were not able to understand the connection between play and cognitive development. My participants shared their experiences when asked to recall about children's play. Then they replied, "*We play during circle time passing balls; due to*

the pressure of reading and writing, there is no time for play; children play freely in the playground, not in class." When participants were asked about the benefits of play, they all stressed more about physical benefits than cognitive benefits. This data is very concerning since teachers lack the knowledge of play and its important role in cognitive development. In this context, how will they promote play in ECD centers? If they don't use play as an effective method to teach young children, then play will be missed. To promote play inside and outside the classroom, teachers should have better knowledge of the benefits of play and its relationship with holistic aspects of children's growth and development. Through play, children get opportunities to practice the skills that are learned in the classroom. Play helps to create new learning experiences. For example, block play facilitates deep learning when given time to develop because it helps children to think and make decisions about what to do next.

There is a significant body of research (Brown, 2009; Pellis et al., 2014) that indicates that when children are deprived of play, they face many challenges in life. If children do not play, they do not have opportunities to negotiate conflicts, explore materials, or use their bodies in fun ways. Without play, children do not develop extensive language skills or how to express themselves. Reflecting on my knowledge of the play, when we teach children using materials, they learn a wide range of skills and they seem more curious and eager to learn. At this age, if learning is more abstract without giving concrete, hands-on learning materials, it affects children's academic performance and curiosity for future learning because the absence of play negatively impacts executive functioning. For example, providing a child with three different colored apples, the word apple, and a picture of an apple matches the developmental needs and abilities of a learner, rather than a coloring sheet or abstractly talking about an apple. When children have opportunities to interact with the concept on a concrete level with objects, their brain is stimulated physically, through the senses, and cognitively, therefore storing the learning experience in long-term memory.

Play and Physical Development Theme

The theme, play was identified only through a physical dimension" is presented at first. Among six themes for play perception, this particular theme was consistently reported by all six participants each time when we discussed children's play. They all

expressed the importance, necessity, and understanding of the benefits of physical play more than other areas. Now, I am going to share those examples that participants reported to support their ideas, which makes it clear to navigate their perspective towards play.

The play of young children is crucial and vital for a child's growth as it provides multiple opportunities for young children to explore and develop in all developmental areas. This includes: a) social, b) emotional, c) cognitive, d) linguistic, and e) physical. Gessell (1924) concurs that play is the foremost component in children's lives to become creative and healthy adults. Researchers (Johnson, 2014, 2014; Pellegrini, 2003) revealed that there are many physical benefits when children engage in play, like jumping, skipping, hopping, running, climbing, and chasing. During the interview sessions, I provided extensive time for thinking, reflection, and answering. After these deep conversations with six different ECD teachers from four different schools, the data showed that teachers predominately believed that play perspectives were confined primarily to physical play. Whenever teachers had to recall their children's play experiences, they connected play with physical benefits and explained their own outdoor play activities. They were given ample opportunities to describe the play incidents, their play practices, and the benefits of play. There was a strong similarity in their answers regarding how they defined play. For example, they replied, "*Play helps to develop motor skills, the play makes children active, the play makes muscle strong, play helps to digest food, children will get better sleep, as refreshment, happiness, competition,*" etc. These specific aspects directly indicated the benefits of play through mastering physical coordination, muscle movement, and fine and gross motor skills.

Similarly, this theme conveys the play perception of teachers regarding their experiences with young children, which found much attention given to the physical need to play outdoors. During the rapport-building time, I inquired about the different types of materials they use and the games they conduct in school for students. They replied with blocks, swings, slides, ball games, dancing, rope jumping, making two different teams and having a competition between the two groups. Some of the participants immediately replied that they didn't have enough blocks to play or a playground with slides, swings and other play equipment. When I asked them about the benefits of block play, they replied, "*Blocks help in gross and fine motor development. It is very important to have in*

the classroom to engage children. They easily stay in one place and play". These responses were closer to traditional concepts when play was mostly related to physical development and those physical activities that supported the growth and refinement of gross and fine motor skills, as well as body awareness (Sutapa et al., 2021). If we restrict play only to physical development, then we miss the other aspects like language development, emotional development, social development, and cognitive development; based on the data from questions one, two, three, four, five and six, they all stressed on the values of physical development components of play. The above finding of restricting play to only physical development was consistently articulated by all participants.

Language Development and Play Theme

Play is one of the most important periods for language development in young children (NAEYC, 2022). At this age, they are extremely eager to learn language because they feel free during play time to communicate their thoughts and ideas. Traditionally, it was assumed that children develop language in school by reading and writing, but before reading and writing, they should know how to listen to stories, speak and sing rhymes. During play, they get opportunities to practice new words and phrases, which helps them improve their vocabulary and grammar. The interview data of this study showed that teachers are not very aware of the relationship between play and language development. Although they said they sing rhymes and songs and use flashcards as an activity in class, they cannot explain their eagerness and the development phase of learning rhymes. They related this activity by saying, "*Children become so happy to sing songs and rhymes," "Children learn easily through songs," and "frequently children request to do it again."* None of the teachers was able to navigate the ways of facilitating language through play. This indicates that they did not recognize the play as a valuable tool for language development.

According to Vygotsky (1978), the language learning process occurs as a result of giving and taking, just like playing with others and exchanging back and forth. For example, to play a ball, we need two people to catch and throw, and this exactly happens in conversation. Throughout the interview sessions, there were many occasions that compelled them to think about the connections between language development and play because they were also considered to be the major components of this study. To explore

the teacher's understanding of play and language development, survey questions two, three, four, five, and six were directly related to the language. Only one teacher shared about the circle time play activity, which made it easy to learn letters. None of the other teachers shared any kind of experiences about how particular plays, songs, or stories made children easy to learn. They were unable to give examples of their daily practices and how they use play as a tool to develop language. To communicate well, we must have some kind of representational thinking skills. For example, block play and pretend play are very important in children's early language development and language acquisition. It encourages language development because they communicate with peers about what they build and learn new words. Such play experience repeatedly makes strong connections in children's brains, and it becomes much easier to communicate well with others about that experience (Moore, 2023). Likewise, when children are playing with blocks, teachers can ask various questions to develop language. They can ask, what color you want to use next? For whom are you building this tower? How tall will this be? Let's count together. How many blocks are left now? Do you need any more? Such questions will stimulate children to reply and encourage longer conversation that develops vocabulary. Hence, through block play, children will feel a sense of achievement and confidence in interacting, which is essential for language acquisition (Pang & Simoncelli-Bulak, 2017).

Play and Social Benefits Theme

Play is an integral part of a child's life as it helps to construct an organized pattern of social actions. When children grow and develop, their play also matures (Piaget, 1962). Through play, children learn various social skills like communication, collaboration, negotiation, sharing, developing empathy, solving problems, listening, taking others' perspectives and many more (Ginsburg, 2007). Therefore, play serves as a context to engage children in groups that maximize all the benefits of social skills. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) also stated that "play, particularly complex dramatic or make-believe play, is a crucial vehicle allowing children to develop & practice self-regulation skills" (p. 200). When children socialize through play, they start learning about socially accepted values, rules and norms and make friends. It also develops affection towards another person because it is the natural medium of communicating, caring and compromising which is very important for building relationships. This particular theme

was identified when participants did not express their understanding or share any kind of experience of social skills that come through play. Participants in the study were asked many questions related to play and social development. They failed to describe their experiences that confirmed their viewpoint about the importance of the relationship between play and social development. Participants reported that too *many children spend time indoors on their mobile phones instead of physically playing outside.* They did not explain that it affects children's social skills. A play element also displaces the time and opportunity for the development of social skills. After careful review, the participants did not report a relationship between play and social skills.

Through dramatic and make-believe play, children learn to navigate social situations as they have to imagine that they are happening in real life (Vygotsky, 1978). Through imagination, they recall and copy their everyday life and it ultimately develops their strategies to cope with different situations. For example, block helps to make new friends, negotiate with each other, wait for their turn and help to resolve conflicts. It challenges children to see the world from different perspectives, which enhances tolerance and openness. Based on the interview data, four participants reported the benefits of social skills from play, but they gave examples like "*Play makes them refresh and able to listen them well in class" "recognize friends' names."* They couldn't easily give examples about the social development of play, and this indicated less awareness of play and learning social skills.

Emotional Development and Play Theme

Emotional skills are learned behavior, and educators play an important role in facilitating children's development (Karthikeyan, 2015). Various emotional skills like understanding others, managing anger, handling impulses and expressing emotions by building self-awareness, staying motivated, the ability to make friends and confidence to face the difficult situations are developed through play. According to UNICEF (2018) through play children are able to express their feelings because it encourages them to work in a team and children are able to understand their own feelings as well as others. For example, block play helps to develop self-esteem, increase attention span and increase problem-solving abilities. It provides a natural context to deal with different types of emotions they are struggling with. It gives happiness as well as a sense of

achievement when they are able to function in complex play and learn those emotional skills necessary in life to become successful adults later.

This particular theme was identified when participants did not express their understanding of emotional development from play experiences. One of my participants said, *"Play gives inner happiness."* I immediately asked to describe how, and then she replied that it was because of the whole-body movements. Other participants also shared that *"children are happier in playtime than studying,"* and I requested to describe more, then she replied that it's their age to play, not to read and write. Likewise, another participant also expressed that "*children who have problems at home remain unhappy in school,"* but none of them can explain the emotional development and children's play. Throughout the interview, they expressed very little emotional aspects. I found this theme very concerning because emotional development is not reported while related to play. As an early childhood educator, it is essential to value the emotions of children to boost their self-esteem and make them confident. If play is not identified as a valuable tool to develop emotion, then how can children express their feelings? Research has shown that play can reduce prolonged exposure to stress in children, so it is very important to engage children in play activities (UNICEF, 2018). Play also helps children deal with stress that arises from traumatic events and recover from tough situations. It develops a sense of agency in children and enables them to recognize their interests.

Safety and Hazards in Play Theme

In the play, children take risks physically and psychologically because it allows opportunities to extend their limits (Harvard, 2016). Understanding risks and hazards in play is very important to create a safe and stimulating environment for children to play and learn safety skills. If we are able to identify the healthy risk behavior of children and the hazards for play, then we can prepare a better play environment for children. Removing hazards by careful observation before allowing children to play is very important to save them from accidents. Most of the teachers are very scared of accidents, so it's difficult to organize many games. The interview data reported that many accidents happened during free play time due to teachers' negligence or lack of understanding since they did not plan for play. They were not able to identify the hazards of the classroom and did not remove those potential hazards before allowing children to play.

It is essential for educators to understand the manageable risks associated with different types of play because it helps to engage children in those activities that are appropriate for their developmental needs (Canadian Public Health Association, 2019)). However, my participants in this study were not able to identify the risks and hazards of play, so I found this theme very important to discuss. My participants shared, "*Due to the fear of accidents, we remain indoors.*" when children are not given play opportunities, how will they explore their capabilities? Generally, in our context, parents give high priority to safety rather than promoting children's play, which stops educators from organizing high-risk games like the long jump, hanging climbing, etc. Participants reported that *"Parents want their children to study more than play to avoid accidents.* This is a very concerning issue as it stops children from learning risk factors. Even while playing with blocks in class, we can notice that many children destroy what others make. Such behaviors are very hurtful, and the conflict mostly starts from this point of play when one child disrespects another child's play. Therefore, teachers have to teach their students safety rules of play and ways to resolve conflicts rather than avoiding play. Experiencing and navigating risk teaches children about cause and effect, the consequences of actions and how to make the right decisions regarding safety (Canadian Public Health Association, 2019). Only through risk in play do children learn to explore their environment and their strengths, so there lies a collective responsibility among adults to make a safe play space for children to teach various safety skills during play.

Summary of the Themes

All of the established themes that resulted from the interview data demonstrated very clear and concerning perceptions about the importance of play in early education. Each theme presented the importance of play and its connections with the different developmental domains. Each narrative was carefully analyzed and recorded in a table format with complete notes supporting the perspectives. The in-depth interview data clearly established consistency and strength in the themes identified, and they provided a clear picture of the status of play in ECD centers. These themes reflect the critical importance of training teachers to empower them in learning about the importance of play and how to effectively implement a play-based learning curriculum. In the following

section, I will address issues of process, reflect, and discuss perceptions about play in this study.

Critical Discussion on Teacher Perceptions About Play

During the interview, teachers frequently shared their problems and dissatisfactions with the school management committee. They always feel neglected and disrespected compared to primary and secondary-level teachers. When did I ask them in an informal conversation about how familiar they are with the new ECD curriculum? Four teachers replied, "*No one told us about the new ECD curriculum, no one gave us any documents, where can we find these? We just follow what is there in the books"*. One teacher went towards the classroom cupboard and showed me the books that they were using, which were pre-reading and writing books. The next day, when there was another meeting scheduled with another participant, I took my laptop, where I had already downloaded the ECD curriculum and showed her. She replied that if I had known about this new curriculum, it would have been *much easier to follow. Can you please tell our principal to provide this?* Likewise, I communicated with all the participants and put forward this question before I started the interview.

I was surprised that they never knew about the new ECD curriculum that focuses on play activities., How would they know about play pedagogy and plan play-based learning activities as suggested in the curriculum? All they do is follow the traditional method, such as preschool books that include recognizing letters and learning how to write letters and numbers. The remaining two teachers who replied that they were trained and familiar with the play way method also couldn't properly explain why it is important to do those suggested activities and how they support learning. Rather, they replied, "*We play many games after completing the writing task. I also join them in play and ask many questions about what they are making. I give them materials like blocks, threading and beading and puzzles"*. They understood play as fun activities necessary for that age group but perceived play and learning as two different things. I was totally surprised to see such oppressed teachers who were seeking help from me to raise their voices to the school committee. Now I understand the reason why they have so much dissatisfaction because they were tired of asking for support and help but never received this support. Consistently asking for help is very disempowering to teachers, and it was unclear if the

administration was responsive or helpful. The lack of optimism showed me a valid reason to speak for them. It was important to identify ways to empower them through this study's demand for developing better policies to address this serious problem. Also, training and education need to be accountable in follow-up so that teachers have indeed learned the concepts, practices, and theory during training. Clearly, even with education or training, teachers still require feedback since curriculums change and pedagogical advances are constant. Therefore, their responses and frustration informed me of the important need for support, mentoring, current curriculums, and feedback from the administration.

They told me in a heavy-hearted tone, *"Sometimes we don't feel like teachers but just a caretaker (Aaya Didi- Nepali word) babysitter to help children in feeding, napping and toileting only.* Such emotions affect so much to stay motivated to do best in their job. As a researcher, I find it clear that empowered, satisfied teachers are open and receptive to integrating play into the classroom. ECD teachers are not just babysitters; they are knowledgeable people to foster child development and well-being. Hence, ECD teachers should be familiarized with when change is made in the curriculum as they have huge responsibilities to implement.

Therefore, I will discuss the key themes that have emerged from Teacher Perception Survey items 1-6. First, it is clear that the participants were not able to define or describe what is meant by children's play. They loosely referred to laughter and physical activity but didn't seem to be able, after much encouragement and probing, to describe play in a definition that is related to any area of development. I asked this question a number of ways to learn if they could define children's play since they were teachers of young children. To plan play activities, it is very important for teachers to understand the definition of play first. If they cannot define play, how will they understand the ECD curriculum that emphasizes play as the process of learning? Play was associated with the happiness of children, but through happiness, there comes interest and motivation to learn. This deep level of understanding between children and play will inspire teachers to think in different ways and how to teach young children. Thus, I can now claim that in their definition of play, the five elements agreed upon by all play researchers, as mentioned above, were missing, and my participants need more

understanding of play to associate with learning. Play is the basic right of every child and it should be protected. When teachers who work with young children misunderstand play, how can we assume that children are encouraged to play in ECD centers? Play is acknowledged as a developmentally appropriate practice by NAEYC and all other researchers in early childhood education; therefore, play pedagogy is adopted in every country's early childhood curriculum. However, the findings of this study revealed that play is slowly disappearing from school and home. Neither teachers nor parents seem aware of this, as both lack an understanding of play and its holistic benefits in children's learning. Hence, serious attention must be paid to educating all those concerned people who directly and indirectly work with children.

Second, cognitive development was clearly identified as a valuable benefit and essential element of play by researchers (Piaget, 1963; Rubin, 1983; Brown, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978), yet only four participants believed that cognitive development was related to play or the benefits of play. The other two participants were complaining about the learning materials and space to conduct play activities. Even if they understand the cognitive benefits of play, if they don't have play space and resources, how will they integrate play and learning? Even the classroom environment didn't reflect their understanding of the cognitive development of play. There were very few play items like plastic blocks, storybooks, puzzles, slides, plastic rockers, free play items, and small balls in baskets. I didn't find any play items that support language learning or mathematical skills, and those materials were kept either inside the box or above the cupboards, which were not easily reachable for children to play with. Since play has been recognized as valuable for children's learning and development in international practices (Frost et al., 2012), the findings of this study are very concerning. I didn't find any participants who strongly confirmed the relationship between play and cognitive development. From the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1962), dramatic play and pretend play increase cognitive abilities in children (Ginsburg, 2007). Neither my participants talked about any dramatic or pretend play areas, nor did I see such areas in the classroom environment that provide evidence of my participants' deep knowledge of play and cognitive development.

Third, the social skill development theme was certainly surprising since much of the ECED program is about developing social skills, yet the teachers did not identify

social skill development as an element of play or a benefit from play. Bandura (1971) stated play is a tool of socialization, but only three participants believed that play supports social development, and the other three didn't believe it. When teachers don't believe in it, how will they feel it is important to organize social plays? They try to accept the social benefits of play but do not understand the functions. From Vygotsky's contextual theory, we understand that the development of a child is heavily influenced by the child's socio-cultural context. For example, a child working alone and a child who is allowed to play with other children or given little amount of support from an adult can reach a higher level of learning than an alone working child. Therefore, social context can provide opportunities to develop many skills like vocabulary, negotiation, collaboration, and solving problems, and it ultimately supports reaching students' true potential for academic learning (Wood & Attfield, 2005). By observing the classroom scenario, I didn't see children allowed to choose their play items, and there wasn't any adult support even in the playground while they were playing. This is an important finding since observation provides children guidance and prevents future accidents. Teachers were seen as passive observers to avoid accidents. I saw most of the time, children remained seated alone in their respective places and had no movement for social interactions and play. Based on all the evidence, I can confirm that teachers have less knowledge about the social benefits of play.

Third, emotional development, as identified by (Erkison, 1963), clearly has documented how important emotions are during play, and others like Vygotsky found similar findings on the importance of emotional development. Similarly, teachers did not identify emotional development as part of play. When children are not allowed to express their emotions, it later develops into frustrations (Brown, 2009). This is concerning because when children are discouraged from playing, they might develop negative feelings like anger, loss of self-control, and fear, leading to poor resilience (Fasikhah & Fatiyyah, 2019). It was midday when I reached one of the ECD centers to observe. There, I saw children watching English rhymes on television. The teacher was at her table checking the workbook and telling them to sit quietly and watch the song, but some students were jumping and trying to model the dance. I observed that they were expressing their emotions, but the teacher was reminding the child to sit down. There was

no interaction between the teacher and the child. If she was familiar with the emotional development of children, then she would have joined them in expressing their emotions. She would have let them model the dance with their peer group. She would have developed a supportive environment to release their emotions. I sat quietly and observed the reactions of the children who were just waiting for the moment to follow the dance. Coincidently, at that time, someone came to call the teacher, and she went out of the class to inform me. Then, everyone suddenly started dancing. I can see how desperately they were waiting to express their happiness. Then, I realized that there is a lack of strong emotional connection between teachers and students since the actions and reactions of teachers have a huge impact on children's behavior.

Generally, emotional development at an early age is closely related to the joy that children experience through play. Working closely with children, I have noticed their various emotions in different situations, like they feel extreme happiness when successful, sad when unable to accomplish and excitement while waiting for their turn, and also negative feelings like jealousy, frustrated, annoyed, bored, embarrassed when they don't get enough attention or feel unheard and also when unsuccessful in attempts.

One of my participants recalled and shared that "*there was a girl in my class who refused to do anything, even she refused to participate in play, and then I asked her, she replied that her father always beats her mother at night.*" Children who witness violence at home get emotionally disturbed. I also have noticed such frustration in my students who experienced domestic violence, and they display strange behaviors at school. They remain passive, show less curiosity about doing activities, and are anxious most of the time while communicating. Sometimes, it's really challenging for teachers to deal with such different emotions. Play gives them enough space to deal with those emotions that they are struggling with (UNICEF, 2023), as play promotes children's capacity to feel a wide range of emotions. It is very important for teachers to understand that play is essential for children because the primary function of play is to foster emotional development (MacMahon,1992). Vygotsky (1978) also discussed that play helps children self-regulate their behaviors and emotions because they get opportunities to recreate the events and emotions. Teachers should try to understand their emotional needs and respond according to the situation. I didn't find my participant's emotional sensitivity

towards the development of their students' emotional aspects. While observing their practice and the way they expressed themselves during the interview, I found very few examples and experiences they shared about their students' emotional state. They were not able to relate play with emotional development. Even three participants expressed, "*Play gives inner happiness to children, more than reading writing. I see them happy in the playground. I can see them happy when we start music and movement time*". Without a proper understanding of the relationship between play and emotional development, teachers are not able to help children gain emotional skills, which is essential at this age.

Fourth, physical play is quite an obvious traditional element of play. Based on the results of the research, teachers associated play with physical fitness (Pelligrini, 2011). When play is perceived as a vehicle for physical development, other dimensions of play are neglected. This perception will lead to the understanding of play and learning as separate entities. When teachers view play through a single dimension, then play cannot be accepted as a learning tool. To understand play pedagogy and follow the play curriculum, this perception needs to be very clear. Piaget has emphasized that only when motor skills are developed will cognitive functions improve. This is the reason why therapists also use games to teach special needs children because play strengthens their senses (Yogman et al., 2018) and promotes cognitive development. This general concept about plays mostly associated with physical play is also an important factor that holds back ECD teachers from thinking play happens only outside of the classroom. They can never find ways to develop play inside the classroom.

I agreed with all my participants when they said, "*Our classrooms are not appropriate for playing inside due to limited space and high teacher-student ratio. We don't have enough play equipment,*". I also disagreed with them when they explained that "*due to our daily routine and limited time to complete the written work, we cannot conduct play.*" These reasons indicate that the perception of play is limited to physical play, as these teachers cannot understand that learning is all about cognitive development. Writing in a copy or book is not the only way to help children recognize letters or numbers. The same activity can be organized through play activities. If they learn through play, they will have a better understanding because while playing, they are intrinsically motivated and ready to repeat the same action many times (Rubin, 1983). This motivation

will bring joy to the overall learning process. Through play, the child is encouraged to take on bigger challenges. At this age, body in motion is the main factor in developing motor skills, not doing written work in a formal setting. More opportunities for body movement will give more confidence and independence (Nur et al., 2017, as cited by Sari & Izzah, 2021) because motions are the main stimulating factor of motor development (Sari & Izzah, 2021). The activities suggested in the ECD curriculum, like jumping one foot and two feet, hopping, crawling, throwing, and catching, have major objectives to support children in gaining better gross and fine motor skills before starting to write and read.

Play encourages children to engage in a lifelong learning process (Parten, 1932; Rubin, 1985; Smilansky, 1990). Therefore, the goal of play pedagogy is to help children enjoy play and promote learning. While playing, children develop motor skills and together, they will also learn about other skills like social skills, language and emotional skills, safety skills and concentration. For example, when children play with mud and sand, their muscles become strong, they gain better eye-hand coordination and problem-solving skills, and they learn language by communicating with others. Even a simple throw-and-catch ball game for young children will stimulate nerves and improve coordination (Sari & Izzah, 2021). I have also experienced this with my own students during throw-and-catch ball games. They try their best to catch the ball and target to throw. We can notice their deep concentration not only in their turn but also while watching others. These multi-sensory experiences enhance more complex physical development necessary for cognitive development. If the child lacks opportunities to actively learn and have the freedom to move or play, then they will have delays in physical development, which ultimately affects the whole learning process. Clearly, if we provide children opportunities to manipulate objects, move around the room, interact with peers, and investigate, they have opportunities to develop and grow in positive ways.

Based on the results of the study on the relationship between play and language development, I found that my five participants didn't mention language development. Only one participant explained how she encourages students to speak during circle time, passing on objects turn by turn and who has objects has to speak. According to play researchers' the development of language exists everywhere in play (Vygotsky, 1978). It

may be gestures, actions, written symbols and communications. They all support language development. Usually, I have noticed children talking to themselves in free play or doing any kind of activity. Sometimes, they sing songs or make noises on their own. While playing in groups, they talk more to allow the play to continue. Through play, they make friends and they get opportunities to share their knowledge and experiences. When play is lacking in ECD centers, children fall behind in language learning. I still remember when I was a little girl, we used to make lots of planning while playing hide and seek games. I still can feel the excitement of the game now when I try to recall. Therefore, in play, children are encouraged to share ideas, collaborate in a team and make plans through extended communications (Tamis-Le Monda, 2019. Young children always articulate words before learning sounds. So, communication is more important than learning letters and sounds at this age. According to Vygotsky (1978), children's stories are always centered around their cultural context and experiences. The more play opportunities children have, the more they can learn language efficiently. For example, if they hear a favorite story each time, the teacher can plan a different play activity for each reading. Therefore, the children are repeatedly hearing complex language but have opportunities to dramatize the story, create art from the story, physically dance to the story, and create their own stories. This iteration is part of the complex definition of play and is especially valuable to the multilinguistic children of Nepal.

Finally, a number of participants made a profound discovery on safety. This area is critical, given the safety of young children in early childhood centers. Clearly, the issue of safety is related to other areas of concern. First, if the teachers engaged in preplanning and examined for potential dangers in their play/learning environment, they would be proactive about possible accidents. Second, if the teachers engaged in daily observation of children's play, they would see the value of children's choices, individual differences, possible opportunities for learning, and potential hazards in play.

Learning safety skills equips children with the knowledge and skills required for every step of life. Teaching children about safety skills is equally important as other basic skills. It is very important to teach children about their body coordination and to calculate the amount of risk. Play creates opportunities for navigating risk in their environment (citation) and taking acceptable challenges. During play, teachers can teach children how

to use play equipment safely and follow safety instructions to avoid accidents. In this study, participants reported some life-threatening accidents that were caused by environmental hazards. My participant shared her unforgettable incidents at the ECD center when she was very new to the job. She expressed, "A *long time ago, when I was a very new and naïve teacher working in a center with very low resources in the village where there was a scarcity of water, I used to fill the drinking water in a jar and also, I had to cook food for children with kerosene oil. Due to the same kind of jars used to store water and kerosene oil, one day, my student drank kerosene while trying to drink water. Luckily, I was able to save his life by providing instant first aid from a nearby health care center, but this incident always makes me feel guilty".* I was shocked to hear about this incident and how much carefulness this profession demands. Even a small hazard can take away a child's life. Therefore, learning about safety, teaching safety skills, and identifying the potential hazards in the play area and safety in the play process itself is very important for ECD teachers to know and teach their students.

Generally, based on the result of this research, ECD teachers avoid play due to the fear of accidents, which is shared by all my participants in one way or another. When I asked them if they allowed children to play, Some of them straightly expressed, *"My parents give me instruction to not let children jump and move around freely. There might be accidents. I alone have to handle large groups, so I am compelled to keep them inside the class for safety".* The way they expressed it made me realize that play is also associated with fear of accidents or escaping from accidents. Even I have observed many adults usually reminding small children all the time by saying, "You might fall down," rather than modeling through actions and body language how to follow safety rules before play. To empower children to play, safety skills are necessary to learn rather than instilling fear in small children. Through role plays, songs, praise while following the rules, and modeling while giving instructions, teachers can help children develop safety skills.

In my observation, I noticed lots of hazards in the school environment inside and outside the classroom that need to be addressed urgently to make ECD centers safe for play. I am going to share some of the potential hazards. For example, electrical cords, toxic materials, plastics, choking hazards, unanchored furniture, etc. It is critical to plan

properly and to ensure that the environment has proper cleanliness, non-reachable electric outlets, and spaces that are developmentally safe. Finally, it is important for a positive environment to have materials maintained.

With respect and gratitude to the candor of the participants, it is important to note that quality play curriculums are not available in their regions, nor are intentional education courses or training that would benefit the participants. Also, teachers need continuous support and access to the value of play being integrated into academic learning. Certainly, when educational opportunities do not exist, educational practices suffer or do not exist. Without the proper knowledge of play and its benefits in the growth and development of young children, educators cannot improve the quality of their own education. I also found through the participant voices that when training was provided, there was little or no follow-up to ensure comprehension of the training. I found play suffering in ECD centers due to the clear and recognizable outcomes. To make the foundation stage strong, providing the right approach to teaching play pedagogy is one of the effective methods recommended by various researchers in early childhood development. Implications of these significant discussions will be carefully presented in chapter seven.

CHAPTER VI

TEACHERS PRACTICES OF PLAY

This chapter presents two different themes that briefly discuss the teachers'
practices of play by understanding the teaching strategies of the participants. The two
themes that emerged from the teaching strategies of the participants were identified
through the teacher play interview. Specifically, questions were asked about their
planning, observation, and documentation strategies, as well as the leadership role that
was needed. The themes included are 1) Planning for Play and 2) Play Observation and
Documentation. In addition to the in-depth interview, I observed each teacher for a total
of 2 hours and documented their teaching behaviors through anecdotal records and a
running narrative. I will describe the observation notes of the teachers in the following
domains: 1) cognitive, 2) language, 3) emotional, 4) social, and 5) physical.

Planning and Play Theme

Planning in play is highly important while working with young children. Planning
helps to keep the play environment safe, anticipating to avoid potential risks and hazards.
It helps to maintain balanced activities between all areas of learning. It ensures that
educational goals are met (Sabin, 2022) by making play-based learning fun and
enriching. Structured play can help children to understand lessons more effectively. For
example, organizing math language play activities will help them to have a better
understanding of number concepts and vocabulary building to arouse further interest in
that area. In terms of intentional teaching, it is very important to plan to really know the
children we are working with. Planning play will also help children to learn about time
management and follow routines. Consistency in playtime allows children to learn a
sense of stability and predictability.

This theme is important as none of the participants reported that they conducted
play activities according to the schedule and routine. I didn't find any play planning
documents or logbooks that identified the regular playtime of children to support
different learning areas. It is a very concerning matter in early childhood education. From
the statement of five teachers, *"No planning for play activities regularly, but there is*

planning for reading and writing time." One of my participants said, *"I don't write about planning, but I have it in my mind."* This statement does not provide evidence that play is in the regular routine. This indicates that in ECD centers, play is not taken as a method of teaching for young children. When we plan for play, we see them, but if we don't plan, then we don't see. If we ignore planning, then play does not happen. Planning is incredibly important for implementing play pedagogies because planning makes it intentional and thoughtful for better learning outcomes. Play is the work of children (Piaget, 1962), but if play is ignored in ECD centers, how will children get enough stimulation to enjoy the learning process? Playtime is not just for recreation but should be purposefully planned to promote children's development in balanced and beneficial play to support learning.

<div align="center">**Play Observation and Documentation Theme**</div>

Documentation is a methodological process that involves an act of collecting, interpreting, and reflecting on the concrete evidence of learning (Wakeham & Gulsvig, 2022). It includes the children's work samples as they engage in play and learning activities. While documenting play, the rich, detailed explanation of what children are doing from moment to moment is recorded. It is very important for teachers to identify their students' potential, which is enhanced through play. Documentation requires very careful observation as it helps teachers with planning and assessment. Therefore, observation is crucial in recording or documenting play for many significant reasons. Observing play will help teachers to understand the developmental progress of their children. Through careful observation, we can get valuable information regarding their emotional, cognitive, language, social and physical development. Their choice of play materials will help to identify their interest and strengths and accordingly, we can support them. It will be easy for teachers to assess the child's skills and abilities in various domains. It supports planning for a need-based curriculum because, at this age, children have their own developmental needs. To become intentional in teaching, it is very important to use formal documentation due to the necessity of the evidence that children already know and are ready to go to the next level. Documentation helps children to push forward to another level rather than simply waiting for what will emerge next for them. It meant high expectations of knowing children and pushing forward with new concepts.

Despite the many benefits of observation of children's play, my participants in this study did not admit that they observed children while playing. Rather, everyone reported that they observed them for safety reasons to avoid accidents while playing. As an educator and early childhood leader, I believe that the safety of children is critical, but it requires systemic observation and planning to provide a safe and productive learning environment. Every child is unique, and observation helps in recognizing their developmental level and carefully planning what each child needs in the learning environment.

For example, if teachers observe and are fully engaged in children's block play time, then it will be easy for her to identify their interests, developmental levels and needs. Also, through playful questions, the teacher could identify and learn how the child is processing information. Similarly, it is very important to record or document play because it offers deep insights into children's development, informs educational practices, supports individualized learning, and facilitates effective communication with families. Planning for play also guides the teacher in preparing a safe and intentional learning play environment where learning is maximized and hazards are minimized.

Critical Discussion on Practices

From the results of this study, it was very clear that teachers are not planning for play, but from observation, I found that children have free playtime during recess and after completing classwork. Teachers were not observing or documenting at play, and due to this, they failed to document the growth and change in learning and development of their students. How can they plan if they do not observe children during play? Planning needs very careful observation (NAEYC, 2022) to extend their learning and to plan for the next level of play environment. All my participants honestly mentioned that they don't keep records of play and learning activities. This means that in ECD centers, play pedagogy was not practiced, and teachers still followed the traditional way of teaching. To promote effective learning in early childhood programs, play should be valued in school because teachers need the support of the entire school family to conduct play. Play establishes the groundwork for learning (Mraz et al., 2016) in early childhood programs. Teachers need play materials and enough space to organize play and this involves very careful planning. Teachers need training to integrate play and learning, as well as follow-

up support training. This happens only when principals, educators, school management committees, and parents collaborate and critically reflect upon the current teaching practices.

Planning involves many decisions that teachers have to make daily to address the responses and interests of children. Planning sets the environment to maximize the learning opportunities for children. According to Australian Government development education, the four key aspects of the Early Learning Years Framework (ELYF) planning cycle include the following: 1) Observe, 2) Analyze, 3) Planning, 4) Implement and finally, evaluate the effectiveness of the planning (Australian Government Development Education, 2022). Here, planning has been defined as the intentional plan of teachers to create both indoor and outdoor play activities to support learning after observing children when engaged in play activities. Without planning, observation and documentation means moving ahead without a map. One does not know where to go and why to go. It's a kind of confusing state. Participants admitted that they need guidance from school leaders to bring changes in teaching practices. When there is no mentor and guidance, teachers are confused and lack competency in their profession. They will not have the required language for analysis. Among the major competencies needed to become an early childhood teacher are observation skills and documentation skills, which are highly valued (NAEYC, 2020). Young children learn best at appropriate ages and stages of the development program, so to determine their development level, careful observation is needed during playtime. For example, in play, the way children select play materials the way they engage in play and use the resources will help teachers to identify their development level and interest. Only through careful observation and documentation is it possible to plan appropriate activities for children. Since learning is supported through play, teachers need to plan intentional play to adjust individual differences and promote learning through play. Since block play covers all areas of development, teachers can observe children during block play so that they can understand individual children. Teachers will know what children can do alone, when to intervene and what they can do with little help.

Similarly, from my participants' sharing, I came to know that ECD teachers are not involved in the annual school planning and are not informed about the new practices

and changes. They are given fewer opportunities to participate in the training than primary and secondary-level teachers. I have already mentioned the training of teachers in the table previously. They are unheard of and not involved in decision-making. It looks like they are cornered and left alone to do their work with very little support from the administration and educators. All participants constantly expressed dissatisfaction during the interview. In this context, the teachers will not be highly motivated to do their job, and it affects the whole teaching practice. Everyone needs respect and equal treatment, whether they are teachers from higher grades or they are from ECD. To bring change in entire teaching practices, the main starting point is from early childhood education.

There are various factors that I noticed through interviews, observation and being an early childhood educator that hold us back from practicing play pedagogy in ECD centers are lack of understanding and guidance to implement play pedagogy, play spaces, both outdoor and indoor and safe play items. However, among them, the most important factor is the definition of play. For example, during observation, I heard teachers saying, "*We came to school to learn not to run here and there; go back to your chair and finish it. I will let you play after this. You are not allowed to go home until you complete this; where are your copies and books? Why did you come to school without books and copies?*" I also observed teachers frequently reminding children to play as a reward and expecting children to be seated most of the time or remain silent. They are differentiating between play and learning, not accepting the fact that play itself is a learning process (Piaget, 1962). They were allowed to express their beliefs about the play during educational lessons. They replied, "*Yes, but we need guidance, learning materials and two teachers in each class, one teacher for writing work and another for play activities*". These responses argue for training that is coupled with time for practice and integration of information. These views made it clearer that play and learning were perceived separately. Finally, the study explored the ECD teachers' perceptions that play is not learning and that learning must happen in a formal setting, which was totally opposite to what was mentioned by the play researchers. To accept play and bring change in existing practice, we should change these perceptions.

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CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION, LIMITATION, IMPLICATION AND REFLECTION

This chapter presents the conclusion, limitations, implications and reflection of the researcher. I have explained this study's focal area. Since I am always in search of improving the quality of early childhood programs, I want to learn more about children's play and its connection with all development domains. From the beginning of my teaching career, I have always been in search of the best approach to teach young children. I found playing the method mentioned by many theorists, researchers, and national and international educationists to be a good method. My role as facilitating many ECD teachers encouraged me to explore the play perceptions and practices of other teachers to understand the realities of play pedagogy, which is also a new concept in the education system of Nepal. Hence, I revealed the underlying realities of ECD teachers' perceptions and practices in play pedagogy.

Conclusion

This study emphasized play pedagogy in ECD centers. In this study, ECD teachers' play perceptions and practices were explored using qualitative methods. The finding shows that teachers understand play and learning as two different things; hence, they cannot integrate play and learning. I observed that children are in the same formal setting for long hours inside the classroom. It might be good for elementary-level students to stay focused and concentrate for long hours to complete the assigned task, but it is not appropriate for those in their early childhood. Generally speaking, formal settings were taught and designed for the elementary-level age group. If we try to understand the main objectives of early childhood development education, it is all about learning gross motor skills, fine motor skills, languages, personal independence, and social skills that cannot be learned in formal settings and formal ways of learning. Play supports children's overall development domains (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Therefore, play helps to achieve all the above-mentioned indicators. ECD centers need an environment that allows them more free space to move around to play because play is their inherent character, and they have a different way of learning from adults.

This research study was guided by two research questions. How do teachers perceive play pedagogy in ECED centers? How do teachers practice play pedagogy in their schools? The first research question was about the understanding of the perceptions of ECD teachers and six guiding questions were prepared to explore the perceptions; five questions were about the practices, and the last question was about the advocacy to address the problems of play-based learning opportunities for teachers and children. Here, the researcher used the five elements of play to build perceptions and understand the participants' responses. They are 1) intrinsically driven, 2) freely selected, 3) pleasurable, 4) nonliteral and 5) active engagement. The finding revealed that teachers lack the holistic aspects of play. They viewed play and learning as two different things. Play pedagogy is not in practice due to the various reasons mentioned above, but perception was found to be a major factor in not being able to integrate play and learning.

Researchers found it essential to conduct advocacy in this area as children were missing play opportunities in ECD centers. Play deprivation seriously impacts children's brain development (Hughes, 2003) because children lack opportunities to play; 90% of the time is planned to engage children in reading and writing. I noticed that the children were not physically active because the teachers wanted them to be passively seated. As play drives the development of young children, it is considered the central focus of the ECD curriculum. Without play, children miss interactions to develop the necessary social and language skills. For example, mobile displaced the time to play and watch Television. Likewise, work and academics also displace time for children's play. It is critical for educators to understand the value of high-quality materials in play and results showed that teachers frequently reported that block play was enjoyed by their children. However, it was unclear whether they understood the value and numerous benefits of block play. For example, blocks for young children are a very divergent material that allows for extensive benefits. For example, blocks contribute to cognitive development through various problem-solving, etc. Similarly, blocks foster opportunities for language interaction, social sharing and negotiation (Block Play: Case Study, n.d.). Physically, we know that children use their small and large motor skills depending on the material to interact with blocks. Finally, children learn many safety skills through teacher leadership

by using and manipulating blocks. Clearly, using the knowledge of the participants and fostering a block play workshop would enhance and build on their previous knowledge.

Through this research, I discovered that play was suffering in ECD centers because of the limited knowledge of teachers regarding play and its relationship with child development. It is taken as a reward for children's good behavior or successfully completing certain tasks. Everyone agreed that play was thought of as something that children desire. The deeper question for teachers to explore is why is it that children learn so effectively through play and to honor that in the classroom. Would these results be different if they received the training on play and received the support to integrate it during the training or education classes? Would they understand the holistic benefits of play if they had access to play coursework with high-quality or teacher-made materials? If participants were trained enough to understand the value of play, would they feel competent enough to implement a play-based curriculum? Would they have expressed high motivation to practice play pedagogy as an effective way to teach young children? Would they have more play experiences to share rather than complaints?

Play resembles children's growing personalities. It is an integral part of development at a young age. There are various positive benefits of play, and extensive research has shown that children develop their capacities for creativity and problem-solving. We also understand that children use logic, social knowledge, and communication during play. Finally, play benefits include how a child self-regulates and utilizes their cognitive processing and social development during play. The environment in which play occurs is equally important. It must be resourceful and spacious to stimulate children to play. Implementing play pedagogy requires a change in the perception of play by teachers, educators, parents, school management committees, and educational leaders to take play as a tool for intrinsically motivating and offering deeper learning. It is enjoyable and eagerly pursued by children rather than taking it as a boring task. It also demands a change in the school setting and classroom environment to change the traditional practices into a play-based learning environment.

Limitations & Gaps in the Research

This qualitative play study was conducted in a specific geographic area in Nepal with a small number of teachers. The researcher recognizes that the sampling was

limited, but the study opens the door and gives voices to teachers who lack an understanding of play pedagogy. They are searching for appropriate training to bring changes to the existing practices. The interviews allowed in-depth conversations in their work environment in which the teachers were allowed to share their personal experiences and stories to explore their perceptions and practices. The researcher reflected upon her education, personal beliefs, and her biases about early childhood education. Based on these reflections, she engaged in critical reflection about play as a developmentally appropriate practice. The study, as well as the research questions, were designed around the researcher's critical analysis of the play theories and literature. The probing interview questions were developed and designed based on the researcher's knowledge and consultation with an ECD expert professor who has a deeper understanding of play and developmentally appropriate practices of early childhood education. All efforts were made to encourage the participants to feel comfortable in sharing their stories. The researcher believes that her role as an early childhood educator and understanding the scenario made her become more critical in raising the voices of children and teachers. She planned to make efforts to bring changes in the existing situations through collaboration with early childhood educational leaders and advocacy.

Implications

This study explored ECD teachers' perceptions and practices for play pedagogy. Certainly, the results have implications for teaching practices and education policies. Play-based learning has been recognized as the most effective method for teaching young children by many researchers and educators. The following section will address implications in two major areas. First, implications for educators will be described. Second, the results of education policy will be detailed.

The new early childhood development education curriculum of Nepal also aligned with the play and learning approach, but the findings of the study showcased various problems in the efficacy of teachers actually using their training and implementing play activities. Now, I would like to highlight some key implications based on the findings of this study for developing ECD programs. The important implications of this study in five categories are listed as: 1) Practitioners, 2) Educational leaders as Practitioners, 3) Parents as Practitioners, 4) Implication for Policymakers and Higher Education Policy

Makers and 5) Future direction for researchers. The identified major areas are how we all can work together to implement play pedagogy to raise the quality of the entire education system, which starts from the foundation period.

Practitioners

Many teachers are oppressed educators who lack access to educational strategies and research. This study encouraged ECD teachers to support children in making learning effective by planning play activities and providing play opportunities through continuous modeling play. It further emphasized that teachers should reflect upon their teaching practices and raise their voices to demand the play items inside and outside the ECD classrooms for teaching and learning. This is achieved by learning about the new ECD curriculum and observing children while playing. There are many social media platforms that portray playing and learning models, so frequent visits to those sites will also support planning play activities.

Similarly, the study identified the cultural concepts of play as related to physical health, so there is an urgent need to broaden the concept into holistic relationships for the overall development of children. It also points out a safe environment for play to avoid life-threatening damage. Play materials and the environment need to be divergently considered. For example, selecting materials that have numerous learning outcomes is highly recommended. In previous sections, I have mentioned block play as highly divergent because it fosters language, motor, social, and emotional aspects of children.

Educational Leaders as Practitioners

This research has implications for educational leaders who play a very important role in guiding and supporting teachers to learn and update about recent practices and research. It is their responsibility to engage teachers in a continuous learning process by providing various opportunities to become familiar with these new teaching strategies. It is their role to build better relationships between parents and teachers by conducting parent education programs. They are like bridges and change-makers to identify the needs of children and parents and empower teachers to identify their parents. A significant implication from this study showed that educational leaders and policymakers need to rethink how they design training so teachers have opportunities to learn and put into practice what they learn during the training. When teachers identify their parents, then it

will be easy for them to collaborate and make them accountable for their children's learning process.

Parents as Practitioners

Play is not a worthless activity because it has a deeper connection in a child's life. Every parent of young children should be aware of play as parents are the first teachers of their children, so this research has implications for parents who play a very important role in the growth and development of their children. Teachers, as parents' partners, have an important role in sharing ideas about play activities with parents so that parents are empowered as well. Play should be encouraged and valued from home and recognized as an effective tool in children's learning. Parents need to understand that instead of only focusing on the reading and writing of their children, they should try to develop holistic aspects of their children.

Implications for Policy Makers & Higher Education Policy Makers

The study revealed that ECD teachers play a major role in building holistic development in young children. There is a need for a clear definition of play in our new education policy to understand play values. For a strong foundation of education, there is the need for motivation to learn. Play gives intrinsic motivation to young children; hence, to motivate a person in the lifelong learning process, play should be encouraged in early childhood classrooms. For this purpose, teachers need a proper understanding of play to implement play pedagogy. ECD teachers need proper training to understand the relationship between play and learning.

Through this study, the researcher recommends that universities add teachers' training programs for play pedagogy to address the current pedagogical tensions that exist in ECED. Again, as noted in earlier implications, it is critical that policymakers have sustainable relationships with programs so that quality follow-up can take place through support and observation of teachers as they learn how to put play into practice. It is very important for new teachers to come out from a play background. It's the responsibility of universities to educate new teachers by developing teacher education programs that include courses in play theories and play practices to familiarize them with play pedagogy and its benefits in children's development. Embedded in both of these

recommended courses should be issues of ethics, advocacy, quality training, and educator support.

Future Directions

This study is very helpful for future researchers who want to conduct research in early childhood education, children's play, or play pedagogy. Due to the limitation of time, I was not able to explore different factors of play pedagogy that were very important in early childhood education. Therefore, this study motivates future researcher to explore various aspects of play and play pedagogy. Upon reflection, I encourage other studies to increase the sample size and geographic regions. I also believe it is important to explore the content and quality training of educators in the field to more accurately identify their needs. I hope to replicate this study with a large sample, inclusive of children with special needs, and in other regions of Nepal.

Finally, the study emphasized play pedagogy as an effective approach to early childhood education. Through play, children develop physically, socially, emotionally and cognitively. Given the importance of the early years in building a resilient foundation for motivation and learning, I believe it is vital that more research is needed in Nepal to build this foundation. This research is a valuable resource for early childhood educators and researchers who are working continuously to bring improvements in this field.

Reflection

Being an early childhood educator, I had many opportunities to visit many kindergartens, preschools, private and community-based ECD centers in my 20 years of experience. Since I have interacted with many ECD teachers, I have gained an understanding of the ECD practices in different kinds of ECD centers. I witnessed that in one of the ECD centers, children did not even have proper blocks to play with, and the blocks were not usable. This made me totally disheartened by the way children were oppressed from their basic rights to play. They faced adult pressure both at school and home to accomplish the reading and writing tasks that were not planned according to their developmental needs and age-appropriate. They received less encouragement for play and more reminders to stay quiet while attempting to play and move around. There wasn't any planning for play in the regular routine. The play items were not easily accessible to children because they were locked inside a big metal box or inside the

cupboard. I didn't see play materials easily accessible for children. In one of the ECD center, I found educational items displayed on racks that had glass panel sliders like in a shop. It looked very unsafe if children tried to take the materials out to play. This message for children from the environment is that "you cannot touch these materials." The children's curiosity to interact with the materials was eliminated. Therefore, I requested the principal to remove the glasses from the rack to avoid accidents. I didn't see teachers encouraging children to play either verbally not modeling play.

Previously, I chose Piaget's child development theory and Vygotsky's constructivist theories as a strong backbone to complete my study. However, observing the environment of ECD centers and interacting with teachers made me more reflective and I started searching for other theories and designs to complete this study. I went through various journals, websites and previous national and international theses, blog posts and YouTube videos. I found critical theory most interesting because it gives us a deeper understanding of human situations and valuable insights to develop critical questions and awareness. Therefore, I decided to add critical aspects to narrative design and using critical narrative inquiry, I completed this study.

While collecting data, I had to adjust the time schedules of the interview according to the availability of participants and teachers and the unfavorable situation of one participant. I changed another participant even after the rapport-building process was completed, but everything happened for a good reason. I found this new participant more friendly and energetic and did not hesitate to reply to any answer. I can feel her honesty in the way she shared her experiences. It was not easy for me to drive one and a half hours to the village to meet my participant in her natural classroom setting, but I was satisfied to see the varied location's ECD settings. Even my perception of ECD centers changed when I saw that the village's ECD centers were more equipped with indoor and outdoor play materials than in the city areas. The two teachers who are from village ECD centers received more training than teachers from the city. This made me amazed that it's not the location that matters but the educational leaders of the center, the principal's awareness and the responsible role of the management committee that helps to foster early childhood programs. Actually, I was happy to see that the children of the village are

getting more opportunities than cities in community-based ECD centers due to the support of donor agencies.

I decided to complete this study within the given time frame to avoid the long gap where there is a chance of losing my focus and misinterpretation of data. Hence, to maintain the quality of the study, I made careful planning for each day to complete the task and avoid unnecessary meetings and fellowship programs to accomplish the goal on time. I was very happy at the same time; my dream of completing an MPhil will be completed soon and I will be ready for the next level of my educational journey.

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APPENDIX- I

Consent Letter

Dear Teacher Candidate,

I am Milan K.C., MPhil scholar of Kathmandu University, school of education. For my dissertation, I doing research in early childhood teachers' perception and practices of play pedagogy in Nepal to investigate the values of play in children's learning and development and how these beliefs were shaped.

You are invited to participate in this study to share your experiences regarding children's play in early childhood education centers. The findings may help to identify the problems while implementing play pedagogy in early childhood and support in developing better policies in ECED in Nepal. If you agree to participate in this research you have to share your experiences regarding children's play and play pedagogy in ECD classroom.

There is no risk associated to participate in this study. All the information received will be kept private and confidential. No one will have access to the data that you share, it will be only discussed among the research team. You will have full rights to withdraw from the research when you feel uncomfortable. By signing below, you are indicating that you have read the information carefully and agreed to participate in this research study.

Thank you for your kind consideration

Participant Signature

Date:

APPENDIX- II

Research Guiding Questions

Questions related to the 1st research agenda:

1) How do you define play?

2) Do you believe that play is important for child's development? Why?

3) Does play supports in learning? Does play help children in learning or learning effectively?

4) Do you believe that play is important inside and outside classroom? Do you believe play is important for children's learning and development in the classroom? Do you believe play is important for children's learning and development outside of the classroom?

5) What are the benefits of play?

Questions related to 2nd research agenda:

1) Do you plan for play?

2) Do you observe play? How?

3) Do you encourage for play? How?

4) Do you believe that children can play during educational lessons? Please describe?

5) Do you allow children to play with educational activities? Please describe?

Educational Leadership guiding questions:

1) What is the role of leaders to facilitate play pedagogy in school? Do leaders have a responsibility in play pedagogy in schools? Please describe

APPENDIX III

Transcribed Data of Participant 2

Researcher Question One: Definition of Play

Participant Response: Play is very important game. Play gives holistic development, physical, mental, cognitive and they gain different skills. Children love to play than reading and writing, they become very excited. Play is very important for children, it help in body… umm….oh! what to say…they become active and excited. They remember the game than study and talk about it at home also what they played in school…phone vibration… she switched it off. We have to let children play than study more, from play children feel active like exercise, it helps to digest food. They play same game in neighborhood with other children. I feel play is good (lack of words repeating the same). Children don't like to study when we start play, they want to play for longer time because they love to play like we adults love to do different kinds of things. So, we have to understand child psychology, whether they ate properly or not, or they are beaten by parents, we have to give eye contact to all students and understand them before telling them to study. Therefore, I think play, physical exercise is very important for that we need sufficient outdoor and indoor materials and educational materials also. They can play with different shapes blocks without teachers help.

Researcher Question Two: Is Play is Important for Child development?

Participant Response: Umm… it's very important. First, they learn to tell the names of different play, if we give picture cards, they can see pictures and we can ask them what is that? What did you play? If they can say the names of shapes from the given shape cards, it is also a learning. Such learning is more effective, isn't it? Anyways, such physical activities support in learning. They will understand better. In training, also we learn the process of learning, first is listening, then speaking, reading and writing is the last thing we have to do. Therefore, first they see, listen, read and only able to write (repeats the same thing). But in out context first we focus in writing and those children who have very

good handwriting, parents think that my child is brilliant he/she has very good handwriting. Thus, they have to know first reading before writing.

Researcher Question Three: Does Play Support Learning?

Participant Response: Yes, it does. My students have less interest in study and more interest in play as they don't know that by studying one day they will become a successful person. For example, they are like clay, they can be molded to any shape and it's like watering plants, if we regularly give water those plant will grow well. Likewise, less nurtured, neglected child cannot grow well in comparison to well cared child. Many students share with me that they don't get good food to eat. Whenever, we get time we organize play but we have not separated play time in our daily routine.

Research Question Four: Do you believe play is important for learning and development inside the classroom?

Participant Response: In my experiences if schools have enough place play is better to conduct outside the classroom but when space is lacking, we can entertain children inside the classroom also. But as possible it is better in outside environment I greenery and cool place they are happier to play in such place. We can also can conduct some kind of play inside the classroom. They always keep on asking, mam!! let's, play again the same game. For example, the rhymes activities like tap, tap, walk, walk, five fingers' songs…etc. I always do this action rhymes every morning. I encourage them to move their body parts and sing the song. They say "Our teacher is dancing so nicely, let do the same". They enjoy because they find difficult to study and have to carry such heavy bag full of books and copies and doing such actions is so refreshing for them. Sometimes I like to say them not to bring bag and just keep on doing such activities to make them happy. I keep on giving them chocolates, sugar and they ask what will you bring next day.

Research Question five: Do you believe play is important for learning and development outside the classroom?

Participants Response: Play need big place and outside they can play freely.

Research Question six: Do you believe that there are benefits of play?

Participant Response: Umm… the play benefits are….umm they are happy, it help to digest food, they get tired and they sleep well, they organize same game at home and in

neighborhood. It's a very good physical exercise. Higher class level students usually play badminton, volleyball, football, they don't play other games but small children do action games, we play ant game, walking games, round games. I do these simple games inside the class also. To follow play pedagogy, sometimes I bring items from home like corn seeds and show them to make letters and I also use flash cards. They write in copy also and it makes clearer and I keep on asking them what is the letter and I can use in counting also the same corn seed. So, I feel that children understand better if we use teaching materials but we are trying to make them "book worm", We have materials but I don't know why still we use books……laughs !!!

Research Question Seven: Do you plan for play

Participant Response: I don't plan for play, why we have to plan? It can be organized instantly. I can do activities like up, sit down, hands side, hands up, in out activities and sometimes I can do counting of days Sunday, Monday…..Whatever comes in my mind, heart….like that…..I do it, I don't plan for play and I don't write about it.

Research Question eight: Do you observe and document play?

Participant Response: Yes! I observe play to see how happy they are, how excited they are or not while they are doing play activities. If they are very excited to play then only, I like to continue play, if they don't feel like playing and ignore playing then how to organize play? If they participate actively and follow what I do it and become happy then ……… usually they show active participation and follow what I do it. When I notice some children who don't enjoy playing then I ask them what happen, why they don't want to play? Sometimes children come without eating, they are sick then they don't want to play. I watch carefully what is their condition while playing, if child participates actively then I feel that everything is fine at home others they have some issues at home. I even ask parents sometimes. Child avoids doing any activity when there is stress, it might be homework not completed or bitten by parents…….. When homework not completed, I also have to threaten them. I think they need some kind of punishments to realize them, if they don't do homework next time then they have to face some consequences.

Research Question nine: Do you encourage play?

Participant Response: Umm….I keep on encouraging for play by telling them that it is important to play as play has physical benefit, even we play skipping rope everyday early

in the morning then it is benefit for us. I do it every day my mind and body remain active the whole day. But the time is not enough for us to organize play. I have to write in copy for each student everyday homework and classwork. I am alone in class. Children, as soon as they reach home without washing hands and feet, they start hanging on mobile phone, if parents don't give phone, then they start tearing their own books and copies and throw tantrums to parents. I know homework is not good at this age but parents ask for homework to engage them in study than using mobile. We focus on parents' interest and give them homework to remain engaged at home.

Research Question ten: Do you believe that children can play during educational lessons?

Participants Response: Umm…..if we start doing activities then other students get very excited, they might prick each other's eyes or they might fight, accidents might happen. Today, just before this interview three children were fighting even, I was there watching them. Sometimes if there is time I do play activities. To play and learn alphabets we can use flash cards, umm….can spread them in the floor and let them arrange the cards, find the pair of each alphabet. This way they recognize letter, they can enjoy, it's a play. Children are smarter than us in mobile but cannot say anything when asked from book. (Started telling jokes about children that they know many things these days…..started laughing). One of the trainers said, children learn through seeing, touching educational materials, reading writing is not important.

Research Question eleven: Do you allow children to play with educational activities?

Participant Response: I will tell you the real thing what is in practice according to my long years of experience that we are not able to use educational material for teaching and learning. Even we know that we have to use materials to learn, it is not happening because the main person (school head) has to understand the importance at first. They have to realize that there is good enrollment in ECD come on and teachers are working hard for this age group, they need to give more training to sustain the children till higher class. They have to respect ECD teachers, satisfy them through good salary and motivate for doing good work. They need to ask what kinds of educational materials teachers required to teach different subjects. They have to think why teachers are not happy, what

is lacking ……. Actually, I don't see their concern, please raise our voice, we are very hopeful that from your study things might change, keeps on laughing for a while.

Research Question twelve: What is the role of leaders to facilitate play pedagogy in school?

Participant Response: laugh!! For a moment. First, they should give value to preschool education to help us. I feel from inside that Principal, head teacher if they cannot monitor or support ECD, they can separate it from school. Same principal for school and for ECED section is also a problem. If we can keep separate principal for ECED to pre-primary level, I mean trained experts as a principal, then they can support and guide teachers, and they will understand how to work with children. Only then will the teaching method change, and they can do play-based learning. Leaders have huge responsibilities, such as managing and making things easier for teachers. They will think more about the teacher-student ratio. To conduct play-based learning, we need training, materials and maintain ratio. Right now, there is no environment in school to implement play and learning because of too much pressure on reading and writing both in school and at home.