

Reclaiming Playful Learning: Exploring the Perceptions of Playful Learning among Early Childhood Preservice Teachers

Minsun Shin¹⁾

Montclair State University

Abstract

Despite a deeply-rooted tradition that recognizes the value of play-based learning in early childhood education and care (ECEC), there has been relatively little research into adult playful learning in the higher education sector. This study explored the perceptions of play and playful learning among early childhood preservice teachers while they learned through play with reflection at a public university in the United States. An analysis of their reflective journals revealed that engaging in play activities promoted positive affect and a sense of learning community which, in turn, elicited playfulness and joy. Additionally, the study highlighted the value of hands-on, playful learning, challenging the participants' preconceived notion of play and internalizing playfulness, thus gaining a stronger personal commitment to enact play pedagogies in their future endeavors. Considering that play-based pedagogy has increasingly been marginalized both in ECEC and higher education, the findings suggest a need to reclaim play and playful learning in teacher education programs.

Keywords : early childhood education, playful learning, sensory play, preservice teachers

Corresponding author, ¹⁾ shinm@montclair.edu

Introduction

Play has long been considered fundamental in human experience and learning (Nørgård et al., 2017; Whitton, 2018). Play is also a resource of shared pleasure, joy, enjoyment, and creativity (Johnson et al., 2005; Singer, 2013). Therefore, many scholars advocate and recommend play-based learning as a recommended teaching approach in early childhood education and care (ECEC) contexts (Daniels & Pyle, 2022). Play-based learning is the learning taking place in play (Daniels & Pyle, 2022) which is also referred to as learning through play (Parker et al., 2022) or playful learning (Fisher et al., 2010). Play-based learning involves playful, child-directed elements and some degree of adult guidance and scaffolded (Weisberg et al., 2013).

Despite an extensive body of literature asserting the benefits and value of play in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC), our understanding of playful learning among adults, especially in teacher education programs, has been acutely limited (McArdle et al., 2019). Learning about the theoretical concept of play is not enough to enact play pedagogy in early childhood classrooms. To support play among young children, preservice teachers should have ample opportunities to learn about play, navigate the play-based curriculum, experience playful learning, and practice play pedagogy in initial teacher education programs (Canaslan-Akyar & Sevimli-Celik, 2022; McArdle et al., 2019; Vu et al., 2012; Wood, 2009).

I argue for the integration of play pedagogy in teacher education programs: promoting reflective and playful thinking, experiencing playful learning, and thus inculcating play-based learning among preservice teachers—our early childhood future professionals. Given that there has been relatively little research into the role of playful learning in teacher education programs, this study aims to explore the perceptions of play and playful learning among undergraduate preservice teachers as they individually and collaboratively experience hands-on playful learning in one of the early childhood teacher education courses.

Literature Review

In the field of ECEC, play has long been recognized as a central vehicle through which

children learn and develop socially, emotionally, linguistically, physically, and cognitively (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Elkind, 2007; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Play can be described as pleasurable, enjoyable, intrinsically motivated, process-oriented, and often associated with positive emotions (Johnson et al., 2005; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Playfulness, the ‘quintessence of play,’ is described as the spirit of play and defined as spontaneity, joy, and a sense of humor (Lieberman, 1977). Playfulness is the disposition to engage in play (Barnett, 1991). In this sense, play and playfulness are closely related and together promote problem-solving skills, creativity, emotional expressiveness, and cooperation among young children (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Thus, play and playfulness are regarded as essential (Singer, 2013), and they have a significant role in young children’s and adults’ lives (Proyer, 2012).

Unfortunately, play is being pushed out in many early childhood programs due to the recent movement towards high-stakes accountability and standards-based curricula (Jung & Jin, 2014; Pistorova & Ruslan, 2018). Devoting large blocks of time to more formal, direct instruction has limited time for child-centered play (Nicolopoulou, 2010; Wood, 2009). It should be recognized that teachers play a crucial role in supporting young children’s play and playfulness in the classrooms. Teachers’ playfulness is related to better teacher-child playful interaction and thus enhances higher playfulness in children (Pinchover, 2017). Playfulness is critical for creating positive interactions and close relationships with young children (Jung, 2011). Playful teachers who are spontaneous and humorous are more likely to implement play-based learning than structured and teacher-directed instruction, thus making instruction more interesting for children and nurturing children’s playfulness (Canaslan-Akyar & Sevimli-Celik, 2022; Pinchover, 2017; Singer 2013). It is all the more important that early childhood professionals should value the power of both play and playful learning, and systematically and intentionally integrate play-based curricula to promote children’s learning and development (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010). More importantly, future early childhood teachers should have an opportunity to develop their own playfulness to enable them to enhance children’s play (Pinchover, 2017).

However, the playfulness among teachers has not been extensively explored for a number of reasons. First, playfulness in adults is less socially acceptable than in children (Lieberman, 1977; Nørgård et al., 2017). In addition, the growing commercialization of and neoliberalism in higher education results in a continued focus on a performative and assessment-driven

environment (Leather et al., 2020; Nørgård et al., 2017). Playful learning might cease to exist with much weight placed on measurable and predictable learning outcomes and standard measures or key performance indicators in higher education (Leather et al., 2020).

Despite long-held traditional views of play as a common discourse in ECEC, early childhood teachers are not receiving much support to develop play pedagogy (Ryan & Northey-Berg, 2014). Taking a play-related course has been found to make ‘a significant influence’ on teachers’ beliefs about play (Ryan & Northey-Berg, 2014, p. 208). College students who have taken play-related courses have reported positive perceptions of the role of play and the importance of incorporating a play-based curriculum in early childhood classrooms (Jung & Jin, 2014). However, during early childhood programs, early childhood students have tended only to discuss play and play-based curricula and have mainly been trained to organize and provide a playful environment for young children (Loizou, 2017). This lack of specific attention to methods and play pedagogies has resulted in an inability to develop and enact play pedagogy and incompetence in doing these (Jung & Jin, 2014; Loizou, 2017). Therefore, “teaching teachers about play becomes a priority” (McArdle et al., 2019, p. 172).

It is futile for preservice teachers to merely explore the discourse of play or discuss the play-based curriculum in early childhood teacher education programs (Vu et al., 2012). To achieve playfulness and playful learning among children and teachers in early childhood classrooms, teacher education programs should provide many opportunities for preservice teachers to experience play pedagogies first hand, for them to develop a repertoire of strategies to effectively put play into practice and become play advocates in their future classrooms (Canaslan-Akyar & Sevimli-Celik, 2022; Kemple et al., 2015; Vu et al., 2012). Early childhood professionals should learn not only the theoretical underpinnings of play, but also ways to integrate play effectively and intentionally into a curriculum to provide ‘good-fit’ interactions with young children (Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot, 2010). Intentional teaching of play in teacher education programs, therefore, should be an area for consideration to equip preservice teachers to enact play pedagogy in their future practices (Jung & Jin, 2014; Nicholson & Shimpi, 2015).

Method

Based on a social constructivist framework, this qualitative study recognizes that learning takes place in a socially and culturally shaped setting and is grounded in interpersonal interaction and discussion (Prawat, 1992). The purpose of the study was to explore undergraduate preservice teachers' perceptions of play and their experiences of playful activities in one of the early childhood courses at a public university located in suburban New Jersey, United States. The following research questions guided this exploratory study:

- 1) How do preservice students describe their experiences with and perspectives on play?
- 2) In what ways do preservice teachers perceive playful activities as a valuable experience?

Context and Participants

The early childhood teacher education program described in this study prepares undergraduates to work with children as licensed teachers at a public university located in suburban New Jersey, United States. The participants were in the early childhood teacher education programs and upon the graduation, they earn p-3 (preschool-grade 3 level) certification. The participants were enrolled in one of the early childhood courses in the fall of 2020. This particular course is compulsory for all undergraduate early childhood teacher education students. The course is offered in the third year of the early childhood program and has one or two sections per semester. The researcher has been teaching one section of this course for a few years.

The content consisted of developmentally appropriate practices, play in classroom settings, and family-school-community partnerships to meet the diverse needs of young children. Throughout the semester, preservice teachers were asked to reflect on their own perceptions of play and playful learning. Additionally, they experienced and created hands-on play activities while collaborating with peers in the class and engaged in guided reflections. There were 26 participants taking this course in the fall 2020, who were all females, and either juniors or seniors.

Due to the ongoing pandemic, the fall 2020 course modality that was utilized was a blended synchronous and asynchronous model. Using the flipped classroom approach, students could

engage in collaborative annotated readings (e.g. *Perusall*), watch a pre-recorded mini lecture video, review other course contents, and participate in an online discussion board at home during the asynchronous session. The synchronous class session was held via Zoom. As I intended to make the course interactive, I utilized various ways and platforms to engage students in remote collaboration. For instance, I allotted ample time to students to actively engage in whole class discussions, small-group breakout room discussions, presentations, polls (e.g. *Poll Everywhere*, *Slido*), game-based learning tools (e.g. *Kahoot!*), interactive board (e.g. *Padlet*, *Google Jamboard*), and interactive presentation tools (e.g. *Pear Deck*). I prioritized a virtual learning community in which we could all learn from each other. In an attempt to create play experiential learning, the students participated in two hands-on play activities, which will be discussed in the next section.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data sources include the reflective journals that the students wrote after they engaged in specific play activities, as well as a final reflection submitted through the Learning Management System. Participants participated in an active, experiential learning course environment and engaged in play activities and reflections throughout the semester. As part of their course expectations, the participants engaged in two specific play activities. The first activity was called ‘design your own play,’ which main point was for the students to engage in free play and reflect on their playful activity. For this activity, the students could choose to play independently or with their friends. After playing out any playful activity that they liked to pursue, the students shared the photo or video of them playing with the instructor and wrote a short reflection about their experience. The reflective journal had a few prompts: What words and phrases best describe your feelings and opinions on play and learning? Why did you choose to play a specific game? Can you explain what play means for you?

Another activity was to create a sensory bin, which is a tactile, hands-on learning experience for our young learners. Towards the end of the semester, they were asked to create the sensory bin, independently or collaboratively. The activity itself was open-ended: they could use any theme or materials to create an educational bin that could be played by young children and family members together. There were two specific requirements: First, they had

to make the bin with modified materials about which young children, including infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, could enjoy learning through play, inquiry, and wonder. Second, the participants were specifically asked to create the bin using everyday objects and to modify some contents/fillers to better meet the needs of different age groups. As a final paper, the participants reflected on their experience and important learning moments regarding the sensory bin creation experience.

All the data sources for this study were collected after the participants had completed the course and their grades had been given. The data analysis process was complex, elaborate, and interpretive (Merriam, 2001). The data were organized into different folders and reviewed carefully. The reflective journals were read and re-read multiple times. An inductive approach was used to identify any recurring keywords, phrases, and themes in the participants' responses to the reflective journals and exit slips (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Initially coded themes were revisited using the research questions as a frame. The data were then reviewed again to highlight the primary themes and to select representative excerpts to share the participants' voices (Stake, 2005; Wolcott, 1994).

Results

'I was just having fun. I think that's the best part about play'

When the participants were asked to share the words and phrases that best described their feelings and opinions on play and learning, the top three descriptors were fun, creative, and exploration, followed by imagination and sensory (touch or tactile), as shown in Figure 1 below.

The point, 'play is fun', was echoed in the participants' reflective journals about their free play. A wide range of activities, from tactile to online, were performed. Choices of free play included board games (Monopoly, The Game of Clue, and Phase 10), silly putty, manga tiles, dramatic play, puzzles, a dress-up play set, a pinball game, and the online Pictionary game. One participant, for instance, played silly putties, which she used to play when she was younger (see Figure 2).



Figure 1. Words Describing the Feelings and Opinions on Play



Figure 2. Participant Playing with Silly Putties

Given the ongoing pandemic during the fall 2020, two classmates found the interactive online Pictionary game enjoyable, and interacted with others virtually (see Figure 3).

The most notable finding was that the participants chose activities they enjoyed playing with their family members when they were younger. It seemed that certain activities brought back fond memories of their childhood experiences. Below, one participant shared that her

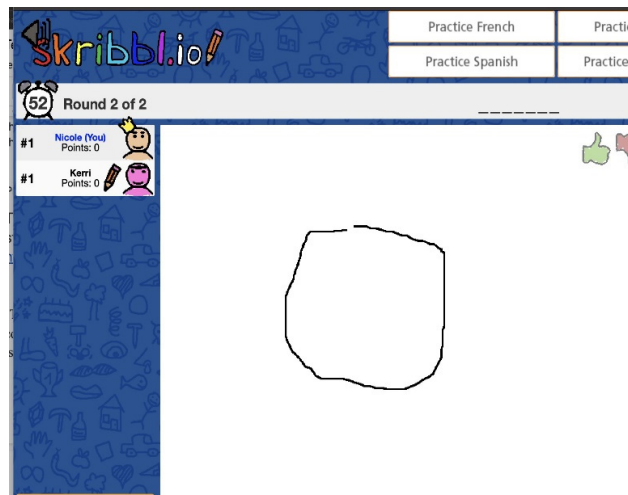


Figure 3. Preservice Teachers Playing an Online Game Together

brother chose the go-to game their family played during the holidays and related the positive social experiences shared and created during the play.

My brother chose the game we played. He chose '5 Second Rule' because it is a favorite in our house, and it's always a go-to game when we're bored and looking for something to do. Play is a fun way to pass the time and keep your brain active. But my favorite part about playing is the people I play with; playing games with friends and family is something that I love and look forward to. There is a game that my family plays on Christmas day, and it is everyone's favorite part of the day (besides the dessert!). Play really has the power to bring people together and disguise[s] learning as a really fun time.

One participant revealed that her play choice was nostalgic and that it brought back fun memories of the times she had with her mom. The participant also mentioned the limited time there was to play games in her life and that the assignment made her feel focused and calm.

To try something new, but also something nostalgic, we played pinball on the Nintendo switch. I remember playing pinball on the PC when I was about 8, with my mom, so this game brought back memories and was something fun to do. My life is so fast paced, so, oftentimes, I don't take time to sit still and play a game. This game helped me focus and it calmed me down.

When the participants were asked to think about playing, most thought about someone close to them, such as a classmate, a family member, a roommate, a nephew, and a godson. As one participant commented, *'I immediately thought of my three-year-old nephew (Jay). Jay and I are always interacting with each other and engaging with toys, however, his interest in play has especially grown over the pandemic shutdown'*. Play is a social activity that fosters engagement and pleasure, enriches their lives, and keeps loved ones close, as shown in the excerpt below:

For this assignment I chose to play the game 'Phase 10' with one of my roommates. I chose to play 'Phase 10' because I love the subject of math and this game has a lot of math concepts in it ... I also love to play games like this because it allows for me to interact with my friends and family while using my critical thinking skills to win the game. Play for me is something that I do not have to think too hard about, but I am still able to enjoy myself. Without realizing it, one is able to strengthen and learn new skills depending on what they are playing, and I think that is not only really awesome, but also super valuable.

'I actually had fun while learning'

The participants shared that creating an actual sensory bin was such a positive experience, commenting, *'I really enjoyed making the sensory boxes'*, and *'My experiences while making the activity were a lot of fun.'* The participants were creative and suggested various themes,



Figure 4. Example of Sensory Bin

such as hot chocolate, beach explorers, winter, art, letter recognition, and under the sea (see Figure 4).

In addition, they used various materials to create the bin, including kid sand, foam letters, fishing rod (magnet), rice, beans, bath toys, shells, chocolate cereals, marshmallows, measuring cups, cups, spoons, tongs, etc. As the participants were unfamiliar with this kind of bin, they felt intrigued and excited about the activity. One mentioned, *‘Throughout this assignment I was very intrigued in creating my own sensory bin for the first time. When I work as a paraprofessional, I always wanted to learn more about sensory bins and how they worked’*. Another shared her excitement about this hands-on, sensory activity:

My experience putting this project together was an overall positive experience ... I think play is an essential component of children learning. More specifically, children learn best when they are touching and using their senses. This is why I loved working on this project. I think play is important because the students get hands-on experience with what the teacher wants them to accomplish.

Initially, using everyday objects, which the participants (and children and their future family members) could easily access, was found to be challenging when creating a sensory bin. However, in the end, they unequivocally shared their learning moment, articulating how simple materials could be used to facilitate play.

Through mapping out and creating this sensory bin, I learned a lot about play. I found that I needed to really dig deep to find a way to make the bin playful and integrative, even though the only materials I have access to are paper. I found that using shredded paper was my best option ... Another thing that I learned is that children will play with any objects, from a simple piece of paper to an actual toy.

Most participants, if not all, did not have much of a knowledge base for and experience with infants. It was a major challenge for them to figure out an appropriate and meaningful way to make one sensory bin with modified contents/fillers for the three different age groups: infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. They commented:

When first thinking about the theme, infants had not crossed my mind. I was frustrated in the beginning, trying to figure out what kind of sensory bin I wanted to create that could benefit the children ages of infant, toddler, and pre-schooler. It was easier to come up with an idea for a preschooler because they might put things in their mouth but not as much as an infant or toddler would. Once I came up with an idea, it was very fun to create and make it come to

life. I never realized how important play was to such a young child ...

Despite the initial struggle, the participants shared, in the end, that ‘*Something I learned from this project is that infants, toddler, and preschool aged children can play*’, and ‘*It is truly eye opening to realize how many simple activities can have such a big impact on a child’s learning both socially and academically*’. Some even created the bin with others and played together, as shown in the Figure 5.



Figure 5. Playing Sensory Bin

It transpired that brainstorming ideas and collaboration among the group members were beneficial to the participants in realizing the value of play for all children across the age groups.

Creating the sensory bin play activity was extremely fun. While brainstorming, my group and I thought that it would be challenging to create a sensory bin that can be used for infants, toddlers, and pre-schoolers, since their developmental milestones are all very different. However, as we opened up our imagination and became more creative, we realized that there were so many opportunities and ways for children of all ages to engage in this sensory bin.

The sensory bin created a heightened awareness of the importance of play in teaching and learning among the participants. One participant stated that their previously held perception of the value of play in young children's learning had shifted.

I think that the sensory bin project was the most valuable learning experience for me. Physically creating something that children can use to learn was valuable for me, as I previously didn't understand the value of play. Because of this project, I can fully see how play can provoke learning. I want to be able to incorporate what I've learned into my teaching.

One participant acknowledged the value of sensory play, but also shared her concern about implementing sensory play in the classroom as sensory materials could be too messy or not easy to clean.

I personally do not enjoy cleaning up the mess of rice on the floor!! It gets all over the floor, but the children love it and it helps them learn. However, at one daycare I worked at the teachers did not use sensory bins because it was too messy and too much to clean up. And I feel like the children were missing out on so much because it does use your five senses and motor skills. Sensory bins promote creativity, and the exploration of maybe unfamiliar objects.

'I am now more confident to be an educator in the classroom'

Taking a course heavily emphasizing play and playfulness strengthened the participants' perceptions of the role of play in children's learning and development. As the participants put it, *'This course really opened my eyes to how much play is incorporated into the classroom for both fun/engagement and also exploration, imagination and learning'*. Furthermore, they witnessed and experienced the value of play while learning by playing with reflection and, consequently, and more importantly, gained insights into how to foster play in their future classroom, as exemplified in the below excerpt.

Throughout this course, I have learned and grown both as a student and a future educator. I have attributed this growth to the many positive learning experiences I have gained from this course. One in which stands out the most is our journey as a class learning about play and its significance in early childhood classrooms. Through our class discussions, observations, and implementations, my

mindset on play has positively grown to see its importance and the ways in which I can push for more implementation in public education classrooms. Specifically, I have enjoyed our focus on making positive strides to push [for] more sensory play experiences in public education classrooms...Through this experience, I have had the opportunity to gain insight on how to foster play in my future classroom in a simple, yet meaningful way.

Even their preconceived notion of play was challenged and shifted, affirming the impact of play on learning and development, demonstrated in the following examples:

The sensory bin assignment emphasized the fact that play is essential for learning experiences for children. Prior to taking this course, I would observe the children at the school I work at and wonder how they are learning; I previously did not see the value of play in the classroom. With that being said, because of this course and the assignment, I now see the impact play has on learning experiences.

Teaching through play will be a huge adjustment for me, as I previously did not hold the belief that play was essential to learning. However, now knowing what I know, I plan on incorporating it into my teaching practices.

Accordingly, the increased appreciation of the value of play made the participants feel more confident as future professionals.

My most positive learning experience from this class was truly understanding the value of play and how it really benefits the children and their learning experience. Getting a chance to work on the different interactive activities were super fun and helpful in understanding. After taking this class, I feel more confident going into the classroom.

In addition, the participants shared their emerging commitment to play advocacy, stating that ‘... in my future classroom, I will encourage play as part of learning’, and, ‘I definitely will use many of the ideas in the future’. One added:

I am really excited to take what I have learned into my future classroom. You have made me [the course instructor] see the value of play and have given me valuable tools to create an inclusive environment even if the school I work at doesn't encourage it.

Many participants commented on their positive feelings towards the content and atmosphere of the course, articulating ‘This course was a joy to be in. I really enjoyed every class we had, and it was good through zoom, but I know it would've been a blast in person’. Specifically, they articulated the usefulness of game-based learning in the remote instruction by writing, ‘I also LOVED how interactive you made the material. Whether you had us on Padlet, Jamboard, or other interactive learning tools, I found that my learning experience was enhanced by the multiple means of engagement with the material’. They also appreciated the instructor’s own playful learning advocacy by stating, ‘I also love that you [course instructor] are so passionate about play’.

Conclusively, one participant’s comment summed up the benefits of play for all ages: *‘Many may think that play is just something fun that kids do; however, there are truly so many educational benefits for children, and even adults’.*

Discussion

The findings from this study revealed that the participants enjoyed engaging in playful activities and being in a playful course. Their perception of the value of play strengthened while the participants learned through play with reflection, affirming the cognitive and social benefits of play among children and adults, and further advancing their stance to become play advocates. An inherent limitation of the present study is that it took place within a particular context. Additionally, it is a small-scale study that was conducted in a relative short time frame. Course modality was a blended model forced by the pandemic in an unprecedented time. Therefore, the findings may not be applicable and generalizable to other settings. However, considering that play-based pedagogies have increasingly been marginalized, both in ECEC and in the higher education sector, the findings offer new insights into the field.

The participants acknowledged the positive emotional states they experienced during the playful activities in the particular course context, consistent with previous researchers (Johnson et al., 2005; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Lieberman, 1977; Sutton-Smith, 1997). In their reflective journals, the participants used words, including fun, creative, and enjoyment,

to describe their playful experiences. When asked to freely choose a play activity, many participants experienced joy and excitement. They chose activities that brought their positive childhood memories back and could be played with their close ones, family, and friends. This appreciation for the positive affect of play activities should be fully realized. Positive affect is a well-recognized element of play and playfulness. Therefore, teachers must realize and validate the emotional positive affect of play and create an enjoyable and playful experience (Johnson et al., 2005; Sutton-Smith, 1997).

The findings revealed that taking a play-related course seemed positively influence the participants' perceptions of play and playful learning; thus, providing a play-focused course should be an important consideration in teacher education programs (Jung & Jin, 2014; Ryan & Northey-Berg 2014). Furthermore, the participants seemed to believe that the educational benefit of play and playfulness in learning could extend beyond childhood to adult learners. While there is no shortage of research articulating the value of play for young children's learning and development (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Elkind, 2007; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Nicholson & Shimpi, 2015), increasing commercialization and the prevailing neoliberalism make playful learning in higher education even more complex and difficult (Leather et al., 2020; Nørgård et al., 2017; Whitton, 2018). Beyond that, the marginalized play-based pedagogies in early childhood classrooms constraint preservice teachers from seeing real examples of the enactment of a play-based curriculum in their field placements (Kemple et al., 2015). In other words, preservice teachers are trained for early childhood classrooms in which play is under siege and are educated in teacher education programs in which adult playfulness simply does not 'sell.' These points make the integration of play-based learning in teacher education programs a priority.

More notably, the findings highlighted the importance of the integration of hands-on, playful learning in teacher education programs (Kemple et al., 2015). How can we learn about play without playing? Teachers should be the master players to facilitate playful learning in early childhood classrooms; however, early childhood teachers appear to have little understanding of how to teach playfully (Wood, 2009). As teachers who internalize the value of play are more likely to use playful teaching approaches in their classrooms, it is important for teachers to recognize, appreciate, and practice playfulness play to see the value of play firsthand (Canaslan-Akyar & Sevimli-Celik, 2022; Pinchover, 2017). To support play among

young children, preservice teachers should have many opportunities to learn about play, navigate play-based curricula, experience playful learning, practice play pedagogy in initial teacher education programs, and thus appropriately implement play pedagogies (Canaslan-Akyar & Sevimli-Celik, 2022; Loizou, 2017; McArdle et al., 2019; Vu et al., 2012; Wood, 2009). Teacher educators should support preservice teachers to reclaim play in their own lives and systematically and intentionally integrate play-based curricula (Nicolopoulou, 2010; Nicholson & Shimpi, 2015), redirecting focus from a superficial understanding of play to an integration of play as pedagogy.

In addition, the findings showed that the participants' commitment to integrate playful learning and enact play pedagogy in their future classrooms was strengthened. The participants mentioned that the hands-on play experiences helped them see the value of play that they previously did not see. As their preconceived notion of play was challenged and shifted, the participants shared their excitement about applying what they had learned in their future classrooms. This finding raised an important point: playful learning and reflection can inculcate play-based pedagogy among preservice teachers and support their development as future play advocates. I argue for playful learning in early childhood teacher education programs for early childhood professionals to develop as conscious players and courageous advocates, articulating the value of play for children's learning and well-being in this socio-political context in which play is increasingly marginalized and devalued. Examining how playful learning in teacher education programs helps preservice teachers to implement play-based curricula and to be playful in their placement, while confronting and destabilizing the current rigid accountability movement, should be an area for future investigation.

Infancy has been a marginalized area in the early childhood birth-to-age 8 continuum. The participants in this study did not have much experience with infants; therefore, producing a sensory bin theme that might work for all the different age groups was found to be challenging, at least initially. In the end, they expressed, in unison, how the creation of the sensory bin was the most valuable learning moment in the course. First, the open-ended nature of this specific activity promotes imagination and creativity, which are an integral part of play and learning (Sutton-Smith, 1997). In addition, the participants learned how everyday objects that were commonly used at home could offer some of the fun, meaningful opportunities through play. The participants, furthermore, articulated not only an

appreciation of the value of sensory play among young children, but also the importance of play across the different age groups, including infants. Multisensory materials, despite their value, are not utilized sufficiently, as they can be messy or hard to clean. Therefore, strengthening the knowledge base of infant and toddler learning and development and promoting multisensory experiences in the early childhood classrooms will be crucial (Shin, 2021).

Another theme that emerged from the data was the notion of a playful learning environment as an empowered place. The participants experienced positive affect during the playful learning in the course, which facilitated a sense of learning community. The collaborative environment then helped the participants feel safe enough to challenge and revisit their preconceived conception of play. Further, collaborative learning creates a synergy when a group of learners are playfully engaged. It has been noted that play and playfulness promote creativity and cooperative learning among young children (Sutton-Smith, 1997). The finding expands the current understanding, and suggests that playful learning can promote creativity, elevated enjoyment, and collaboration among adults. Playful learning, therefore, should be celebrated and visible in higher education, and be better understood as a powerful pathway of learning among adults. The participants in this study shared how much they enjoyed the interactive part of the synchronous course, while the game-based learning strategies enhanced their engagement and satisfaction (Wiggins, 2016). The findings suggest that incorporating more game-based learning and cultivating playful attitudes in higher education courses might foster students' enjoyment and deeper learning (Nørgård et al., 2017; Le Hunte, 2017; Lieberman, 1977). This will be an interesting area to pursue further.

It should be noted that this study was done during the ongoing pandemic. Consequently, the blended course format (combination of synchronous and asynchronous) and the interactive activities during the Zoom meetings were the instructor's viable tools for educational survival during the remote teaching. In this sense, the topic of how game-based learning via Zoom could promote human connections deserves further investigation. Furthermore, I recognize that my beliefs as an early childhood educator and a play advocate could impact participants' learning experiences differently than other instructors who might not support playful learning. Investigating educators' characteristics and education

philosophy who bring play and playfulness into their class could be a topic for future study.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my participants for demonstrating the power of play and making this work possible.

References

- Barnett, L. A. (1991). Characterizing playfulness: Correlates with individual attributes and personality traits. *Play and Culture*, 4, 371-393.
- Canaslan-Akyar, B., & Sevimli-Celik, S. (2022). Playfulness of early childhood teachers and their views in supporting playfulness. *Education 3-13*, 50(1), 1-15.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2021.1921824>
- Copple, C., & Bredekamp, S. (Eds.). (2009). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8* (3rd ed.). National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Danniels, E., & Pyle, A. (2022). Inclusive play-based learning: Approaches from enacting kindergarten teachers. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. (Online First June 22, 2022).
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01369-4>
- Elkind, D. (2007). *The power of play: Learning what comes naturally*. Da Capo Lifelong Books.
- Fisher, K., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R. M., Singer, D. G., & Berk, L. (2010). Playing around in school: Implications for learning and educational policy. In P. Nathan & A. D. Pelligrini (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of the development of play* (pp. 342-360). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195393002.013.0025>
- Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R. M., Berk, L. E., & Singer, D. (2009). *A mandate for playful learning in preschool: Presenting the evidence*. Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, J. E., Christie, J. F., & Wardle, F. (2005). *Play, development, and early education*. Pearson Education.
- Jung, J. (2011). Caregivers' playfulness and infants' emotional stress during transitional time.

- Early Child Development and Care*, 181(10), 1397-1407.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2010.532873>
- Jung, E., & Jin, B. (2014). Future professionals' perceptions of play in early childhood classrooms. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 28(3), 358-376.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2014.913277>
- Kemple, K. M., Oh, J. H., & Porter, D. (2015). Playing at school: An inquiry approach to using an experiential play lab in an early childhood teacher education course. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 36(3), 250-265.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2015.1062830>
- Leather, M., Harper, N., & Obee, P. (2020). A pedagogy of play: Reasons to be playful in postsecondary education. *Journal of Experiential Education*. (Online First: September 16, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825920959684>
- Le Hunt, B. (2017). Gamestorming the academy: On creative play and unconventional learning for the Twenty-First century. In S. Lynch, D. Pike & C. Beckett (Eds.), *Multidisciplinary perspectives on play from birth and beyond* (pp. 151-161). Springer.
- Lieberman, J. N. (1977). *Playfulness: Its relationship to imagination and creativity*. Academic Press.
- Loizou, E. (2017). Towards play pedagogy: Supporting teacher play practices with a teacher guide about socio-dramatic and imaginative play. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 25(5), 784-795. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2017.1356574>
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2006). *Designing qualitative research* (4th ed.). Sage.
- McArdle, F., Grieshaber, S., & Sumsion, J. (2019). Play meets early childhood teacher education. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 46, 155-175.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-018-0293-8>
- Merriam, S. B. (2001). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Nicholson, J., & Shimpi, P. M. (2015). Guiding future early childhood educators to reclaim their own play as a foundation for becoming effective advocates for children's play. *Early Child Development and Care*, 185(10), 1601-1616.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2015.1013538>
- Nicolopoulou, A. (2010). The alarming disappearance of play from early childhood

- education. *Human Development*, 53(1), 1-4.
- Nørgård, R. T., Toft-Nielsen, C., & Whitton, N. (2017). Playful learning in higher education: Developing a signature pedagogy. *International Journal of Play*, 6(3), 272-282. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2017.1382997>
- Parker, R., Thomsen, B. S., & Berry, A. (2022). *Learning through play at school-A framework for policy and practice*. *Frontiers in Education*, 7, Article 751801. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.751801>
- Pinchover, S. (2017). The relation between teachers' and children's playfulness: A pilot study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, Article 2214. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.02214>
- Pistorova, S., & Ruslan, S. (2018). There is still nothing better than quality play experiences for young children's learning and development: Building the foundation for inquiry in our educational practices. *Early Child Development and Care*, 188(5), 495-507. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2017.1403432>
- Prawat, R. S. (1992). Teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning: A constructivist perspective. *American Journal of Education*, 100 (3), 354-395. <https://doi.org/10.1086/444021>
- Proyer, R. T. (2012). Examining playfulness in adults: Testing its correlates with personality, positive psychological functioning, goal aspirations, and multi-methodically assessed ingenuity. *Psychological Test and Assessment Modeling*, 54(2), 103-127.
- Proyer, R. T. (2013). The well-being of playful adults: Adult playfulness, subjective well-being, physical well-being, and the pursuit of enjoyable activities. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, 1(1), 84-98.
- Ryan, S., & Northey-Berg, K. (2014). Professional preparation for a pedagogy of play. In E. Brooker, M. Blaise & S. Edwards (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of play and learning in early childhood* (pp. 204-215). Sage.
- Shin, M. (2021). Exploring multisensory experiences in infants' learning and development in the child care classrooms. *Early Child Development and Care*, 191(13), 2116-2127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2019.1695127>
- Singer, E. (2013). Play and playfulness, basic features of early childhood education. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 21(2), 172-184. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2013.789198>

- Stake, R. E. (2005). Qualitative Case Studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 443–466). Sage Publications Ltd.
- Sutton-Smith, B. (1997). *The ambiguity of play*. Harvard University Press.
- Trawick-Smith, J., & Dziurgot, T. (2010). Untangling teacher-child play interactions: Do teacher education and experience influence “good-fit” responses to children's play? *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 31(2), 106-128.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10901021003781148>
- Vu, J., Han, M., & Buell, M. (2012). Preserving play in early childhood classrooms: Suggestions for early childhood teacher education and policy. *Play and Culture Studies*, 12, 207-221.
- Weisberg, D. S., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2013). Guided play: Where curricular goals meet a playful pedagogy. *Mind, Brain, and Education*, 7(2), 104-112.
- Whitton, N. (2018). Playful learning: Tools, techniques, and tactics. *Research in Learning Technology*, 26. <https://doi.org/10.25304/rlt.v26.2035>
- Wiggins, B. E. (2016). An overview and study on the use of games, simulations, and gamification in higher education. *International Journal of Game-Based Learning*, 6(1), 18-29.
- Wolcott, H. F. (1994). *Transforming qualitative data: Description, analysis, and interpretation*. Sage Publications.
- Wood, E. (2009). Developing a pedagogy of play. In A. Anning, J. Cullen & M. Flear (Eds.), *Early childhood education: Society and culture* (pp. 27-38). Sage.