

**PRACTITIONERS' EXPERIENCES OF PLAY AS A PEDAGOGY
FOR LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTRES**

By

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DECLARATION

I, Mahudi Magdalena Mofokeng, declare that:

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ABSTRACT

This study explores early childhood practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning in early childhood centres. Specifically, the study explores how practitioners understand play, how children learn through play and how play as a pedagogy for learning can be used to enhance children's learning. The intention was to make sense of how these understandings and experiences of play influence pedagogic practice for children between the ages of 3-4. The study drew on constructivism as a theoretical framework to understand how knowledge around play, learning through play and play as a pedagogy for learning was constructed. The concepts of constructivism, play as a pedagogy for learning, teacher-directed play, child-initiated play and free play was used as an analytical lens to give visibility to the practitioners' experiences of play at the early childhood centres. The study was situated within an interpretivist paradigm and made use of a qualitative research design. A purposive sample of six early childhood practitioners teaching children between the ages of 3-4 was used. Using data generation tools of semi-structured interviews, enabled an understanding of the practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy and how these experiences influence their practice. The findings suggest that practitioners have inadequate understandings of play as a pedagogy for learning and this is due to inadequate training and lack of support for the implementation of play as a pedagogy at the centres. An insight of this study suggests that practitioners need to be provided with adequate professional training so that they have a common understanding of play as a pedagogy for learning in early childhood centres.

Keywords: practitioners, play, learning, play as a pedagogy, early childhood centres

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CAPS:	Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement
DAP:	Developmentally Appropriate Practice
DoE:	Department of Education
DoBE:	Department of Basic Education
ECCE:	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECD:	Early Childhood Development
ECEC:	Early Childhood Education and Care
EYLF:	Early Years Learning Framework
EYLFS:	Early Years Learning Foundation Stage
NELDS:	National Early Learning Development Standard
UNESCO:	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF:	United Nations Children’s Fund
NCF:	National Curriculum Framework
WSoE:	Wits School of Education
SAIDE:	South African Institute for Distance Education

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CHAPTER ONE

BEGINNING MY RESEARCH JOURNEY INTO PLAY AS A PEDAGOGY FOR LEARNING

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This study explores practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning. Play as a pedagogy for learning can be defined as "the ways in which early child professionals make provision for play and playful approaches to learning and teaching, and how they design play/learning environments and all the pedagogical decisions, techniques and strategies they use to support or enhance learning and teaching through play" (Wood, 2009: 27). Of particular interest to me, is how early childhood practitioners understand play as a pedagogy for learning and how these understandings influence their pedagogic practice. In this chapter, I briefly outline the research landscape, which reveals the centrality of play in early childhood settings. This outline provides the background to the study which sets the stage and situates my study. Thereafter, I provide a discussion on the rationale, research aims and research questions that directed this study. A sketch of the theoretical framework and the research design are then elucidated on. Finally, the chapter provides a brief overview of the structure of the thesis.

1.2 BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite, the positive endorsements from different theoretical orientations as to the importance of play in early childhood education, the definitions, value and purposes of play continue to be debated (Wood, 2013). Variations in definitions of play focus on functions, forms, characteristics and behaviour. Chazan (2002: 198) takes a broad and positive view of the function, form and characteristics of play:

Play and growing are synonymous with life itself. Playfulness bespeaks creativity and action, change and possibility of transformation. Play activity thus reflects the very existence of the self, that part of the organism that exists both independently and interdependently, that can reflect upon itself and be aware of its own existence. In being playful,

the child attains a degree of autonomy sustained by representations of his inner and outer worlds.

From the above definition, it is clear that play is complex and variable across different social and cultural practices. Play involves a wide range of behaviours, actions and interactions which have meanings for the participants (Wood, 2013). The definition also presupposes that there is continuous action, engagement, interaction and communication between different individuals in the social and cultural space; and the meanings attached to these engagements have significance for the different participants.

Pramling and Carlsson (2003) inquire whether play is still considered as important as often claimed in early childhood education. They argue that there seems to be two parallel discourses today about play as either something gaining terrain in its own right or as something fading away in favour of learning. For them, play is considered to be a practice initiated by children, whilst learning is seen as a result of practice or activity initiated by an adult. In the context of early childhood education (ECD), play and learning are often separated in time as well as in space where indoor classroom spaces are for learning and the practitioners' domain and outdoor spaces are for playing (Martin, 2015). In addition, there seems to be a move towards preparing children for formal schooling by applying a more teacher-directed academic instruction, where the practitioners are at the centre of the learning process (Tullis, 2011; Martin, 2015).

Notwithstanding the above, acknowledging that children learn better through play and that play leads to learning is at the heart of contemporary understandings of play as a pedagogy for learning. For Gordon and Browne (2008), children's learning is best supported through a play-based, informal approach towards teaching and learning that promotes the holistic development of children. It is through play that children create knowledge as play gives children avenues to be in control of what is happening and what they know. (Dau, 1999; Levin, 1996). In addition, as argued by Pramling (2005) and Carlsson (2008), when children play together with friends, it allows them to exercise self-control and develop what they already know, take turns, cooperate and socialise with others and use objects in a way that is meaningful and thrilling to them.

Wood (2009:3) sees the role of the practitioners as one that provides opportunities for free play and spontaneous movement activities, as well as guided movement experiences designed to support specific aspects of gross motor, fine motor and perceptual-motor development. This, in the end, facilitates learning and development in young children. Wood (2013) argues that play is almost limitless in its potential to enhance learning, but the optimisation of that potential lies to large degree with the practitioner and his/her interpretation of curriculum. She maintains that the role of the practitioner is to “act as playful pedagogues in their self-initiated activities” (Wood, 2009:37). Furthermore, it is this concept of playfulness that should be a central informing source, as early childhood practitioners experiment with alternative strategies for implementing an effective play-based curriculum in the early years of education - a curriculum that foregrounds movement and the co-construction of knowledge. Wood (2009) sees practitioners as co-constructors who demonstrate their in-depth understanding of the possibilities that arise spontaneously from the multi-faceted and complex nature of play. Wood (2013) argues that a practitioner as a co-constructor of learning not only maximises “teachable moments” but also structures the play opportunities to ensure that both learning and teaching occur.

1.2.1 CONCEPTUALISING PLAY AS A PEDAGOGY FOR LEARNING

The research presented here is based on an alternative conceptualisations of play. Previous definitions of play are based on adult views of the observable act of play. However, this does not get to the heart of playfulness and the characteristics that support children’s development and learning. According to Wood (2009, 2013), there is a need for a reconceptualisation of the united pair - pedagogy and play. She argues that while there is substantial evidence of learning through play, there is less evidence of teaching through play. So how can one define play as a pedagogy? For Wood (2009: 27), play as a pedagogy can be defined as “the ways in which early childhood practitioners make provision for play and playful approaches to learning and teaching”. McInnes, Howard, Miles and Crowley (2011) concur when they suggest that early years’ practitioners should engage in a pedagogy that facilitates play and learning.

Play as a pedagogy has been influenced by Vygotsky's theories of constructivism. Fleer (2010:214) proposes a dialectical model of conceptual play where the role of adults is to build on children's everyday working theories and emergent understanding:

through analysing existing play activity (assessable moment) or critical moments as children's development (zones of proximal or potential development) and through using these opportunities to conceptually frame the play so that conceptual development is foregrounded and children think consciously about the concepts being privileged.

From the above, it is evident that a conceptualisation of play as a pedagogy requires that teachers build on children's theoretical knowledge as they learn scientific or academic concepts through play.

1.2.2 PLAY IN SOUTH AFRICAN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION POLICIES

Within the South African policy context, play is seen as a fundamental right for young children as it is perceived to be inherent to children's learning, development and well-being. Various policies affirm the importance of play for children. For example, the Children's Act No. 38 of 2005 sees engagement in play as being an important consideration when working with young children. Furthermore, the guidelines for Early Childhood Development Services (Department of Social Development, 2005: 16) support the view that all children have the "right to relax and play, and to join in a wide range of activities". Additionally, in the National Early Learning Development Standards (NELDS) quality ECD programmes are associated with "child-centred learning environments with a focus on play and programmes that provide varied and age appropriate experiences for young children before formal schooling" (Department of Basic Education and Unicef, 2009:33). In the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), play is seen as the cornerstone for all learning for young children. The NCF outlines how babies, toddlers and young children learn when they play and provides guidelines and examples of activities for how adults can ensure that children learn through play.

1.3 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Within the contemporary South African education system, ECD legislation, policies and programmes advocate a play-based programme to the teaching of young children. For example, the Children's Act No. 38 of 2005 reiterates the importance of children's right to play and leisure (Department of Social Development, 2005). In addition, in the National Early Learning Standards (2009:17), emphasis is placed on programmes that are play-based with different types and forms of play. Furthermore, the Curriculum Assessment and Policy Statement (DBE, 2012) requires teachers to implement an appropriate and purposeful play-based programme where play is used to enhance learning and teaching. However, while play is seen to be important for learning, there are no guidelines as to how practitioners should be teaching using play as a pedagogy for learning. For example, the National Early Learning Standards state that play should not be used in a prescriptive way (DoE, 2009: 14); and this can leave practitioners wondering what and how they should be teaching children between the ages of 3-5.

Contemporary government policy agenda within South Africa calls for a trained workforce who knows about early child development and knows how to plan for stimulating play-based learning environments for the holistic development of young children, but presently practitioners are not sure of how play could be used as a pedagogy for learning (DoE, 2013; Martin, 2015). As a Foundation Phase teacher and now teacher educator, I understand that play is important as children learn best through play. However, from my conversations with the practitioners whom I visited in the QwaQwa region, there seems to be very little understanding of how play can be used as a means to enhance learning.

The practitioners in the region have been trained on the implementation of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) by both Non-Government Organisations (NGO) and departmental officials. During their training, they are provided with guidelines for how to implement teaching and learning for children from birth to four years of age. This is in keeping with the suggestions outlined in *White Paper 5* where practitioners are expected to create inclusive and integrated programmes that foster children's

emotional, social, intellectual, physical, spiritual and moral development, where play is used as a vehicle for achieving these (Department of Education, 2001). However, from my visits to ECD centres around QwaQwa, there seems to be confusion as to how to teach children through play. I have found that whilst there are beautiful play areas, these areas are not used as learning resources. Additionally, I have noticed that at centres, there seems to be a lack of adult involvement in children's play as play is used as a means of keeping children occupied while the practitioners are busy. I found that children are led to play not knowing what the purpose of the play-activity is, and what are the goals they hoping to achieve at the end.

From my readings of this field of study in South Africa, there seems to be a paucity of specific research on how play can be used as a pedagogy of learning; and more importantly, the ways in which early childhood teachers implement play-based programmes for the development and learning of young children. However, internationally, there seems to be some move towards thinking about how children learn through play (Broadhead, 2006; Hughes, 2009; Wood, 2009, 2013). From the literature, I have found that in order to meet the challenges of teaching and learning in the 21st century context, pedagogy of play can best act as a catalyst for fanning the emergence of the growth, development and learning of young children (Ayers, 2005; Isabell & Isabell, 2007). My reading prompted me to embark on a research study about play as a pedagogy for learning in early childhood centres. Stephen (2010b) questions the place of pedagogy in early year's education as it showed that early childhood practitioners do not tend to engage in discussions relating to play as a pedagogy for learning. I believe that this study will go some way in contributing to the body of knowledge of how ECD practitioners understand how play can be beneficially used as a pedagogy for learning and how we can work towards implementing play-based pedagogies in ECD classrooms.

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Considering the above, the main research objective of the study is to explore early childhood practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning. **The supporting objectives are as follows:**

- To identify how early childhood practitioners understand play, learning through play and play as a pedagogy for learning.
- To make sense of how these understandings influence pedagogic practices at the early- childhood centres.
- To provide recommendations of how play as a pedagogy for learning can be used in early- childhood centres.

Main research questions:

What does the early childhood practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning suggest about learning and pedagogic practice in early childhood centres?

- How do early childhood practitioners understand play, learning through play and play as a pedagogy for learning?
- How do these understandings influence their pedagogic practices?
- What do these understandings suggest about how play can be used as a pedagogy for learning in early childhood centres?

1.5 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework explains 'how' and 'why' something operates as it does (Johnson & Christensen, 2007: 7). My study will explore how practitioners are using play as a pedagogy for learning. The theoretical framework influences the way knowledge is studied and understood (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Mertens, 2005). The theoretical framework gives the researcher some choices that set down the intent, motivation and expectations for the study. The study makes use of constructivism which is defined as all forms that share the views that humans are engaged in meaning and knowledge "making", not knowledge acquisition (Domenici, 2008; Raskin, 2002, 2008). Mahoney (2004) states that constructivism represents a meta-theory of human learning, active meaning-making, and knowledge construction. In addition, constructivism, is "a way of learning that requires participation in an activity" (Sheehy, 2002:2). In the context of early childhood education, Bredekamp, Knuth, Kunesh, and Shulman (1992) are of the opinion that knowledge is constructed as a result of dynamic interactions between the individual and the physical and social environments. Besides,

the constructivism position relates to how people learn, based on their experiences of the world, and based on what they already know. Vygotsky (1978), from a socio-cultural theory perspective of learning, maintains that play, like all other psychological functions, is social in origin, is mediated by language and learned with other people (peers and adults) in social contexts. Therefore, he (Vygotsky) believed that all forms of play have the imaginary element and are inherently rule-bound. Thus, the developmental course of play is characterised by changing boundaries. Vygotsky (in comparison to Piaget) paid more attention to symbolism in play. He proposed that the relationship between imagination and realistic thinking is complex and can lead to higher forms of cognition in adulthood (Newman & Holzman, 1993). There is a central characteristic of play which involves action that arises from ideas which create opportunities for symbolic and abstract thinking.

Therefore, children transfer knowledge and skills between different contexts, integrating fantasy and reality: Action in the imaginary situation, is the creation of voluntary intentions and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives - all appear in play and make it one of the highest levels of pre-school development. Thus, the child moves forward essentially through play activity. Only in this sense can play be considered the leading activity that determines a child's development (Vygotsky, 1978:102-3). Therefore, a social-constructivist orientation emphasises the contextually-situated nature of cognition and the significance of culturally-mediated tools in developing knowledge, skills and understanding. Social constructivism, implies a proactive but responsive role for the practitioner, with greater emphasis on the significance of teaching and learning (Wood & Attfield, 1996).

Wood and Bennett (1998) emphasise the nature and benefit of play, and in their research they asked the teachers in their study to define qualities of play, and how they contribute to children's learning. The teacher's responses were that play is child-initiated and is based primarily on their (children's) needs and interests. In addition, the teachers talked about how children know intuitively what they need and can automatically meet those needs through play. The teachers went on further to say that play is enjoyable, it enhances interest, engagement and motivation and provides relevant, meaningful experiences which lead to learning. Furthermore, the responses

from the teachers when considering quality of play indicated that child-initiated activity enables choice, control, ownership and independence.

In contrast, teacher-initiated activity did not allow children to develop the same motivation. Wood (2009) mentioned that child-initiated play activity is freely chosen play. Millei (2012) and Wood (2013b) add that child-initiated play reveals children's interest, needs dispositions and patterns of learning, all of which forms the basis of the pedagogical decisions that practitioners make about curriculum planning, provision of resources and interactions. Consequently, the goals for pedagogy thus emerge from children's activities (Wallersted & Pramling, 2012). Thus, Cohen (2009) advises that forms of control exerted by practitioners should be open-ended with a focus on being emotionally present, supportive and responsive, particularly when dealing with young children.

Hughes (2010) mentioned adult-guided play, where claims are made that children's free and spontaneous activities are intrinsically valuable for their learning and development. Saracho (2012) adds to these suppositions that play can be structured, planned, resourced by adults in ways that promote specific outcomes. Walsh, Pramling, Carlsson, Stephen, Brooker (2011) describe this intersection as playful structure: the goals for this pedagogy are framed in relation to curriculum goals, but are responsive to the children, and playfulness is a characteristic of adult-child interactions.

1.5.1 Concepts That Have Relevance for the Study

- **Constructivism**

Constructivism is "a way of learning that requires participation in an activity" (Sheehy, 2002:2). Bredekamp, Knuth, Kunesh and Shulman (1992:6) maintain that knowledge is constructed as a result of dynamic interactions between the individual and the physical and social environments.

- **Play as a pedagogy for learning**

Wood and Attfield, (2005) provides evidence that play develops children's content knowledge across the curriculum and enhances the development of social skills, competences and disposition to learn. This requires that practitioners make use of

contextual to enhance learning experiencing through a continuous process that helps learners to construct and reconstruct meaning of their world.

- **Teacher directed play/adult-guided play**

According to Gmitrova and Gmitrov, (2003), teacher directed play means joint activity of the teacher and children with the teacher organising and continuously monitoring the process, elaborating situations that require simultaneously cooperation, and encouraging interaction of all children in the classroom.

- **Child initiated play**

Brooker, 2011, Hedges, 2011) see child-initiated play as complex, fluid and dynamics, because children constantly adjust their actions and interactions to changing goals and circumstances.

- **Free play**

Can be construed as unstructured, voluntary and child initiated where children learn social, conceptual and creative skills and learn about the world around them. It is associated with self-actualisation and existential qualities such as flow, which involves mood state, deep immersion, concentration, harmony between the task and the intentions and abilities of the player, (Wood, 2010), a sense of wonder, creativity and inventiveness; harmony between the child and the natural world (Berger & Lahad, 2010) and the unity of affect and cognition (Holzman, 2009).

1.6 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

My study is qualitative in nature and is situated within an interpretivist paradigm as my intention is to understand early childhood practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2010) maintain that interpretivism is categorised by a concern to understand the experience of a human's world. Consequently, an interpretivist paradigm enabled an exploration of early childhood practitioners' understandings of play as a pedagogy for learning. Qualitative researchers are specifically interested in studying typical individual perspectives and experiences by developing an understanding of the meanings people place on the events and structure of their lives (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Qualitative research thus refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols and description of things (Berg, 2007).

I employed a case study research design, which was explanatory in nature, where I had very little control over what and how participants responded to the interview questions. (Yin, 2009).

Semi-structured interviews with six early childhood practitioners as participants were used to understand how practitioners experience play as a pedagogy for learning within its real life contexts (Yin, 2009). Data was generated from the practitioners through conversations and interacting with them (Creswell, 2009). Real-life contexts in this case were the indoor and outdoor play spaces where children play. I followed the requirements for asking questions set out by (Creswell, 2009) where I relied on the views of the participants elicited by asking broad questions and thus generated data consisting largely of statements from participants. I described and analysed the data using thematic analysis as outlined by Creswell (2009). Data was analysed in three steps:

Step 1: Organising the data and defining the codes

I read through the data to gain a general sense of the information and then reflected on the overall information. It was also important for me to generate a description of the setting or people, and identify themes from the coding

Step 2: Developing the categories and codes

I used open coding, I looked at my data, read the data over and over again in order to create labels to establish meaning from the information elicited from the participants which involved looking at the relationships among the open codes; in other words, I looked at what was between the codes, and what connections I saw. Furthermore, I looked at what influences these connections had and what conditions precipitated this to occur, including the context in which it was part of, and the strategies that were used to accomplish it.

Step 3: Developing themes and sub-themes

When coding the data, I painstakingly marked passages and grouped them according to patterns which emerged from the research literature and what practitioners were saying. After a long working process of moving back and forth between the data and

the literature, I identified five themes. I then tabulated the data according to the themes.

1.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF THE STUDY

Ethical measures were constantly applied to avoid disadvantaging any of the participants who formed part of the study (Yin, 2009). I ensured that the ethical principles of the University of the Free State (UFS) were adhered to throughout the course of the study. Ramrathan, (2017) maintains that access to research sites is controlled activity. Researchers are not at liberty to enter a research site and conduct research without receiving prior official permission. This is for various reasons, including the need to prevent unauthorised disclosure of information (which may be defamatory) thus causing irreparable damage to the institution or organisation. In order to access a research site permission is needed from an authorised individual of an institution or an organisation. To ensure that my research process was ethical, I conducted and ensured that a number of ethical procedures were in place.

These procedures included:

- Voluntary participation where participants were notified via meeting and letters of their participation being voluntary including the terms and conditions.
- Informed consent (signed letters of consent with all the necessary details of the study) of all participants was obtained to ensure their voluntary participation in the study.
- Privacy and safety in participation through the use of pseudonyms (anonymity was emphasised).

1.8 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This thesis consists of 5 chapters and in this section, I provide an outline of the focus of each chapter to show the connections between the chapters.

I start **Chapter 1** by providing a framework for this study. The reader is provided with a background to the study and a review of the literature that relates to play as a pedagogy for learning and further detailed in Chapter 2. Thereafter, I provide a

rationale for the study. The aims and research questions are also outlined. Also, the theoretical framework and methodological design are sketched. Issues of ethics are also considered. Finally, I conclude the chapter by providing an overview of the thesis to reveal the interconnection between the various chapters.

In **Chapter 2**, I provide a discussion on the theoretical framework that informed the study and describe the empirical studies that inform the early childhood practitioners experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning.

Chapter 3 describes the qualitative methodological approach that was used to generate the data. The case study approach is discussed together with techniques of sampling, contextualisation, the choice of participants and data generation methods that were used. A description of how the data was analysed is outlined. Finally issues of validity, ethics and limitations of the study are outlined.

In **Chapter 4**, I present the data and its analysis to answer the main research question: ***What does the early childhood practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning suggest about learning and pedagogic practice in early childhood centres?***

Chapter 5 provides conclusions and a summary of the study. This chapter also provides some implications and significance of the study. Some possibilities for future research are also outlined.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON PLAY AS A PEDAGOGY FOR LEARNING

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This study explores practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning in early-childhood centres. Theories pertinent to play as a pedagogy will be discussed as gleaned from Vygotsky. For example, Vygotsky (a constructivist) provides the basis on how people learn. Dennick (2016), a constructivist in the theory of learning, whose philosophical origins are frequently ascribed to Kant and whose educational origins are similar to Piaget, bases his premise on the process which connects new knowledge to pre-existing knowledge. In addition, Manus (1996) draws from the work of developmental psychologists and contends that people construct meaning through their interpretive interactions with experiences in their social environments. Furthermore, Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism theory stresses the importance of learning in context - constructing understanding through interactions with others in the social environments in which knowledge is to be applied.

Alongside constructivism, concepts relating to play as a pedagogy for learning, relevant experiences at early-learning centres, and related literature will be reviewed in order to understand play as a pedagogy for learning. The historical overview of play will also be discussed so as to understand the perceptions of philosophers Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Fredrich Froebel (1782-1852).

Further discussion on play as a pedagogy for learning will be centred on objectives of the study, which are:

- To identify how early childhood practitioners understand play, learning through play and play as a pedagogy for learning.
- To make sense of how these understandings influence pedagogic practices at the early- childhood centres.
- To provide recommendations of how play as a pedagogy for learning can be used in early- childhood centres.

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Any research study must be constructed within some form of theoretical or conceptual framework. Theories provide a language to describe 'how' or 'why' something operates in the way that it does (Johnson & Christensen, 2007:7). The theoretical framework gives the researcher some choices that sets down the intent, motivation and expectations. Tamene (2016) defines theoretical framework as empirical or quasi-empirical theory of social and/or psychological processes, at a variety of levels that can be applied to the understanding of phenomena. Therefore, a theoretical framework is important in research because it guides a researcher to be able to think around the theory that is going to be used in the research, and then process results within the framework that the study will take. Furthermore, a theoretical framework guides research, determining what phenomena to measure, and what statistical relationships to look for. In relation to my study I wanted to explore how practitioners understand and use play as a pedagogy for learning in early-childhood centres. To do this, I made use of constructivism as a theoretical framework as it helped to provide an analytical lens and served as a guide to make sense of the data generated.

2.2.1 Constructivism

Constructivism shares the view that humans are engaged in meaning and "knowledge-making", not knowledge-acquisition (Domenici, 2008; Raskin, 2002, 2008). It is 'a way of learning that requires participation in an activity' (Sheehy, 2002:2). In the context of early-childhood education, Bredekamp, Knuth, Kunesh, and Shulman (1992:6) elaborate on constructivism: Knowledge is constructed as a result of dynamic interactions between the individual and the physical and social environments. In a sense the learner discovers knowledge through active experimentation. Fundamental to experimentation is making "constructive errors" that are necessary to mental development. Hence, constructivism for early learning and development facilitates opportunities to actively process ideas, events and phenomena with which learners come into contact to form their own knowledge in play form. Major variants of constructivism are: cognitive (Piaget, 1968:111-124), sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1978), radical (Glaserfeld, 1995) and physical (Novak, 1997). Most constructivists agree that

human experience involves continuous active agency because humans exist and grow in living webs of relationships especially in social environments (Mahoney, 2004:362). In particular, constructivist early-childhood practitioners argue that striking a balance between 'work' and 'play' provides the avenues to construct knowledge that is unique to them (Gupta, 2008; Bodrov & Leong, 2010; Walsh, McGuinness, Sproule & Trew, 2010).

Origin of constructivism

Philosophers such as Socrates focused on helping learners construct meanings on their own rather than authority figures transmitting information to them. Kant (1724: 120-125) built upon this by recognising that the way learners perceive stimuli from their environment shapes their understanding of the world. More commonly, educators view constructivism as a learning theory. Some educators use the term constructivist simply to indicate a non-behaviourist learning.

Pundir and Surana (2016) assert that learners should no longer be passive recipients of knowledge; and practitioners not to be purveyors of knowledge and classroom managers. In the National Curriculum Framework (2005), the learner is seen as an active constructor of knowledge and the teacher's role is that of a facilitator and guide. The classroom environment should cater for active exploration and engagement with knowledge and with each other. In the NCF, children are seen as "competent people who are actively involved in their learning" (DoBE, 2015: 12).

Constructivists argue that learners come with already-formulated knowledge, ideas, and understandings. This knowledge is constructivist and is situated in the real world. Pundir and Surana (2016) elaborate that knowledge comprises active systems of intentional mental representations derived from learning experiences as learners interpret these experiences and the resultant information in the light of their present knowledge, and thus use this to organise and transform new information. Furthermore, learners make choices about what new ideas to accept and how to fit them into their established views of the world. Kant elaborates on this idea by asserting that human beings are not passive recipients of information.

Constructivism and knowledge generation

Constructivists maintain that the social structuring of human cognition leads to co-construction of knowledge which occurs through social interactions; and this can take place in and outside the classroom (Simpson, 2002). Hussain (2012), emphasises providing opportunities to learners for making their own judgements and interpretations of the situations (they come across) based on their prior knowledge and experience – and this is called constructivism. It aims at developing skills among learners by offering to them activities in their relevant disciplines and contexts. In addition, it is an appropriate strategy preparing them for assuming social roles and professional responsibilities in real-life situations in the future. Another aim that is related to constructivism is modifying beliefs and ideas of learners by offering them appropriate tasks for knowledge construction (Wang, 2003; Dhindsa & Emran, 2006).

Constructivism and the nature of reality

Lesh, Doerr, Carmona and Hjalmarson (2003) focus on the differences between a modelling perspective and a constructivist perspective pertaining to the relationship between the individual's experiences and the nature of reality. According to Glaserfeld, it is necessary to keep in mind the fundamental thrust of constructivist epistemology – the world which is constructed is an experiential world that consists of experiences and makes no claim whatsoever about 'truth' in the sense of correspondence with ontological reality (1984:29). Emanating from this view, "reality" for the individual is constructed and based on the individual's experience; knowledge is evaluated based on its "fit" with those experiences.

Changing roles of practitioner and learner

According to Mvududu and Thiel-Burgess (2012), constructivism is widely touted as an approach to probe children's level of understanding and to show how this can increase and change to higher-level thinking. Constructivism describes the way that the learners can make sense of the material and also how the materials can be taught effectively. Practitioners should consider what learners know and allow them (learners) to put their knowledge in to practice – and play is a distinctive form of achieving this. For this reason, we make sense of the new information by associating, negotiating, asking questions; all of which could be done in play situations.

A classroom example of constructivist teaching

Pundir and Surana (cited in Brooks & Brooks,1993) explain that a constructivist classroom focus tends to shift from the practitioner to the learners where the constructivist practitioner sets up problems and monitors learners' exploration, guides the direction of learners' enquiry, and promotes new patterns of thinking. Brooks and Brooks (1993) state that a constructivist classroom should bear the following characteristics as cited by Pundir and Surana (2016):

- Learner's autonomy and initiative are accepted and encouraged;
- The practitioner asks open-ended questions and allows a reasonable period of time for answering;
- Higher-level thinking is encouraged;
- Learners are engaged in dialogue with the practitioner, and with each other;
- Learners are engaged in experiences that challenge hypotheses and encourages discussion; and
- Learners construct meaning through interaction with others, with materials and by observation and the constructivist learning is the present need.

In addition, we need our learners to become active and independent to discover the knowledge instead of remaining passive listeners in the classroom.

2.2.2 Play as A Pedagogy for Learning

Wood and Attfield (2005) note that research provides evidence that play develops children's content knowledge across the curriculum and enhances the development of social skills, competences and dispositions to learn. Thus, it is an integral element of high-quality provision for young children (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva 2004); and the amount of time a practitioner allocates to play gives 'messages' concerning its importance and value. Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva add that play is located within a Vygotskian model of scaffolding, with the practitioner focusing on specific elements of the play activity and giving appropriate feedback to children's enquiry. Bodrova and Leong (2007) highlight the important role that play has in preparing children for the rigours of formal schooling and suggest that the current dilemma facing early childhood practitioners is whether to focus on teaching academic skills or to promote

developmentally appropriate activities for children. They identify one challenge in play - the restraint placed upon the activity in the form of rules that the child must follow in order to play 'properly'.

However, while play is considered to be an important element in early-years environment, many practitioners are unsure of how to plan for such a curriculum (Moyles, Adams & Musgrove, 2002). Wood and Attfield (2005) assert that an approach based on both curriculum-generated play to support the development of specific skills and knowledge; and a play-generated curriculum based on practitioners responding to the interests of the children. According to Sutton-Smith (1997), children develop play skills which enable them to interact with other children, thus improving their social and cognitive skills and subsequently children become more adept at creating rules and creating more awareness of outcomes and processes.

Sawyer (1997:23) proposes that pretend-play with peers contributes to children's development and allows them to understand the thoughts and feelings of others. He describes this ability as metacognition or theories of mind and feelings of others. There are two parallels in play: children communicate and interpret continuously in the negotiation with peers while role-playing, and they produce the content of it by talking about what to do and in what way it should be done (the meta-communicative approach).

Historical Origins of Play

According to Rogers (2011), the historical roots of early-childhood education concerning play has been a dominant feature of Western-European pedagogy. Over many centuries, philosophers, theorists, educationalists and within recent years, policymakers, have worked hard to define the nature of childhood, play and the purposes of education (Fisher, 2008, Wood, 2013). Consequently, researchers have become increasingly interested in how traditional and contemporary theories on play and childhood have informed conceptualisations of childhood (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010) concerning the "image of the child" (Malaguzzi, 1994), and the development of early childhood curriculum (Graue, 2008).

Wood and Atfield (2005:29) claim that until the nineteenth century, "childhood was seen as an immature form of adulthood and children from all social classes had little status in society. They suggest that it was the studies of classical play theorists such as Rousseau, Froebel and Dewey, that dramatically changed societal views and attitudes towards children to the extent that "freedom to learn could be combined with appropriate nurturing and guidance". It is generally agreed that the theories espoused by Froebel (1782-1852) as the creator of the first "kindergarten" or "children's garden", were not only the most significant during this time, but still have an enduring influence on current early-childhood practices (Ailwood, 2007).

Within the South African context, the significance of play is important and linked to learning. For example, in The Children's Act No. 38 of 2005, there are calls for early-childhood programmes to promote children's right to play and leisure (Department of Social Development, 2005). In 2015, the Department of Basic education (DBE) released the South African National Curriculum Framework for Children from birth to four. The NCF clearly states that play and hands-on (active) experiences enhance children's learning and development (DBE, 2015:17). The intentions of both the NCF and CAPS focus on the provision of a framework of what is to be included in programmes, as well as indicating that the activities should be play-based. Drawing from Froebel as a theorist, children learn through their play activities and therefore "learn to live in harmony with others".

Developmental stages in early-childhood

According to McLeod (2009,) citing from the work of Piaget (1936), the theory of cognitive development is about how a child constructs a mental model of the world. In addition, Piaget (1936) described his work as genetic epistemology; that is, the origin of thinking. Furthermore, Piaget was concerned with children, rather than all learners, as he focuses on development, rather than learning per se, so it does not address learning of information of specific behaviours. Piaget's theory proposes discrete stages of development, marked by qualitative differences, rather than a gradual increase in number and complexity of behaviours, concepts, and ideas. Piaget asserts that children construct an understanding of the world around them, then experience discrepancies between what they already know and what they discover in their environment; and each child goes through the stages in the same order, and no stage

can be missed out - although some individuals may never attain the later stages. But there are individual differences at the rate children progress through stages; Piaget did not claim that a particular stage was reached at a certain age - although descriptions of the stages often include an indication of the age at which the average child would reach each stage.

Piaget mentions the *sensory-motor stage* (birth - 2 years). The main achievement during this stage is object permanence - knowing that an object still exists, even if it is hidden, and it also requires the ability to form a mental representation (i.e. a schema) of the object. Another stage that Piaget talks about is *pre-operational stage* (2 – 7 years): during this stage, young children are able to think about things symbolically.

Types of play

One of the practices most commonly used in the early-childhood sector is 'learning through play'. In addition, play-based learning is described as 'a context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they actively engage with people, objects and representations' (EYLF, 2009:46). Children love to play, and play often mirrors what is important in their lives. Moreover, when asked about play, children talk about having fun, being with friends, choosing activities themselves, and being outdoors.

There are many different types of play and these can be either process orientated-play is a means unto itself and players may not have an end or goal in sight of self-motivating play, which is considered its own reward to the player (Shipley, 2008).

McNamee and Bailey (2010) state that as a child grows and develops, his or her play evolves and there are certain stages of play which are associated with, but not restricted to, specific age groups. They maintain that children go through stages of play and it starts with unoccupied play which is evident in the early months of infancy, from birth to about three months and where the child is busy in unoccupied play. Though children seem to be making random movements with no clear purpose, this is the initial form of play. Thereafter, children play independently which they see it as solitary play, which often takes place from three to eighteen months, in which time babies will spend their time playing on their own. However, during solitary play,

children are very busy and they may not seem to notice other children sitting or playing nearby. Therefore, they are exploring their world by watching, grabbing and rattling objects.

Onlooker play is the next stage of child participation during play, where the child watches other children play. Children are learning how to relate to others and are subconsciously learning language. Although children may ask questions of other children, there is no effort to join the play. This type of play usually starts during toddler years but can take place at any age. McNamee and Bailey (2010), assert that from the age of 18 months to two years, children begin to play alongside other children without any interaction. This is called parallel play. Parallel play provides the toddler with opportunities for role-playing such as dressing up and pretending. It also helps children gain the understanding of the idea of property-right such as “mine”. They also start to show their need of being with other children of their own age. Parallel play is usually found among toddlers, although it may happen in any age group.

Associative play is when children around three to four years of age become more interested in other children than toys – the child starts to socialise with other children which helps the child to learn the DOs and DON'Ts of getting along with others. Here, teachers communicate the art of sharing, and encourage language development, problem-solving skills and cooperation. In associative play, groups of children have similar goals yet they do not set rules and have no formal environment – for example, they all want to play with the same types of toys.

Another type of play is social play, when children around the age of three are beginning to socialise with other children. By interacting with other children in play settings, the child learns social rules such as give-and-take and cooperation. Children are able to share toys and ideas. They are beginning to learn to use moral reasoning to develop a sense of values. To be prepared to function in the adult world, children need to experience a variety of social situations.

With regards to motor-physical play which is when children run, jump, and play games such as hide-and-seek and tag, they engage in physical play which offers a chance for children to exercise and develop muscle strength. In physically playing, the child

imbibes social skills while enjoying good exercise. Therefore, the child will learn to take turns and accept winning or losing.

Constructive play is a type of play where children create things. It starts in infancy and becomes more complex as the child grows. This type of play starts with the baby putting things in his/her mouth to see how it feels. As a toddler, children begin building with blocks, playing in sand, and drawing; which allows them to explore objects and discover patterns to find what does or does not work, thus children gain a sense of pride and achievement when accomplishing a task. Yet children who gain confidence manipulating objects become good at creating ideas and working with numbers and concepts.

Expressive play helps children to learn to show feelings. Here practitioners can use many different materials including paints, crayons, colour-pencils and markers for drawing pictures or writing. It can also include such items as clay, water, and sponges to experience different textures. Other materials are beanbags, benches, and rhythmic instruments.

Fantasy play it is where children learn to try new roles and situations, and experiment with languages. With this kind of play, children learn to think and create beyond their world. They also assume adult roles and learn to think in abstract terms. Children stretch their imaginations and use new words and numbers to express concepts, dreams and history.

Finally, cooperative play begins in the late preschool period and is organised by group goals. There is at least one leader, and children move in or out of the group. When children move from a self-centred world to an understanding of the importance of social contacts, they begin to play games with rules. Part of this development occurs when they learn games such as *Follow-the-Leader*, *Simon Says*, and team- sports. Games with rules teach children the concept that life has rules that everyone must follow.

2.2.3 The Role of Practitioners in Using Play as A Pedagogy In A Classroom

McInnes, Howard, Miles and Crowley (2011) suggest that early-years practitioners should engage in a pedagogy that facilitates play and learning. However, previous research has shown that there is a discrepancy between practitioners' beliefs about play and how they implement these in practice (Bennett et al., 1997; Moyles et al., 2001). Whilst acknowledging the centrality of play in early-years' practice, a recent paper has questioned the place of pedagogy in early-years education as it has been shown that early-years practitioners do not tend to engage in discussion relating to pedagogy (Stephen, 2010b). In view of this, there has been a call for further research looking at play, learning and pedagogy (Stephen, 2010a).

However, more recently, practitioner-involvement in play activities has been increasing, although the quality of this involvement is questionable, with evidence that practitioners are capable in their use of their knowledge of the processes and content of children's play to create content-rich environments that provide a wide range of opportunities for cognitive development of children (Vu, Han, & Buell, 2015). Studies have shown that many early-childhood practitioners not only have difficulties in defining what play means, but also in how to effectively integrate it into daily classroom practice (Brett et al., 2002; Rothlein & Brett, 1987; Thomas, Warren, & de Vries, 2011). In examining early-childhood practitioners' actual definitions about play, it was revealed that practitioners provided a wide variety of definitions about play that were sometimes contradictory in nature (Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). However, this is not surprising given that play is often discussed, though rarely defined; and is, in fact, a rather difficult concept to define (Burghardt, 2011), with many lay practitioners taking a "I know it when I see it" approach. In a pedagogy of play, Wood (2009) sees practitioners, as co-constructors – one who demonstrates in-depth understanding of the possibilities that arise spontaneously from the multi-faceted and complex nature of play-activities.

2.2.4 Related Literature on Play as A Pedagogy For Learning

Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) note that play as well as learning are natural components of children's everyday lives. For example, when children are asked what they like to do best, the answers are unanimous - to play (Ibid: 2008: 623). However, education for children is, on the whole, organised to promote learning rather than play. While school is traditionally seen as a place of learning - and not of play - preschool is more often associated with play rather than learning (Pramling, Klerfelt, & Granelid, 1995). According to Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008), play is also considered to be a practice initiated by children, while learning is seen as an activity initiated by an adult. In early-childhood education, play and learning are often separated in time and space. For example, literacy hours and creative art work are seen as practices of teaching and instruction leading to learning. But play is put aside for leisure time or outdoor hours. Wood (2009) suggests that possible manifestations of a pedagogy of play in the South African context should be a priority of research in this area.

Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) reflect on more than 150 years of early-education information, and mention that there have been a number of successful approaches in early childhood education, some of which I will briefly touch on. Research has drawn from Froebel, Montessori, and others. While many early-childhood practitioners believe that play, both for children's academic as well as social-emotional development, is important (Rothlein & Brett, 1987, Brett et al., 2002) but how to meaningfully integrate play in the classroom often poses a problem. According to Vu, Han and Buell (2015), research has revealed a lack of pre-service and/or in-service training focusing on play for early-childhood practitioners, which has resulted in an early-childhood workforce who have been told that play is important without being shown how to use it, or support it effectively in the classroom (Kemple, 1996; Lobman, 2005).

While professional development can take many different forms, in-service training offers unique opportunities (Sheriden et al., 2009). For this reason, in-service professional development opportunities can address new topics or content, as well as provide opportunities for early-childhood practitioners to work on previously-existing skills (Girard et al., 2011). Beyond the in-class component, in-service professional

development opportunities also allow for an application and a connection to practice that pre-service professional development or training sometimes lacks. Research examining the effects of in-service training for early-childhood practitioners has generally found positive outcomes with regard to changing practitioners' beliefs and classroom practices. A recent meta-analysis indicated that such training can improve the attitudes, knowledge, and skills of early-childhood practitioners (Fukkink & Lont, 2007). This often leads to more developmentally-appropriate classroom practices and there are examples of in-service training that have been found to be effective in many aspects, including:

- Positively changing practitioners' classroom management skills (Webster-Stratton, Reid & Hammond, 2001);
- Increasing the knowledge of appropriate classroom practices (Cassidy et al., 1998; Ota et al., 2006);
- Increasing the use of verbal support strategies to encounter peer interactions (Girolametto, Weitzman, & Greenberg, 2004); and
- Gains in positive child-practitioner relationships (Rhodes & Hennessy, 2000) and improving instructional practices and intentional planning (Dickinson & Caswell, 2007).

There is also some evidence that practitioners' in-service training has positive effects on children's classroom behaviours and outcomes. For example, improving practitioners' classroom practices through such training has been shown to result in children's use of more pro-social behaviours and decreases in aggression (Girard et al., 2011), as well as gains in complex social and cognitive play (Rhodes & Hennessy 2000). Thus, early-childhood practitioners have been shown to play an important role in developing play situations that can stimulate learning (Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009), but there is little professional preparation that specifically addresses this issue of training. Therefore, some research has pointed to how interventions targeted at adults - both parents and caregivers - can use play to address children's academic outcomes, specifically literacy skills (Bellin & Singer 2006; Christie & Roskos 2006). As the first step, there is a need to address the issues of integrating play within the early-childhood curriculum.

In-service or professional development is essential to minimise challenges in this area; for example, when early-childhood practitioners enter children's play, they may sometimes do so in an intrusive manner which may make children feel self-conscious and may even end children's play altogether (Canning, 2007). Thus, knowing how to appropriately engage in play with children, and what appropriate adult roles are for extending and enhancing play-ending are important for practitioners to learn. Practitioners tend to focus on children's behaviour rather than analysing their own. Concepts of child-centredness and play are problematic for practitioners in terms of demonstrating effectiveness.

Furthermore, effective pedagogic interactions are based on shared problem-solving with the use of open questions (Chappell et al., 2008), which sustains shared-thinking (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). Even though the practitioners understand and agree with this, many admit to a lack of knowledge regarding play and how play relates to pedagogy and therefore the reality practice is somewhat different, with a mismatch between what practitioners say and what they do. Studies have repeatedly shown that practitioners are not comfortable with play, child-led activities and allowing children choice (King, 1978; Cleave & Brown, 1989; Pascal, 1990; Bennett et al., 1997). Ironically, the practitioners have been advised not to interfere in children's play, and studies have shown that generally play activities have been left to children (Sylva et al., 1980; Wood et al., 1980). However, more recently, practitioner-involvement in play activities has been increasing, although the level of facilitation is not ideal.

2.2.5 The Need for The Use of Play as A Pedagogy for Learning

Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) cite from the National Research Council (2001) inferring that the notion of play is totally invisible. They assert that there are two contrasting discourses: play as something gaining terrain or as something fading away. We should realise that children are not driven by long-term goals like adults, but interested in here-and-now questions, and the concrete rather than abstract. Therefore, this aspect became a central question: *how to catch their interest and get them engaged?*

Browne (2008) notes that children's learning is best supported through a play-based, informal approach that promotes the holistic development. Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) affirm that high-quality, well-planned and developmentally-appropriate experiences will use play to promote learning. Wood (2008) supports spontaneous-movement activities, as well as guided-movement experiences designed to strengthen specific aspects of gross motor, fine motor and perceptual-motor development which, in the end, facilitate emergent literacy in young children. Wood (2009), argues that a pedagogy of play is almost limitless in its potential to enhance learning, but the optimisation of that potential lies, to a large degree, with the practitioner and his/her interpretation of curriculum. As Wood (2009: 27) notes, a curriculum informed by play activities can include the ways which children "act as playful pedagogues in their self-initiated activities". It is this concept of playfulness that should be a central informing source in ECCE (Early-Childhood Care and Education) where practitioners experiment with alternative strategies for implementing an effective play-based curriculum in the early years of education - a curriculum that foregrounds movement and the co-construction of knowledge. Excell and Linington (2011) talk about realisation of a pedagogy of play that would present ECCE practitioners with a new set of challenges. One of the main findings by Martlew, Stephen and Ellies (2011) highlighted that practitioners need to be more interactive and engage with learners.

In becoming more engaged and interactive, practitioners should encourage aspects of mature play which is characterised by the child's use of objects-substitutes that may bear very little, if any, resemblance to the objects they symbolise; for example, they may use a stick as a horse or a box as a train or car. In this way, children use gestures to present actions with real or imaginary objects. Also, mature play is the child's ability to take on and sustain a specific role by consistently engaging in actions, speech and interactions that fit this particular character. And the more mature the play, the richer are the roles and relationships between them. Another sign of mature play is the child's ability to follow the rules associated with the pretend-scenario in general (playing hospital versus playing school) and with a chosen character in particular (playing a doctor versus playing a teacher). Another characteristic of mature play is the high quality of play activities that often integrate many themes and span several days or even weeks. The question arises, is the play of today's children a mature one? Unfortunately, play that exists in many of today's classrooms does not fit the definition

of mature play. Even 5-6-year old children who, according to Vygotsky and Elkonin, should be at the peak of their play-performance, often display the signs of “immature play” - the ability to follow directions at all ages and in all conditions had generally declined. The research has found that the 7-year-old of today have self-regulation levels more like those of the preschool children of the 1940s. The authors attributed this phenomenon to the decline in both quantity and quality of play in preschool and kindergarten. Thus, ECD practitioners need to be fully trained and equipped to deal with play as a tool for teaching and learning which is so important in the successful development of the child.

Bodrova (2008) talks about scaffolding make-believe play in an early-childhood classroom; for many children enrolled in centre-based ECCE programmes, their classroom may become the only place where they can learn how to play. Therefore, it is important to note, however, that learning how to play in the classroom will not look the same as learning to play in an informal peer group of yesterday. Bodrova (2008) explains that most play existed in multi-age groups where children had an opportunity to learn from older ‘play experts’, practise their play skills with the peers of the same age and then pass their knowledge on to the ‘play novices’.

However, in today’s classrooms, children are almost always segregated by age and have to interact with play partners who are as inexperienced as themselves. As a result, many of the play skills that children were able to learn in the past by observing and imitating their older playmates, now have to be modelled and taught directly by the practitioners. In addition, unlike unstructured play of the past that often lasted for hours or days, play time in today’s ECCE classroom is limited and rarely exceeds one or two hours. Although after-school time could be potentially used for expanding play, in reality it only happens after play in the classroom reaches its mature level. Therefore, it means that to achieve rapid progress in the quality of play, play-scaffolding in the classroom needs to be designed to strategically target its most critical components.

2.2.6 Identification of Circumstances under which Play as a Pedagogy for Learning may be Successfully Implemented

According to Vu, Han, and Buell (2015), although many early-childhood practitioners believe that play, both for children's academic as well as social-emotional development, is important (Rothlein & Brett, 1987; Brett et al., 2002), how to meaningfully integrate play in the classroom often poses a problem. Vu, Han, and Buell (2015) pointed to a lack of pre-service and/or in-service training focusing on play for early-childhood professionals, which has resulted in an early-childhood workforce who have been told that play is important without being shown how to use it, or how to support it effectively in the classroom. However, given instructions as to how to engage in playful learning may help early-childhood practitioners learn how to better implement play in the classroom in order to bridge the gap that often exists between practitioners' beliefs and their practices. Although professional development can take many different forms, in-service training offers unique opportunities (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009). For example, in-service professional development opportunities can address new topics or content, as well as provide opportunities for early-childhood practitioners to work on previously-existing skills (Girard, Girolamento, Weitzman & Greenberg, 2011).

In addition to the in-class component, in-service professional development opportunities allow for an application and connection to practice that pre-service professional development or training sometimes lacks. Vu et al. (2015) examined the effects of in-service training for early-childhood practitioners and generally found positive outcomes with regard to changing practitioners' beliefs and classroom practices. Moreover, a recent meta-analysis indicated that such training can improve the attitudes, knowledge, and skills of early-childhood practitioners often leading to more developmentally-appropriate classroom practices (Fukkink & Lont, 2007). Thus, in-service training will go a long way in enhancing the development of practitioners' skills which will eventually be beneficial to all children under their guidance.

2.2.7 Threats in the Application of Play as a Pedagogy for Learning

Research has shown that there are a number of threats that impact in the implementation of play as a pedagogy for learning. Firstly, according to Vu, Han and Buell (2015), practitioners when asked about the importance of play in their classrooms, many said that play is important and critical to children's development. However, when pressed for a definition of play, practitioners provided a wide variety of definitions about play that were sometimes contradictory in nature (Sherwood & Reifel, 2010).

Secondly, even when early-childhood practitioners believed that play was critical to children's development, some did not devote a significant amount of time in their curriculum for play. For example, research conducted by Kemple (1996) found that while nearly all of the practitioners questioned stated that they considered socio-dramatic play to be valuable and that they provided time for such play to take place during the school day, classroom time allocated to socio-dramatic play varied widely, ranging from fifteen minutes to two hours per day.

Thirdly, practitioners' roles in children's indoor and outdoor play have been often found to be restricted primarily to more functional concerns, such as providing time, space, and materials as well as supervising and maintaining safety (Kemple, 1996, Chakravarthi, 2009), rather than engaging in play themselves with children. Davies (1997) stated that practitioners reported that their role was to primarily set the stage for children to play and watch for unruly behaviours instead of participating in play with children, let alone facilitating and extending children's play.

Finally, there appears to be a disconnection between practitioners' beliefs and their actual practices. This may be in part be due to the fact that practitioners may not know how to effectively incorporate play into the classroom day, which points to the need for professional development that may help bridge this gap. Therefore, the importance of directly addressing the role of play in academic as well as social-emotional development is important in order to foster its effective use in the classroom.

2.2.8 Recommendations for How Play can be Used as a Pedagogy for Learning

Wood (2013:80) maintains that “high quality environments support unity between playing, learning and teaching and ensure access and inclusion for all children”. In addition, Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008), citing Froebel, Montessori, dialogue pedagogy, Reggio Emilia and High Scope, argue for notions of act and object of play and learning where act refers to *how* children learn and play whilst object refers to *what* children play and learn. They argue that practitioners need to construct the environment and different kinds of experiences that advance children’s learning and opportunities for them to make sense of the world in which they play and learn. Wood (2008) talks about the conditions under which play should happen and these must include adult involvement and intervention, planning and organisation, well- resourced environments (indoors and outdoors), sustained periods of time for observational and assessment of play.

2.3 DEFINITION OF OPERATIONAL CONCEPTS

2.3.1 Play as a Pedagogy for Learning

For Wood (2004: 27), play as a pedagogy for learning is defined as:

The way in which early childhood professionals make provision for play and playful approaches to learning and teaching through play, how they design play/learning environments and the pedagogical decisions, techniques and strategies they use to support or enhance learning and teaching through play. This definition includes home-based pedagogies of play and the ways in which children act as playful pedagogues in their self-initiated activities.

Wood (2004, 2008, 2013) distinguishes between teacher-initiated and teacher-directed play activities. Play is also considered to be practice initiated by children, while learning is seen as a result of a practice or activity initiated by an adult. Wood, (2008) supports the notion that through a pedagogy of play, practitioners can provide

opportunities for free play and spontaneous-movement activities, as well as guided-movement experiences designed to support specific aspects of gross motor, fine motor and perceptual-motor development which, in the end, facilitate emergent literacy in young children.

McInnes, Howard, Miles and Crowley (2011), contend that conceptualising play in this way requires one to define play from perspective of children. They argue that utilising a concept of play based on children's perceptions that highlights playfulness as an approach and attitude to an activity may be helpful to practitioners in their understanding of play (Howard & McInnes 2010). Therefore, this approach of playfulness should enable practitioners to more fully understand play and their (practitioners) role in children's play and encourage them to co-construct play activities that afford children choice and control while enabling mix-framing.

Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) citing Langer's study (1997), talk about the notion of mindfulness which is another dimension of play in the learning situation. By mindfulness she meant "to be aware, perceive or be attentive towards something". Thus, being responsive and interested is as important in play as in learning. In addition, taking these notions seriously means recognising and making use of the close connection between play and learning. This is often a question of the practitioner seeing possibilities in all activities in early-childhood education. Oberheumer (2005) claims that the most common way to perceive goals is to state what knowledge or skills children are supposed to attain before they leave the early-childhood setting.

2.3.2 Constructivism

Mvududu and Thiel-Burgess (2012) state that constructivism is widely touted as an approach to probe for children's level of understanding and how effective learning is, and show that understanding can increase and change to higher-level thinking. Thus, constructivism refers to the *how* of learning and thinking. Furthermore, constructivism describes the way that the learners can make sense of material and also how materials can be taught effectively. In addition, according to Pundir and Surana (2016), children should no longer be passive recipients of knowledge supplied by practitioners who should no longer be purveyors of knowledge or classroom managers. Thus, the role

of the learner is conceived as one of building on and transforming knowledge. Therefore, for the learner to construct meaning, he/she must actively strive to make sense of new experiences and must relate it to what is already known or believed about the topic. Thus, learners develop knowledge through an active construction process, not through the passive reception of information.

The NCF (2005) also favours the role of a learner as an active constructor of knowledge, while the practitioner's role is that of a facilitator and guide with the classroom as an atmosphere or space for active exploration. It further states that the teaching and assessment methods should be constructivist in nature. The curriculum advocates that children acquire and apply knowledge and skills in ways that are meaningful to their own lives. In this regard, the curriculum promotes the idea of grounding knowledge in local contexts and real-life worlds of young children. However, very little guidance is given to how practitioners are expected to implement a play-based approach to learning, in a meaningful way.

2.3.3 Early-Learning Centres

Within the South African context, the early-learning centre is defined as any building or premises maintained or used for the admission, protection and care of more than six children away from their parents (Department of Higher Education, 2017). This is defined as a system that is used to arrange or organise materials in a classroom. Furthermore, the term learning centre has been judged by name because it has a connotation that learning takes place only in these specific centres (Brewer, 2004). Therefore, for purposes of clarification, a learning centre is defined as a specific location where instructional material are placed and organised in a classroom. Some of the learning areas that are mostly common and that you will see in the early-childhood classroom are art, library/listening/writing activities, blocks, dramatic play, and manipulative games. Play materials in the classroom are extremely important for multiple developmental perspectives such as cognitive, social/emotional, physical, and language.

The early childhood practitioners should know the children and families in their centre; they assess, document children's learning and know their interests. Then together with families, they plan carefully how to use play-based activities as one tool to promote the learning that will achieve the EYLF outcomes. Planning the environment to assist children to achieve outcomes is important in providing quality play experiences. A well-arranged environment should enhance children's development through learning and play. The environment is defined as the physical environment, its surroundings, and specific setting (Vickerius & Sandberg, 2006). Therefore, the physical environment will vary depending on the age and number of children in the classroom, as well as the goals of programmes linked to specific activities in the classroom. The environment can be intentionally planned in four main ways:

- The physical environment – health and security, layout of space, furniture and resources;
- The social and emotional environment - children need secure, warm and trusting relationships so they are confidently supported in their explorations and risk-taking. It should assist children to make connections with others, develop friendships and regulate their behaviours;
- The intellectual environment - there are times to leave children to play freely and times for intentional conversation, a well-placed question or query that will extend children's learning. Shared sustained conversations (Siraj-Blatchford, 2008) are the hallmark of effective early-childhood practitioners at ECD centres; and
- The temporal environment - the way that practitioners decide to use the time available in the programme as children need large blocks of time to develop play themes and ideas.

To elaborate on health and safety, practitioners need to create a conducive environment to avoid injuries and confrontations. Toddlers are expected to have a separate play area from the preschool children. Thus, a large, open space, free from obstacles, for the play area is encouraged for very young children. This type of area helps infants and toddlers move about and explore their environment without any risk. A safe environment also involves fire-safety. Therefore, fire regulations require that fire-extinguishers, as well as smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, be present and

in working condition in all classrooms. However, fire-exits, fire-alarms, and fire-escapes should be labelled clearly, and staff should be familiar with the location of building exits and emergency procedures.

In order for children to be familiar with fire-drill routines, practitioners must be trained by an official safety service-provider in order to be efficient in conducting regular fire-drills, among other duties. Thus, children will not be frightened if a real emergency did occur. Sanitation and bathroom facilities should be accessible. Classroom toys and other equipment are required to be sanitised on a daily basis as this will reduce germs from spreading around. All child-care centres are required to have adequate washing sinks, toilets, soap-dispensers, and towel-racks. Having the right size fixtures allows children to care for their own needs. Bathroom facilities need to be accessible to both indoor and outdoor play areas. Correct lighting, ventilation and temperature should be considered. In summary, health and safety rules must be adhered to strictly so that meaningful learning could take place.

2.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter dealt with different perceptions of play in preschool and how this affects the development of such learners. The theories surrounding constructivism connecting the value of play in ECD centres suggest that practitioners need to familiarise themselves with the psycho-social contexts of play as significant forces that enhance cognitive learning among mainly preschool children. The conglomeration of evidence from various researchers indicated in this chapter suggest that learners in the preschool age group are more than capable of using play as a means to beneficially add to their educational experiences and thus have an overall positivity on school learning. In addition, the practitioners must be capacitated with materials and guidance to make play as a significant method to uplift teaching-learning especially in the preschool stages. These include cognitive, social-emotional and motor-sensory skills that integrate to form a holistic learner who is given the impetus to cope with challenges that may arise in later schooling years. As far as play is concerned in early childhood programmes, not much direction

is given to practitioners to function optimally to exploit the inherent potential of learners – specific and in-depth guidance needs to come also from the DoE and literature on ECD. This study wishes to fill some of this gap but I will further use more resources such as expert experience, books, journals and other relevant sources to gather more rich data. In the next chapter, I focus on the research methodology that was used to research early childhood teacher's experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter makes explicit the methodological choices made and the decisions connected to research practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning. The chapter commences with an account of the methodological orientation of the study. Thereafter, the qualitative approach in general, and more specifically the case study approach is outlined. Next, I present a description of the sampling process, how the sites and participants were selected and the reasons for the choices made. Then, I provide an explanation of data generation methods and the data analysis processes that were used to make sense of practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning. I conclude the chapter by discussing issues of study concerning ethical consideration which is important for all researchers.

3.2 QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The study is situated within a qualitative approach. Qualitative research refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols and description of things that provide meaning (Berg, 2007). Therefore, the research questions often stress how social experiences are created and give meaning. The value-laden nature of such inquiry stresses the relationships between the researcher and subject(s), as well as the situational constraints that shape the inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Creswell (2009:176-176) argues that qualitative research is often conducted in the field, allowing direct interaction with the people being studied in their context. I found this approach relevant to my study because it gave me the opportunity to go out and interact with the participants so as to understand their experiences in using play as a pedagogy for learning.

Yin (2009: 72-73) says that "qualitative research provides a unique example of real people in real situations enabling readers to understand the ideas more clearly than

simply presenting them with abstract theories or principles". According to Mack, Woodson, Macqueen, Guest and Namey (2011), qualitative research seeks to understand a given research problem or topic from perspectives of the local population it involves. As such, qualitative research gives me the opportunity to work with practitioners in the local population around the QwaQwa region. I was thus able to get an understanding of the contextual realities of the world of the practitioners at the ECCE centres. I was able to get specific information around the experiences of play elicited from the practitioners as participants in the study.

In addition, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) see qualitative research as a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. They further say that qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. Therefore, the researchers turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos. Furthermore, at this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Drawing from the above common definition of qualitative research, the focus then is on subjectivity, meaning-making and interpretation presented through words and discourse.

My intention is similar to this explanation because in my study focused on play as a pedagogy for learning and meaning-making and interpretation through words and discourse of the ECCE practitioners. Hence, language was a key element of qualitative research. Language was used to describe, interpret and explain practitioners experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning at the ECCE centres. phenomenon under investigation. Nieuwenhuis (2010) captures a more nuanced understanding of qualitative research, arguing that this approach to research typically studies people or systems by interacting with and observing the participants in their natural environment and focusing on their meanings and interpretations.

3.2.1 Paradigmatic Approach

Ramrathan et al. (2017) defines a paradigm as the search for truth and is dependent on the positionality a researcher takes in constructing knowledge. This positionality is referred to as a paradigm, the set of lenses one assumes when viewing the world in search of the truth.

This study uses an interpretivist paradigm (which is also known as a constructivist paradigm) to research practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning in early-childhood centres. Therefore, my study draws from interpretivism as a theoretical and methodological framework. Theories explain how and why something operates as it does (John & Christensen, 2007: 7). I find this paradigm relevant to my study as I wanted to understand ECCE practitioners experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning. Interpretivism shares the view that humans are engaged in meaning and knowledge "making" not knowledge acquisition (Domenic, 2008; Raskin, 2002, 2008). Thus, interpretivism assumes that the meaning of experiences and events are constructed by individuals, and therefore people construct the realities in which they participate (Charmaz, 2006). From this stance, research aims to elicit and understand how research participants construct their individual and shared meanings around the phenomenon of interest viz: their experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning.

Also particular to interpretivism is a similar construction of meaning by researchers that "their interpretation of the studied phenomenon is itself a construction" (Charmaz, 2006:187). The interpretivist paradigm was suitable for my study as I was able to get the practitioners to talk about their experiences of using play as a pedagogy for learning in ECCE centres. Boner and Francis (2006) acknowledge co-construction of the researcher's interpretation in interpretivist research and calls for researchers to be reflective and transparent throughout the research. Through conversations with the practitioners I was able construct meaning of their real world understandings and experiences of using play as a pedagogic practice. As Cresswell (2003:8) argues an interpretivist researcher relies upon the "participants' views of the situation being studied" and recognises the impact on the research of their own background and experiences.

3.3 CASE STUDY APPROACH

Gray (2009) sees a case study as being strongly associated with qualitative research, partly because case studies allow for the generation of multiple perspectives either through multiple data collection methods, or through the creation of multiple accounts from a single method (Lewis, 2003). Baxter and Jack (2008) give a background on qualitative case study that it is an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context. Therefore, the case study approach allowed me to explore the practitioners working in early childhood centres and the complexities of working in challenging conditions (Yin, 2003).

Yin (2003) defines the case study method as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon with its real-life context, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and when multiple sources of evidence are (Yin, 2003: 23). Yin (2003) elaborates to say a case study design should be considered when the focus of the study is to answer "how" and "why" questions. In so doing I was able to make sense of the contextual conditions under which teacher understood the relationship between play, learning and play as a pedagogy for learning.

Ramrathan, le Grange and Higgs (2017) explain that case study methodology is a process of exploring a phenomenon within a bounded system of operation, such as a school, organisation, person or country. Its intention is to understand the phenomenon as it exists, and as influenced by the realities and contexts within which it is found. The intention of a case study is illumination and explanation, rather than generalisability.

From the above, it is evident a case study approach is relevant to my study as my focus was to bring the practitioners to the fore and explain and clarify how they use play as a pedagogy for learning in early-childhood centres.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) drawing from the work of Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) further suggest that the case study approach is particularly valuable when the researcher has little control over events. They consider that a case study has several hallmarks: it is concerned with rich and vivid description of events relevant to the case; and it also provides a chronological narrative of events relevant to the case. This was

particularly true for my study as I was able to acquire thick descriptions of practitioners' childhood experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning, the ways in which their training promoted or impeded the use of play as a pedagogy for learning and the complexities of working in rural contexts. This is in keeping with what Cohen et al. (2007) view that a case study approach allows for individuals and situations to speak for themselves, rather than to be largely interpreted, evaluated or judged by the researcher. In addition, O' Leary (2006) defines case study as a process that involves demarcating boundaries that separate some aspect of the case that makes it distinct. Therefore, as in the case of my study it involved defining practitioners based on their job, their intrinsic characteristics and their experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning.

3.3.1 The Relevance of Case Study

Zainal (2007) explains that case study research, through reports of past studies, facilitates the exploration and understanding of complex issues. This statement gives me the opportunity to explore and understand the complex issues, therefore case study, as an approach in my study, is more than relevant. Thus, the role of the case study approach in research becomes more prominent when issues with regard to education (Gulsecene & Kubat, 2006), and community-based problems. As a result, my research focuses on education in searching for understandings of how play was used as a pedagogy for learning. Taylor and Berridge, 2006 affirm that there are also other areas that have used case study methods extensively, particularly in government, management and in education. The relevancy of the case study in my research is that it gave me the opportunity to focus on a specific and interesting case; that of exploring teachers' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning in early-childhood centres. Using this, I was able to concentrate on a particular group of individuals - the practitioners in early-childhood centres because they were the participants.

Cohen et al. (2007) state that the researcher is integrally involved in the case. As the researcher, I was directly involved as I selected the practitioners and the centres that would be used in my study to portray the richness of the case in writing up the report. Cohen et al. (2007) maintain that a case study allows the researcher to portray what

it is like to be in a particular situation, to catch the close-up reality and thick description (Geertz, 1973b) of and feelings for the particular situation. I used interviews because it gave me the opportunity to learn about the people who are part of the case by conversing with them. Talking with informants is called interviewing. The types of interviews conducted by researchers vary in degree of formality; that is, informal to semi-structured to structured interviews (Stake, 1994). I made use of semi-structured interviews, as it was appropriate for my study as an instrument in qualitative research.

3.4 SITUATING THE RESEARCH

3.4.1 Selection of the Participants: Purposive Sampling

I made use of purposeful sampling, as my intention was to select participants who would suit the purpose of the research (Mukherji & Albon, 2011). Palinkas, Horwitz, Green and Hoagw (2013) maintain that purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest. Mukherji & Albon (2011) also see purposive sampling as a criterion-based selection where the sample provides information that is needed for purpose of the research. According to Ramrathan, Grange and Higgs (2017), the sampling process is determined largely by the nature and purpose of the research and the kinds of information needed. Therefore, I had to select practitioners who were knowledgeable about play and how it could be used as a means for learning. In using purposive sampling, I was able to select "information-rich" participants. The participants were selected on the basis of certain criteria that have been developed and refined prior to the selection of the participants.

In addition, as argued by Barnard (2002) and Spradley (1979), I had to consider the availability and willingness of the participants' involvement in the study, their ability to communicate, share experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner, which includes knowledge and experience. Bernard (2002) confirms the importance of availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner. Cohen et al. (2007) state that when using purposive sampling, a researcher should consider factors such as expense, time, and accessibility which frequently prevent researchers from gaining information from the whole population. Therefore,

the researcher often needs to be able to obtain data from a smaller group or subset of the total population in such a way that the knowledge gained is representative of the total population under study.

This study took place in rural QwaQwa. I chose QwaQwa as a location because it has a proliferation of early-childhood centres. I purposively selected practitioners who were teaching 3-4-year-old learners in rural QwaQwa as I believed that they would provide me with in-depth information around their experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning.

Purposive sampling may also be used when a researcher wishes to include only people who meet very narrow or specific criteria. Etikan et al. (2016) affirms that the purposive sampling technique, also called judgement sampling, is the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses. Thus, it is a non-random technique that does not need underlying theories or a set number of participants. Etikan et al. (2016) say that the researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of their knowledge or experience. Ramrathan, Grange and Higgs (2017) state that sampling, as a participant-selection process is a very important step in the research design. Therefore, sampling is a process of extracting objects, subjects or participants from the identified particular category of objects. Cohen et al. (2007) explains sample size (which often plagues researchers) which is just how large their samples for the research should be. They further elaborate that there is no clear-cut answer, for the correct sample size depends on the purpose of the study and the nature of the population under scrutiny.

In the light of the above, I chose six participants because I believed that this number would give me a greater reliability. The table below shows the selection of participants according to their training and experience. Ramrathan et al. (2017) emphasises that sampling should be approached very scientifically and should be clearly indicated and justified. Details should be provided regarding the size of the population as well as the sample itself so that the reader can ascertain if the sample is appropriate.

Table 3.1: Table Selection of Participants

Age Females	Training	Experience (years)	Pseudonym
42	3 weeks	4	Participant 1
46	2 weeks	3	Participant 2
44	2 weeks	6	Participant 3
30	2 weeks	3	Participant 4
45	3 weeks	5	Participant 5
43	3 weeks	6	Participant 6

I chose three learning centres around QwaQwa and interviewed 2 practitioners per learning centre. The teachers were trained by the Department of Social Development.

3.5 DATA GENERATION

For my study, I made use of a semi-structured interview. Gray (2009) sees semi-structured interviews as non-standardised and often used in qualitative research. The interviewer has a list of issues and questions to be covered and the order of questions may also change depending on what direction the interview takes. Furthermore, additional questions may be asked, including some which were not anticipated at the start of the interview, as new issues arise. Gray (2009) asserts that the semi-structured interview allows for probing of views and opinions where it is desirable for respondents to expand on their answers. This is vital when a constructivist approach is being taken where the objective is to explore subjective meanings that respondents ascribe to in terms of concepts or events. Such probing may also allow for the diversion of the interview into new pathways which, while not originally considered as part of the interview, help towards meeting the research objectives. Gray (2009) also says that responses should be documented by note-taking or possibly by tape-recording the interview.

I made use of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to acquire understandings of practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning.

Making use of semi-structured interviews was the most suitable for my study as it allowed the participants to respond as they saw fit. Semi-structured interviews allowed for a set of leading questions to be asked of all participants, with the possibility of including “unplanned” questions that allowed me to ask further questions based on the responses of the participants to gain more information and clarity (Ramrathan et al. 2017). In addition, because the questions were open-ended I was able to probe for further clarification and elaboration. Doyle (2015) defines semi-structured interviews as a meeting in which the interviewer does not strictly follow a formalised list of questions. The interviewer may prepare a list of questions but does not necessarily ask them all, or touch on them in any particular order. Consequently, I was able to gain understandings of practitioners’ world from their points of view. In so doing, I was able to unfold the meanings of practitioners’ experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning.

I had a list of broad questions for the semi-structure interview. The broad questions were as follows:

Do you have specific a curriculum that you follow in your teaching?

Tell me about your training.

How long was your training?

Which department gave you the training?

What do you understand by play?

What do you understand by pedagogy?

Do you think that play and learning go hand-in-hand? Elaborate.

How do you plan for teaching using play?

How can we use play as a pedagogy for learning?

Do you have relevant teaching-aids in your classes?

How do you incorporate indoor and outdoor activities?

Do you have any possible threats in using play as a pedagogy for learning?

What strategies do you come up with in teaching, using of play as a pedagogy?

Do you ever plan any activities for the children to do during their outside time? If so what?

Ideally, how would you describe a practitioner’s role during outside time and inside time?

Do you change or rotate the materials for children's outdoor use? If so, what kinds of materials do you rotate?

Recording of data is considered very important when conducting semi-structured interviews. I realised that I would have difficulty in recording everything that was said by making notes during the interview. I thus made use of a tape-recorder. Before recording the interview, I asked for permission from the participants. I also made use of hand-written notes particularly when I needed to further probe for clarification or elaboration. As soon as I had finished the interview, I made a written report of the recorded interview. According to Henning (2014), whether a researcher has collected data through interviews or from audio-recording, it is vital that one makes notes so as to remember what was said. Notes also serve as memos. For example, once I had transcribed the interview, I made memos to ask the participants about certain information that they had given. The intention was to get clarification so as to further probe. Gomez (2014) says that semi-structured- interview emphasises the aspects to keep in mind while conducting an interview. In my study I used face-to-face interviews because I thought it was the best fit for the study. Another benefit is that it gave me the opportunity to obtain more detailed information than what was available through other data-collection methods.

During semi-structured interviews, the researcher must create a relaxed atmosphere so that the participants feel more comfortable having a conversation with the interviewer as opposed to filling out a survey. During the interview process with the practitioners, I tried to ensure that they felt comfortable by firstly talking about my experiences in early-childhood education, the challenges that I faced teaching young children and the belief that I have in their commitment to teaching young children in an uncertain and unequal space. I then gave them the opportunity to talk about themselves and their teaching experiences. I wanted them to see that I was interested in their lives as women and as early-childhood teachers. During this time, I also realised that they saw themselves as teachers rather than practitioners. I also allowed them to use their home language if they felt comfortable to do so. I tried as much as possible to allow them to speak by not pushing the pace of the interview or putting words into their mouths.

By doing so, I allowed the smooth transitions from one topic to the next. Because the participants were using their home language during the interview, I had to transcribe the interview responses into English. The participants' home language was Sesotho. I transcribed the interviews myself as I am a home-language Sesotho speaker. Because the data sets were so large, I was also able to make choices of what data I would add and what data I would leave out. This was in relation to my research questions and the purpose of my study.

During the interview process, I provided guidance and steered the conversation towards the purpose of the study - understandings of teachers' experiences of using play as a pedagogy of learning. Cook (2008) explains that in a usual semi-structured interview, the researcher has more control over the direction of the conversation and its content than in a non-directive data-collection approach; but still the participants are not restricted in elaboration or changing the course of the interview which is recognised also by Merton et al. (1956), since they consider the interviewer to be the person who activates an interviewee's repertoire of responses. Datko (2015) states that the principal aim of the semi-structured interview is to obtain the participants' objective response to a known situation from his or her lived world. As such, I was able to acquire descriptions of the teachers' experiences of play as a pedagogy of learning.

However, it could be said that the major purpose of the semi-structured interview is to reveal an interviewee's subjective theory; one's complex stock of knowledge about the examined issue based on his/her own subjective experience and lived daily world. Thus, the practitioners talked about how they used play on a daily basis for teaching and learning. Cook (2008) affirms that the researcher must encourage the participants to speak in detail about the subject of scientific interest without the use of a pre-determined set of standardised questions. Researchers would rather use a sort of interview guide or framework focused on central themes and suggested questions where the content is not strictly prescribed but can be modified according to how the conversation evolves (Gavora, 2006).

Kvale (1996) and Cook (2008) conclude that the semi-structured interview is neither a structured "questionnaire" with pre-conceived questions nor an unstructured

conversation with no prescribed topics; it is a conversation where interviewee makes account of his/her subjective experiences related to the theme introduced by the researcher, and the interviewer attempts to explore these experiences for further details worth of analysis. This statement made by Kvale (1996) and Cook (2008) allowed me to be able to ask questions by not following any particular order and it gave the participants the opportunity to tell their story without being intimidated by the interviewer. In addition, the non-standardised organisation and relative open-endedness of the semi-structured interview make it a flexible data collection strategy.

Semi-structured interviews made it easy for the participants as well as myself to engage with one another without any difficulties as they were free to express their ideas without any fear. Gavora (2006) and Cohen et al. (2007) describe it as a more adaptive as opposed to a rigidly structured interview since in this approach, the researcher is allowed to rephrase, formulate, or rearrange the suggested question items and ask for particular examples and further clarifications or explanations. By following Gavora (2006) and Cohen et al. (2007), I was able to rephrase the questions where clarity was needed as well as give elaboration on this process; at times the participants would elaborate on one fact for a long time but following the semi-structured interview style, there was no problem in doing that. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews allowed me to be able to make digressions, include examples and further questions, or exclude unsuitable ones; and introduce or even present more precise verbal cues.

Govora (2006) and Cohen at al. (2007) mention that when confronted with the completely unstructured interview, the predetermined thematic concentration of this technique enables more effective data-collection. Thus, interviewing in this neutral area between fixed and absent structure, which is organised thematically with no fixed range of responses, brings the interviewer in-depth knowledge about the examined topic without determining the results prior to the questioning process (Cook, 2008; Proksa et al., 2008). I found it appropriate to use semi-structured interviews because this process does not force or compel the researcher as well as participants to be too formal whereby the participants are not free because especially when the researcher feels that he/she/ is in control of the interviews and that they must follow the specific structure in answering questions and not to digress.

Datko (2015) citing in Svec et al. (1998) adds that the semi-structured approach to interviewing represents a methodological compromise between norm and theory within the intentions of open systems. Svec et al. (1998) find the semi-structured interview suitable for those research settings where one part of the educational phenomenon under investigation can be clearly and objectively identified in the preconceived interview framework, and the articulation of the other one depends on participants' perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes. Gavora, 2000, and Cohen et al. (2007) believe that this open-ended conception may thus lead the interviewer to obtain new and unexpected knowledge. I find this statement more relevant to my study because by using open-ended questions, my intention was to obtain new and "unexpected" knowledge from the early-childhood practitioners as they have the information I need. In doing this, I was able to focus on individuality, subjectivity, uniqueness, and spontaneity of response, and needs to understand and interpret the main points of respondents' statements with the use of natural language. Furthermore,

I allowed the practitioners to talk about how they plan for play-based learning, and how they planned for indoor and outdoor experiences. Thus, information was gleaned on how they monitor the outdoor play in making sure that it is safe to let the children to play in utilising the different equipment, and what is their role with regards to the situation.

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS

Abraham (2016) states that qualitative data analysis is the rigorous process of selecting qualitatively distinct data, articulating the qualitative meaning ascribed to those units, and commenting on the qualitative similarities and differences noted between and among these distinct units of data. In elaboration, the goal of qualitative data-analysis is to describe, explain, and/or interpret qualitative patterns by using words, numbers, pictures, sounds, or other forms of presentation. Hatch (2002:148) elaborates:

Data analysis is a systematic search for meaning, it is a way to process qualitative data so that what has been learned can be communicated to others. Analysis means organizing and interrogating data in a way that

researchers see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, and critiques or generate theories. Further it often involves synthesis, evaluation, interpretation, categorization, hypothesizing, comparison, and pattern-finding.

I made use of Creswell's (2009) steps for data analysis. For this study, I organised my data analysis into three steps. The following steps proved useful for data analysis:

Step 1: Organise the data and defining the codes

Step 1: To organise the data, I read through the data collected to gain a general sense of the information and reflect on the overall pattern. It was also important for me to generate a description of the setting or people and identify themes from the coding.

Step 2: Developing the categories and codes

Step 2: I used open coding. I looked at my data, read the data over and over again in order to create labels to establish meaning from the information given by participants. I looked at specific words of the participants and started categorising them. These categories emerged from the text; and so created meaning. Abraham (2016) talks about axial coding: I looked at the relationships among the open codes meaning that I looked at what was common between the codes, what connections I saw. Furthermore, I looked at what influences these connections had, and the conditions that made it happen, the context in which it was part of, and the strategies that were used to accomplish it.

Step 3: Developing themes and sub-themes

Step 3: When coding the data, I specifically marked passages in the data to group them according to patterns which emerged from the research literature and what practitioners were saying. Keeping the literature in mind, I grouped the data into themes. After a long working process of moving back and forth between the data and the literature, I identified four themes. I then tabulated the data according to the following themes:

- Personal background about play and learning through play.
- Personal understanding of play as a pedagogy for learning.

- The role of free play in learning.
- Planning for play.

These themes formed the basis of my data analysis chapter.

3.7 TRUSTWORTHINESS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Reliability and validity are considered important aspects in qualitative research. In qualitative research when researchers speak of validity and reliability they usually refer to the terms credibility and trustworthiness.

In keeping with the tradition of qualitative research, I had to ensure that findings were accurately described and captured. Leung (2015) in defining reliability refers to exact replication of the processes and the results. In addition, the essence of reliability for qualitative research lies with consistency. However, to ensure reliability, the researcher must demonstrate that the methods employed are consistent and reproducible. Kaman and Othman (2016) citing Patton (2001) states that validity and reliability are two factors which any qualitative researcher should be concerned about while designing a study, analysing results and judging the quality of the study. In this study I explained the rationale for the method and procedures I used. I also tape-recorded the interviews to ensure that participants' voices were captured accurately. I developed a descriptive text that was discussed with my supervisor. Credibility is involved in establishing that the results of the research are believable, Lincoln and Guba (2011). Furthermore, it depends more on the richness of the information gathered, rather than the amount of data gathered. Thus, in reality the participants or readers are the only ones who can reasonably judge the credibility of the results.

As argued above, validity refers to the issues of trustworthiness and credibility. In qualitative research, the researcher has to ensure that the study's findings are trustworthy. In ensuring the trustworthiness in analysis concerning the validation, I involved the participants to comment on the analysis and interpretations themselves. I provided them with a summary of the analysis and let them to critically comment upon the adequacy of the findings. This was to ensure ethical research procedures during the research process.

Leung (2015) defines validity in qualitative research as “appropriateness” of the tools, processes, and data. Further, it is used to check whether the research question is valid for desired outcomes, the choice of methodology, the validity of the design process, the appropriateness of the sampling and data analysis, and finally the validity of the results and conclusions. However, the choice of methodology must enable discovery of findings in the appropriate context for it to be valid. In application of this theory to validate my work, I presented the work to my supervisor to check and comment. Furthermore, I got the opportunity to present my study at a research seminar for thorough critiquing by other research colleagues. They were able to give their inputs and I noted down their suggestions and made changes where necessary.

In ensuring the credibility of my study, I worked closely with “critical” friends in the Sustainable Rural Ecology team and my supervisor. I also discussed my transcripts with practitioners to check if I captured their meaning properly. Lincoln and Guba (2011) indicate that transferability refers to the degree in which the research can be transferred to other contexts; this section is defined by readers of the research. Therefore, the reader notes the specific details of the research situation and methods, and compares them to a similar situation that they are more familiar with. With regards to my studies, I will present my work to the research committee to appraise and give me feedback.

Dependability ensures that research findings are consistent and could be repeated. However, this is measured by the standard of which the research is conducted, analysed and presented. I followed this procedure by having reported in detail on how I collected data and analysed it to enable an external researcher to repeat the inquiry and achieve similar results. Conformability consists of questions on how the research findings are supported by the data collected. This is a process to establish whether the researcher has been bias during the study; this is due to the assumption that qualitative research allows the research to bring a unique perspective to the study. In my study I avoided biasness by only recording information that I found it to be relevant to my study. However, I did record the views of the practitioners, especially if I considered them to be important to my research.

3.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ramrathan et al. (2017) argue that access to research sites is a controlled activity. Researchers are not at liberty to enter a research site and conduct research without receiving permission. This is for various reasons, including the need to prevent unauthorised disclosure of information and defamatory or irrefutable damage to the institution or organisation. In order to access a research site, permission is needed from an authorised individual of an institution or an organisation. To ensure that my research process was ethical, I conducted a number of procedures.

Ramrathan et al. (2017) explains that research ethics has become a central issue in educational research and no research can be conducted without due regard to ethics. In addition, regulatory frameworks and regulatory bodies have been established to manage and approve research ethics protocols. Data-gathering for educational research can only begin once ethical clearance has been sought, approved and a certificate of ethical clearance has been issued. Ethics are closely associated with morals and involve embracing moral issues in the context of working with humans (Gregory, 2003). Thus, ethics have now evolved to include issues beyond humans, incorporating a respect for and conservation of the environment. Thus, ethics are also located within human rights and democracy discourses.

Ramrathan et al. (2017) adds that the ethical requirement of protecting participants' rights is a central issue in research ethics. He elaborates saying participants must know their rights and limitations within the research process. These rights include: the right to full disclosure of the research intentions, the rights to full disclosure of the nature of the participants' involvement within the research design, the right to full disclosure of the potential risks to the participants, the right to confidentiality of information provided by participants, and the right to withdraw from the research process without any consequences to the participants.

My project was completed through guidance on ethical conduct of research from the Post-Graduate School, my research supervisor and the Faculty of Education Ethics Advisor. Full disclosure and the participants' ability to comprehend the nature and

purpose of the research, as well as their own involvement in the research, are issues of key concern in the application for ethical clearance. Hence, the review panel for ethical clearance in the application needs to know who the participants are, how they are selected and whether they can comprehend the research process in order to give formal consent to be a participant in the research process. There are other concerns with regards to ethical consideration – for example, that of data management once it has been collected. As a researcher I was obliged to indicate how the data would be managed once collected; for example:

- Will the data be accessible to others?
- How will the anonymity of the data source be guaranteed?
- Where will the data be stored?
- Who will have access to the data?
- When will the data be disposed of?
- How will the data be disposed of?

In addition, I had to talk to the practitioners and tell them that they have the right to refuse to participate based on the above questions.

Resnik (2011) defines ethics as norms of conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. In following ethical procedures in my study, I firstly completed the ethical clearance form at the University of Free State asking permission to conduct the research. The Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Education granted me ethical clearance and my ethical clearance number is **UFS-HS2016/0319**. I also wrote a letter to the Department of Social Development asking for permission to be allowed to visit the early-childhood centres to conduct the research.

Once I obtained permission from the Department of Social Development, I produced a consent form for the matron of the ECD centre which comprised of full details of the research agenda, the nature of participation of the early-childhood centre, and who will participate. In setting the scene, I went to the learning centre and introduced myself and the reason in being there. I was able to meet with the matron, the person who is in leadership in a particular learning centre. She called the practitioners and introduced me to them and told them about my study

I then went and talked to the practitioners on an individual basis and asked them if they would be willing to participate in the study. I negotiated time frames with them so that I did not disturb the programme of the day. I also made it clear that I was going to use the language that they felt free to communicate in so that they may be able to freely express their thoughts. The interviews took place over a period of one week per centre as I had to go back and forth to give feedback on their responses.

During the conversations, it was decided that we would make use of pseudonyms to protect the practitioners' identity. I also told them that during the writing-up process I would not use their names so as to ensure confidentiality. I told them that I was there to get the information from them because they were experts in their field and I wanted to learn from them. I also told them that they could withdraw from the interviews if they saw fit to do so. I made it clear that their participation was voluntary and that there was no penalty or loss of benefit for non-participation. I also indicated that the study would benefit both parties because the practitioner's inputs will be written in my thesis and their information would contribute to better understanding of how play and learning are linked.

3.9 LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I see this study as a starting for many other studies related to play as a pedagogy for learning in early childhood education. Whilst I interviewed teachers to explore their understandings and use of play as a pedagogy for learning, it would have been useful if I had conducted classroom observations of how teachers made use of play to advance the learning of children in their classrooms. This would have ensured triangulation of the data as I would have been able to compare and cross check data across different early childhood centres. This might prove valuable for future research. In addition, taking into account the four themes that emerged from the data, the theme on how practitioners plan for play and the role of free play in learning could be studied from a variety of angles such as document analysis of practitioners' planning processes and classroom observations of free play.

Furthermore, I purposively selected three early childhood centres and six participants in order to explore how teachers understand play as a pedagogy for learning in early

childhood centres. One limitation of the study is that the sample size was too small. However, I believe that the methodological approach that I used allowed for a deep exploration of practitioners' experiences of play, learning and play as a pedagogy for learning. In addition, whilst the sample size was too small, my intention was never to generalize findings to other contexts. But rather I wanted to generate understandings of early childhood practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning in the contexts in which they work.

3.10 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I provided a description of the research and the methodology used in my study to answer my main research question. I used the qualitative approach as it was suitable for the theoretical ideas gleaned from the interpretivist paradigm. The rationale behind the use of semi-structured interviews, sampling procedures, data generation, data analysis and issues of trustworthiness were also provided. Semi-structured interviews enabled me to be flexible when generating data from participants. From the analysis of the data, four themes emerged that helped me to make sense of how practitioners understood play as a pedagogy for learning. Furthermore, issues of ethics throughout the research process were extrapolated upon. Finally, limitations of the research methodology employed in the study were discussed and directions for future as a result thereof were offered. In the next chapter, I present the analysis of the four themes that emerged from the data to answer the research question: *What does the early childhood practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning suggest about learning and pedagogic practice in early childhood centres*

CHAPTER FOUR

PRACTITIONERS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF PLAY AS A PEDAGOGY FOR LEARNING

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I present the analysis of the data and I discuss the findings in relation to practitioners' understandings of play as a pedagogy for learning in early-childhood centres. This discussion focuses on the analysis of the data collected through semi-structured interviews to explore how play as a pedagogy for learning was used in early-childhood centres. The data generated was also structured to answer the main research question: *What do the early-childhood practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning suggest about learning and pedagogic practice in early-childhood centres?*

Four themes emerged from an analysis of the data: *personal background about play and learning through play, personal understanding of play as a pedagogy for learning, and the role of free play in learning and planning for play*. These themes are supported by sub-themes. In addition to interviews, photos were taken and participants were afforded an opportunity to provide narrative reflections and descriptions thereof. As indicated in chapter three, pseudonyms were used for the participants: for example, P1 for practitioner 1 and P2 for practitioner 2 etc. What follows is a discussion on the emerging themes and sub-themes, which are presented to answer the research questions according to the objectives of the study.

4.2 OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- To identify how early childhood practitioners understand play, learning through play and play as a pedagogy for learning.
- To make sense of how these understandings influence pedagogic practices at the early- childhood centres.

- To provide recommendations of how play as a pedagogy for learning can be used in early- childhood centres.

To answer the main research question (*what do the early-childhood practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning suggest about learning and pedagogic practice in early childhood centres?*), the following sub-questions were identified:

- How do early childhood practitioners understand play, learning through play and play as a pedagogy for learning?
- How do these understandings influence their pedagogic practices?
- What do these understandings suggest about how play can be used as a pedagogy for learning in early childhood centres?

The table below provides a representation of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the analysis of the data in order to answer the above research sub-questions.

Table 4.1 Themes and Sub-Themes

Theme	Sub-theme
1: Personal background about play and learning through play.	Sub-theme 1.1: Childhood memories of play and learning through play. Sub-theme 1.2: Professional development and training
2: Personal understanding of play as a pedagogy for learning.	Sub-theme 2.1: Importance of play for learning Sub-theme 2.2: Play and social development Sub-theme 2.3: Play and cognitive development Sub-theme 2.4: Play and emotional development Sub-theme 2.5: Play and motor development
3: The role of free play in learning	Sub-theme 3.1: Indoor play Sub-theme 3.2: Outdoor play

4: Planning for play	<p>Sub-theme 4.1: Curriculum</p> <p>Sub-theme 4.2: The role of the practitioner</p> <p>Sub-theme 4.3: The school context and the practitioners' pedagogy of play</p> <p>Sub-theme 4.4: The role of the matron</p>
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4.3 THEME 1: PERSONAL BACKGROUND ABOUT PLAY AND LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

This theme emerged during the semi-structured interviews with the practitioners. The practitioners' personal background about play and learning through play are explained through their childhood memories of play and learning and to their training and professional development.

4.3.1 Sub-theme 1.1: Childhood Memories of Play and Learning through Play

The early-childhood practitioners had different memories of play and learning through play.

P1 did not attend an "early-childhood centre in our time but I remember having a lot of time and space to play...we played different kinds of indigenous games such as playing stones, skipping, clapping, hands, hopping... She felt that as "a child, I was allowed to take more risks...I would jump on the fences and climb trees.

P2 remembered different kinds of games with her friends such as "hide and seek, hopscotch, jumping with one leg into a block that we have drawn on the ground, Kgati (two children standing apart each other holding a rope and the third child jumping through the rope). She talks about how she learnt how to "follow the rules of the games and thus learnt from one another".

P3 we had fun playing different games like Diketo, throwing the stone up and down and you catch it having seated down taking turns, we will play up until we have the winner. We enjoyed ourselves and will find that there are some children who are older than others and they will take the lead.

P4's earliest memories of play and learning were when she learnt how to "follow the rules and negotiating with one another...where we would do so without fighting". She talked about how they learnt to "correct ourselves by setting the rules and following those rules... after we have agreed and disagreed but finally we will have a game that has rules".

P5's memories of play and learning were when they played pretend-games: "we played games where we would pretend to be other people using our experiences we had, from our home or from school". We also played with different objects and built play houses and houses in the trees.

For P6, play was about having fun with little restrictions from parents: "We played a lot during our time and we had fun, playing without restrictions coming home being dirty and tired and our parents were not bothered by that. We were so independent, if there is something wrong with the things that we were using for play, we would fix those things on our own".

The statements above show how the practitioners' earliest experiences of play activities created different affordances for learning (Wood, 2013). For all the majority of practitioners, play was fun, child-initiated and provided opportunities for children to take risks. These playful experiences provided opportunities for children to learn about their limits, face challenges, make choices and decisions about how to play with one another. In addition, the practitioners earliest memories of play were grounded in different types of play: games with rules, pretend play and symbolic play. In addition, constructive play also formed part of their earliest experiences of play where P5 and her friends *played with different objects and built play houses and tree houses*.

4.3.2 Sub-theme 1.2: Professional Development and Training

Within the South African context, "there is a wide recognition that professionalisation, continuing professional development and career paths, post-provisioning, adequate conditions of service, and a conducive working environment, are critical elements of an effective national early-childhood development human resources strategy".

(Department of Social Development, 2015: 92). Training provisioning for the ECD workforce includes technical and vocational colleges, non-profit organisations and more recently, higher education institutions. The practitioners at early-learning centres had gone through u some form of training in early-childhood education. Whilst there are some expectations emanating from them having been exposed to professional knowledge, professional practice and ways of enhancing children's learning through play, the practitioners felt that the training that they received was inadequate.

P1 explained that the training she attended was *"for two weeks and it was offered by the Department of Health... in that training I was taught how to make my own learning aids and how to follow the programme for me to teach. I was given the certificate which is on the PIP... you know the Pre-Introductory Programme. In the programme, I was taught basic teaching skills such as how to plan for play inside and outside of the classroom and how to make resources for teaching and learning. I found the programme very helpful because I can plan and develop learning experiences that is play based for the little ones"*.

For **P2**, the training that she received was not sufficient as she was *"given training... three weeks by the Department of Health. The training was on PIP and I got the certificate and with this certificate I am now on level one"*. However, she had strong feelings about the kind of training that she received as she still feels that *"I still need more training...how to plan and organise my classroom...also how children learn and play...I still need more training"*.

On the other hand, **P3** believes that her training to teach in ECD gives her a qualification that will help her to *"further out my training by moving from level 1 to 4 which will take me the whole year to be trained but it will be on part time. Level 5 is also there but it takes two years for one to be trained"*.

From the above, it can be deduced that practitioners at the early-learning centres have undergone some training in early-childhood education. However, the training that they received was limited and did not focus on how to use play as a pedagogy for learning. What is also evident is that whilst the Level 1 qualification does give the practitioners

some inroad into becoming a professional in the field, it is insufficient for them to have a deeper understanding of how to use play as a pedagogy for learning.

4.4 THEME 2: PERSONAL UNDERSTANDING OF PLAY AS A PEDAGOGY FOR LEARNING

The practitioners had strong feelings and beliefs about what constituted play as a pedagogy for learning and their role in enhancing learning through play. P1 believed that play, body movements and a stimulation of the senses go hand-in-hand. She believed that children learn *"through seeing. I bring pictures in class to let the children to see the pictures...and I come up with the song or recitation. I demonstrate the song or recitation and they sing or move their bodies"*. She saw her role as one of developing a *"close relationship with children...for them to learn"*.

P2 had strong beliefs about how children learn to play and what her role is during play as she says *"play is important to children they must play. I give them time to play during indoor play. Here children are using different equipment that are in class to play with, then is where they portray different personalities"*. P3 agreed with P2 and said that *"play as a pedagogy for learning is fantasy play...they play using equipment in the classroom"*. P3 explained that for optimum learning through play to occur, children need encouragement, time and learning materials to stimulate their learning: *"I do allow them to play with the toys in class every day.. I let them to rotate the different stations in class to play...Because I want them to be exposed to different ideas and learn through experiencing different things"*.

P4 believed that through play, children developed their perceptual motor skills: *"Play is important children must to exercise their motor muscle. I let them play indoors and outdoors so that they can develop their muscles"*. However, her role during these play activities was reduced to that of monitoring safe play as *"I only watch them so as they may not get hurt or fight each other when they do play"*. In addition, P5 believed that children acquire skills of social engagement and that they learn that learning can be fun as *"play is important and children learn through play because they talk to one another, they enjoy playing and they have fun"*.

From the statements above, it is evident that practitioners at learning centres have different perceptions of play as a pedagogy for learning and their role during play.

4.4.1. Sub-theme 2.1: Importance of Play for Learning

The importance of play in so far as learning is concerned also came to the fore during the semi-structured interviews. Practitioners in early-childhood centres expressed the following on the importance of play:

P1: *Play is important to children because they learn how to communicate to one another and as they play they share the toys meaning that they are able to share the toys, they negotiate what to play and how to play.*

P2: *Children learn from each other, they correct each other, ...even those children who are not yet have develop the speech they are able to learn how to talk properly.*

P4: *Children like to play. It is their duty to play throughout the day*

P6: *I do teach through play because children learn more easily when they do play as they play they learn something that is important for them and they enjoy so much when they play and I play with them during fantasy play. I listen to them when they play then I join them even though they don't become free if the practitioner is too much involved in their play.*

From the above it can be deduced that the practitioners have different viewpoints on the importance of play for learning; and what was also evident was that they have some appreciation of the importance of play and how it enhances the learning of the young child. Additionally, they made some attempts to incorporate play in their teaching so as to ensure that learning takes place. The practitioners also agree that play is a common vehicle that facilitates learning.

4.4.2 Sub-theme 2.2: Play and Social Development

Newton and Jenvey (2011) maintain that through social play, children develop social competence as they acquire skills of social engagement, co-operation, interaction and sharing. The practitioners in the study believed that children learn through social engagements with one another. The practitioners had the following to say about play and social development:

P1 said that *through play children learn to know each other better and they share some ideas. They also strengthen their relationship they become friends they also talk to one another and as they are playing they solve their problems meaning that they do learn some certain skills.*

P3: I let my children to play with toys as they talk about the toys then they start to negotiate as they start doing that they socialises with one another and they enjoy and become so happy.

P4: Children play together as they play they enjoy themselves they learn on how to talk to one another they even correct each other in their talking they learn from each other and learning becomes easily for them.

P5 play is natural for children you can see how spontaneous is, playing without any struggle, but if I come to them they start not to be free and others start to be somehow shy because I am listening to them. The moment I live then they start to be free on their play saying whatever they want to say unlike when I am with them.

P6 children when they do play they learn to know each other and they socialize and to get to know each other better. They share ideas and come up with solutions. When talking to each other they learn the language they correct each other and they enjoy playing be only the children without adult interference. They feel free in pretending to be other people reprimanding one another coming with solutions.

The statements above show that the practitioners have some knowledge of the relationship between play and social development. What is also evident is that the practitioners ensure that they cater for children to develop social skills and rules of social engagement for children to work together, to collaborate and interact. In this social play, children also learn the rules of social engagement such as working together, collaboration and interaction as they *"learn to know each other better and they share some ideas..., become friends"*, they begin to *"strengthen their relationship they become friends... they solve their problems"* and begin to *'negotiate,'* and learn from each other as they *"even correct each other in their talking"*. These statements also reveal that the children have learnt the rules of how to interact with each other and how to get along with each other.

4.4.3 Sub-theme 2.3: Play and Cognitive Development

In constructivism, there are three main cognitive skills that are widely acknowledged when play in early-childhood is concerned: problem-solving, self-regulation and creativity. The early-childhood practitioners in the study had different understandings of the relationship between play and cognitive development. P1 and P5 believed that cognitive development and listening, reading and writing go together. P1's and P5's statements promote the image of learning as the acquisition of a set of discrete autonomous skills of reading and writing:

P1: *"I find it very challenging because these learners they don't know how to write and I have to teach them for a long time because they don't listen in class, they also forget very easily".*

P5: *I need to call them by their names for them to listen to me...they just don't listen. So it is difficult to teach them numbers, colours, shapes, size and other concepts.*

P2, P3 and P4 experienced difficulty in teaching certain cognitive skills and this was as a result of ill-discipline and large numbers. For P3 *"children are not disciplined enough...they play when I teach, I have to teach one thing for a long time I understand they are very young to remember everything but at least if they can try to concentrate in class they need to be able to read and write their names".* P4 also experienced challenges in relation to the discipline of learners as *"the children are fighting in class and I have to take a break and deal with the situation."* P2 talked about the challenges in relation to the number of children in the class. She says, *"I do have many children in class it not easy to work with them effectively that is why I take a very long time to teach some concepts like shape, colour, and number."*

P6 tries to ensure that the children in her class acquire problem-solving and creativity skills by *"asking them questions on what I was teaching to test their level of understanding and to see if they can come up with different ideas".* She also attempts to see if children are able to recognise and make meaning of what they have learnt: *"I do this by asking probing questions to able to show their understanding not actually the understanding but how do they attach meaning to some other things, these children can tell something that you as a practitioner you are not aware of because*

they are good in attaching meaning to everything they see". This statement also points to the self-regulation of learners as they have assimilated what they already know into new ways of knowing and understanding.

From the above narratives, it can be deduced that the practitioners had simplistic understandings of the relationship between play and cognitive development. **P1, P2, P3, P4** and **P5** saw the relationship between play and cognitive development as the development of autonomous skills for school readiness, and not in terms of contemporary understandings of play and cognitive development – problem-solving, self-regulation and creativity. These autonomous skills include among others, listening, reading and writing, writing your name, perceptual skills of shape, number, and colour. These statements point to the practitioners' understandings that cognitive development and play are about getting the child ready for school where children are disciplined and have acquired the skills needed for formal schooling. The positive is that **P6** tried to ensure that children acquired skills in meaning- making, problem-solving, self-regulation and creativity.

4.4.4 Sub-theme 2.4: Play and Emotional Development

Play as a tool for emotional development is one of the themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews of the practitioners. **P1** and **P2** believed that through play children develop emotional competence and develop a sense of well-being at the early-childhood centre because *"when they first come to the centre, they cry a lot and I hold them and talk to them to make them feel safe and loved. I also let them play with the different toys and with one another and they learn from this"*. **P2** says that *"when these children come for the first time to learning centres, they cry a lot... We even carry them on our backs just to try to make them feel accepted. When they begin to talk to one another and make friends...it is like they belong...and they learn that this is their place too"*.

P1 and **P2** wanted children to have a strong emotional connection with learning and they do this by cuddling and talking to the children, carrying them on their backs and allowing children to play freely and engage with each other. Additionally, **P3** also *"tries to make the children feel very welcome and when they arrive early in the morning I go*

to them and greet at them with love and start to play with them". P3 believes that she needs to display unconditional love and regard for the child so that he/she develops emotional competence and the practitioner does this by showing them love and playing with them.

However, P4 says that *"some children already have emotionally developed...there is P4 and P5 believed that children at this stage should not display their emotions: Not too much of drama and crying. I tell them I don't want all that crying and fussing".*

P 5 says she *"teaches them that to cry is not a good thing. I sometimes tell them the story that is related to emotional development and they start to understand gradually that crying is not good. They even go to extent to try to remind themselves... if there is one who is crying then they say don't cry, you are no more a baby, you need not cry tell us what do you want".*

Researchers in early social and emotional skills maintain that an ability to effectively talk about emotions, display emotions and communicate emotions is important in helping children become confident and competent in developing friendships and relationships, resolving conflict, coping with anger and frustrations and managing emotions (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Ashdown & Bernard, 2012). By not allowing children to display their emotions, they will become frustrated and display anti-social behaviour (Ibid, 2012). These common-sense understandings can be attributed to a lack of training and poor understandings of the role that emotional development plays in the holistic development of the young child. In addition, the practitioners had no real understandings of the ways in which they can use play to enhance the emotional development of the children in their classrooms.

4.4.5 Sub-theme 2.5: Play and Motor Development

The practitioners in the study saw the importance of allowing children to develop physically through play:

P1 believed that *"children play and as they play they exercises their bodies and their muscles become strong, with any kind of play I can see which area the child does has gained the development.*

For P 2 *"when children play they develop physically as well as their muscles, gross motor and fine motor. This is important. I give them activities like cutting out from the magazine, using scissors with regard to gross motor development it where they run and jump"*.

P 3 gives *"them activities like to draw and colouring, their pictures, as they do that I don't check for accuracy because I am focusing on how I can help them to develop their fine motor skills"*.

P4: *"comes up with activities like to let them cut and paste those who don't know how to use scissors I help them to show them on how to handle the scissors how to cut out the pictures by these activities their muscles are developed."*

P5: ensures that children *"have books where they do write or colour using the colours to develop and prepare them for formal school to be able to hold the writing material"*.

P6: maintains that *"children are not at ease to use scissors but I allow them to learn and experiment with the scissors...there are many activities that children can be exposed to for example letting them to tie up their shoe laces is another activity that is related to fine motor muscles."*

The excerpts above show that the practitioners have knowledge and understanding on how to help children to develop their motor skills, and they have an understanding of the ways in which children can develop their motor skills through play. Wood (2008) asserts that through a pedagogy of play, early-childhood practitioners can provide opportunities to support specific aspects of gross motor, fine motor and perceptual-motor development which, in the end, facilitates emergent literacy of young children.

4.5 THEME 3: THE ROLE OF FREE PLAY IN LEARNING

This theme emerged during practitioners' talk about how they implemented play-based activities for the development of learning. I noticed that when practitioners talked about play and learning, an association with free play was made and this was further differentiated into indoor and outdoor free-play activities. These common sense understandings could be attributed to a lack of understanding of the relationship between play and learning.

4.5.1 Sub-theme 1: Indoor Free Play

The practitioners believed that learning and stimulation should take place at all times and that the practitioner has to incorporate different types of learning experiences inside the classroom.

P1 talked about different learning areas that she creates where children can play indoors: *"There are different learning areas in the class...different leaning corner where children can sit and write, art corner, reading corner fantasy corner and box construction areas."*

P2 also had different learning corners as she believed that these play-based activities helped to develop perceptual motor skills: *"cutting and pasting, colouring, play dough...any activity where fine motor muscles are involved"*.

P3 allows children to make their own choices and feel comfortable when playing indoors as *"they like this kind of a play because they play as they want and they come up with their ideas on what to do and who to play with."*

P4 believed that when children play they learn as they are using their everyday experiences to pretend to be other people or negotiate and solve everyday problems: *"children enjoy fantasy play and make-believe play where they pretend to be other people that they came across"*. She saw indoor play as important for social engagement as when children *"play together, they are able to suggest what they can play and they learn to negotiate and also to solve problems maybe to share the toys without fighting or maybe to exchange the toys if there is a need"*.

P5 suggests that practitioners need to rotate indoor activities so that children do not choose the same learning activities all the times". She believed that the indoor learning environment influences how and what children learn so *"you have to know what you want the children to do or to learn during indoor play."*

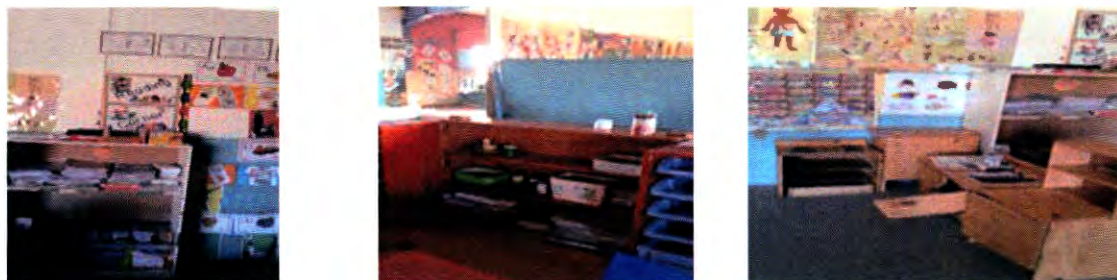
P6 also believed that children learn through play: *"As children have chosen their different learning areas I move from one group to another just to listen to them when*

they are enjoying themselves. Others don't mind coming closer to them to listen but others they don't feel free to have the practitioner to come closer to them. For such group of children, I only pass by not asking anything but remember there are those children who likes attention whenever they play they want me to be there to listen to them and they will start to communicate and to correct one another.

P1 remarked that 'there are different learning areas in the class, different learning corners.'

The pictures below show the different learning corners in P1's early childhood learning space.

Figure 4.1: Learning Spaces



It can be deduced that practitioners do have some understanding about indoor play as they have different allocated areas that cater for all the children at the early-childhood centres. They seem to have some understanding of how this kind of play has an impact on children's representational and self-regulatory abilities. These understandings could be attributed to their experiences of working at the centres. They see their role as an observer where they move from one group to another, watching and listening to children as they play and engage with one another. What is interesting to note is that they see observation as part of assessment.

4.5.3 Sub-theme 2: Outdoor Free Play

Research on the value of outdoor play focuses on specific aspects like social development (Waite, Rogers & Evans, 2013); mental and physical health (Grey et.al., 2015); social co-operation, flexibility and creativity (Knight, 2011) and holistic development of the young child (Kemple et.al., 2016).

The importance of outdoor play is of utmost concern for the practitioners and this was related to the development of gross motor skills:

P1: *outdoor play is important as children are able to run, jump, climb and their gross motor muscles are developed*”.

P2: *“children develop their muscles during outdoor play”*.

P6: *“outdoor activities are important for my children because they exercise their body and to keep them healthy”*.

P3 talked about how *“children learn to play together and learn how to take risks and become more secure”*.

Below is an example of outdoor free-play activities at the early-childhood centre where **P4** works.

Figure 4.2: P4 - Outdoor Free Play Activities



In addition to the health benefits of outdoor play and the development of gross motor skills, some of the practitioners talked about their role during outdoor activities, which included supervision and safety:

P1 believed that the outdoor play areas need to be *“safe and secure so that children can learn and discover the outdoor play areas more”*.

P4 said that *“before I take out my children to play I check first for the playground for things that may hurt the children and the equipment and then let them to play”*.

Other practitioners spoke of their role as that of motivator and providing support for the development of physical and motor skills:

P4: *"and those who have not gained the balance because they are scared of heights... I motivate them and help them to climb up. I get their friends to show them how to do the activities".*

P3 also motivated and encouraged children during outdoor activities: *"those who have weak muscles are unable to climb so I help them and motivate them...I tell them you can do it my child keep on doing it".*

From the statements above, it can be deduced that practitioners have some understandings of the importance of outdoor play. For the majority of the practitioners, outdoor play helped to develop children's gross motor skills which was important for the development of physical motor skills. **P3** was the only practitioner who talked about the importance of outdoor play for the development of children's social and emotional development which entailed risk-taking, working together and developing a sense of security. These understandings can be attributed to experiences and earliest memories of play during their childhood. In addition to the development of children's learning, the practitioners saw their role as that of support, motivator, supervisor and providers of safe and secure learning environments and equipment.

4.6 THEME 4: PLANNING FOR PLAY AS A PEDAGOGY FOR LEARNING

This theme emerged when the practitioners were talking about the ways in which they plan for learning through play. The following sub-themes emerged as significant ways of enhancing learning through play:

- the curriculum;
- the role of the practitioner;
- the school context and the practitioners' pedagogy of play; and
- the role of the matron.

4.6.1 Sub-theme 1: The Curriculum

The practitioners talked about the different ways in which they plan for play including child-initiated and teacher-directed activities. In addition, the practitioners also talked about the training that they received and its relation to planning for teaching-learning through play.

P1, P2 and P6 planned for learning through play by making use of themes:

P 1: *I teach using the different themes that are on our programmes. I also have lesson plans so that I know what I have to teach each day”.*

P 2: *also “follows the daily programme... it tells that how much time I can use for each activity. I teach using different themes as it is easier for children to learn concepts when I use a theme”.*

P 6: *also “follows the daily programme. It has time allocation. So I know what to teach and for how long”.*

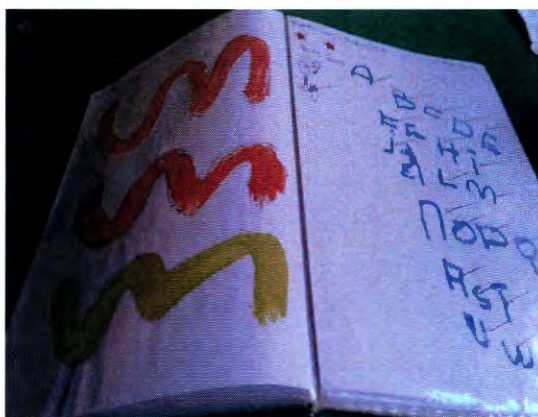
P3, P4 and P5 see curriculum-planning as preparation for formal schooling:

P4: *“teaches them how to write their names as well as alphabets and they are able to write the alphabets. I put the alphabet chart on the wall for them to copy”.*

P 3: *“gives them activities to colour, like the pictures in their books”.*

The figure below is an example of an art activity that formed part of a small-group activity in **P4’s** classroom.

Figure 4.3: P4 Small group activity



P 5: *makes “children write...to prepare them for formal school, they need to be able to write their names, know their numbers, colours, shapes and the alphabets. The activity below is an example of an activity that children complete in their work books in P5’s classroom.*

Figure 4.3: P5 - Colouring Activity



The statements above show that the practitioners are aware of how to plan for learning at the early-childhood centres. However, what is also evident is that planning procedures are teacher-directed where the teacher chooses the activities, its purposes and its design, and then implements the curriculum. The intention is to develop and prepare the child for formal schooling by teaching, amongst others, the traditional content such as colours, shapes, numbers, and the alphabet. Kashin (2011) explains that theme-based teaching is grounded on the school-model and negates the uniqueness of children and their ability to construct knowledge through active engagement with one another, and with knowledge.

In addition, a theme-based curriculum ensures that ownership of the learning belongs to the teacher. This is evident in **P3**'s statement where she says "...and for control /

mark the books and signed them so that parents can see what we do at the learning centre". However, as argued by P4 "during my training, I learnt how to plan for the day...plan for the theme, plan for the morning, for outdoor activities, group activities...that sort of thing". These practices are considered to be best practice as the practitioners are making use of practical guidelines and using observation and innovative methods to teach children based on child development norms encompassing developmentally-appropriate practice (Langford, 2010). Because of limited training, these ways of working with children provide the practitioners with a framework for what and how to teach.

4.6.2 Sub-theme 2: The Role of the Practitioner

The practitioners had different understandings of their role during play:

P1: *It is important that practitioner should be a facilitator during children's play. In being a facilitator "I should engage and intervene in children's play when necessary.*

P 2: *I need to be able to come at the level of the children, use simple language for them to understand and I use objects and pictures, I allow them to talk about the objects and picture, to tell their experiences.*

P3: *I need to guide children during their play activities, I must have different learning corners for example fantasy corner where they play pretending to be adults and constructing knowledge experiences from homes. It is fascinating when listening to them during fantasy play talking and playing with toys. I only intervene when necessary.*

P4: *I follow the programme when planning and we sometimes attend the workshop where we are being trained on how to plan and teach through play hence we do have art corner and how to teach literacy and mathematics.*

P 5: *I use play as a method of teaching and learning by using pictures and singing the songs singing together moving our bodies.*

P6: I teach them by using actions to capture their attention and they love movement to be included when teaching I point to each part if we are singing the song that talks about the body parts and by so doing they get to know the different parts of the body.

From the narratives above, it is clear that generally practitioners know their role and they do have knowledge and skills on how to teach in early-childhood centres.

For example, the children know how to use physical objects in doing counting in mathematics. The learners putt counters according to the numbers and where it is written *two*, the child has to put *two* counters to show understanding. The children are enjoying themselves because they learn through play. Samuelsson and Carlson (2008) declare that play is also considered as a child-centred strategy, while learning is seen as an activity initiated by an adult.

4.6.3 Sub-theme 3: School Context and Practitioners' Pedagogy of Play

The practitioners talked about how the school context influenced the ways in which they implemented play for learning:

P 1 believed that the school context is important as *if you have enough resources and support from the matron it would be easier to implement play.*

P 2: I teach them because I want them to become ready for formal school, I come up with activities which incorporates play, let me give you example colouring, cutting, pasting... enjoy because they are playing.

P3: I do teach through play but the parents don't understand they want their children to be taught on how to read and write, when children are busy colouring and pasting then the parents become happy because they think of school readiness.

P4: I let my children to play during indoor play but the space is not enough for I do have many children in my class even the toys are not that much enough in that way in implementing indoor play it is not that much effective having not enough resources at times children are fighting over one thing, but to help them not to fight I let them to rotate around learning areas that are in class.

P5: I teach them and let them to play during outdoor play, I also need to check for the material for outdoor activities for the safety of the children that equipment that are not in good condition we remove them from being used by the children because of their safety. I also check the ground for small sharp things that can cause accident to children to be removed. Parents are not that much interested to play during outdoor because they want their children to be taught as if it is a formal school. Sometimes it is frustrating because I don't know whether to teach the children as if it is a formal or early childhood centre where play is the central point of learning. In addition, when our children need to go to formal school there is much confusion because teachers nearby when receiving these children from early childhood centres they are expecting these children to be school ready.

P6: I teach them through pictures, to colour, paint and cutting out the pictures for those who are not able to hold the scissors I demonstrate to them on how to hold it and even helping them by touching their hands for help. I also give them a home-work for children who are 4-5 and I do file their work, parents become happy when the children are busy with writing materials because they think that their children need to be able to write for formal school

From the above, it is evident that the practitioners do have knowledge and the skills on how to incorporate play in teaching and learning in early-childhood centres. However, they spoke of the expectations of parents who believed that early-childhood education is about getting the child ready for formal schooling. For many of the practitioners, teaching and learning is about preparing the children for emergent literacy and becoming school-ready.

4.6.4 Sub-theme 4: The Role of a Matron

The matron has to play an important role in the ECD centre. These tasks and responsibilities are complex and multifaceted. Meier and Marais (2012) say that the role of the matron include duties such as determining licensing, health and safety regulations of the centre, enrolment of children, supervision of the curriculum, responsibility for physical assets and equipment, leadership in parent involvement, staff relationships and financial management. In terms of planning for play as a pedagogy for learning, the matron has to provide direction for setting curriculum

objectives, ensuring the implementation of the curriculum and evaluating the implementation of the curriculum. When I asked the practitioners about the kind of support that they get from the matron/principal in the implementation of a play-based curriculum, the practitioners had the following to say

P1 said that she receives very little support from the matron in the form of *“helping me to plan the curriculum...like planning for play.”* She also said that *“the resources I get are not enough as I have many children and besides the space is not big enough for both outdoor and indoor play activities”*.

P2 also spoke of the challenges that she experienced in terms of the support that she receives from the matron of the centre: *“Our matron does believe that learning materials are very important because she always tells us that children learn through play and that they learn when they use the learning materials...but the learning materials are not enough because the children...they play with the resources and sometimes we need to replace the resources... but we do not have enough money to buy these resources all the time”*.

P3 also said that she received little support from the matron at the ECD centre when it comes to *“helping us to plan for play”*. She talked about how she learnt from her colleagues who *“show me how to plan and how to teach young children”*. Whilst she receives little support from the matron in terms of curriculum planning, the matron buys resources and learning materials for indoor free play: *“We have learning materials for our classrooms like charts, blocks and story books”*. However, *“the outdoor play space is not enough and I have many children”*.

P4 says that the matron at the ECD centre where she worked helped her to *“deal with the parents...sometimes the parents can be difficult...so the matron helps by talking to the parents.”*

For **P6**, the matron provides support when it comes to assisting with curriculum development and the provision of learning materials: *“She does work with us, she helps us by making sure that we all sit together and plan... she sees to it that children are taught and there are learning materials for them to do the work”*.

From the statements above, it is evident that support for the practitioners comes in various forms from the matrons at the ECD centres where they work. This support includes curriculum planning, purchasing of resources and engaging with parents. However, what is also evident is that the support that they receive is also to ensure that the children at the centre develop skills for emergent literacy and school readiness.

4.7 CONCLUSION

Chapter 4 presented the results of data that was collected from three early childhood centres. Data from three case studies of two participants from each ECD centre was presented and interpreted in relation to how they experienced play as a pedagogy for learning. The research objectives and research questions were addressed through the data generated and the results were presented in the form of a narrative. The concluding chapter (Chapter 5) provides an overview of the study, highlighting the purpose of the research. I also provide a summary of the research results in tabular form and interpretations in relation to relevant literature. I emphasise the contributions that the study made and suggest recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS: EXPLORATIONS OF PRACTITIONERS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF PLAY AS A PEDAGOGY FOR LEARNING

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In this study I sought to understand and detail practitioners' understandings of play as a pedagogy for learning in early childhood centres. In chapter four, I analysed and interpreted data generated from semi-structured interviews to acquire an understanding of how practitioners gave meaning to their experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning. The data analysis was guided by the literature review. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the study to illuminate the interconnectivity of the chapters. Thereafter, I present a comparison between the research findings of this study to outline the key findings and the extent to which these address the research questions. I conclude this chapter with the recommendations and directions for future research.

5.2 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

In this section, I reiterate the purpose of this study and outline what was discussed in each chapter to show the interconnection of the chapters. The purpose of this research was to explore practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning in early-childhood centres.

As outlined in Chapter 1, despite the importance of play in early-childhood education, the definitions, value and purposes of play continue to be debated (Wood, 2013). Within contemporary South Africa, ECD legislation, policies and programmes advocate a play-based programme to the teaching of young children. However, from my readings of research and from my visits to ECD centres in the QwaQwa District there seems to be confusion as to how to teach children through play. These macro and micro accounts provided the rationale for the study and it is against this backdrop that I ask the question: *What do the early-childhood practitioners' experiences of*

play as a pedagogy for learning suggest about learning and pedagogic practice at the early-childhood centres?

I commenced **Chapter 1** with a brief sketch of the research literature around play and learning, and play as a pedagogy for learning. I put forward the rationale aims, objectives and research questions of the study. I then provide a summary of the theoretical and methodological approach that was used in the study.

In **Chapter 2**, I developed the theoretical framework to make sense of teachers' understandings of play as a pedagogy for learning. I firstly provided an outline of the theoretical framework of constructivism and play as a pedagogy for learning, which provided an analytical lens to understand practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning. The literature reviewed that focuses on constructivism and play as a pedagogy for learning was centred on the objectives of the study, which were:

- To identify how early-childhood practitioners conceptualise play and learning through play;
- To explore how early-childhood practitioners understand play as a pedagogy for learning;
- To make sense of how these understandings influence pedagogic practices at the early-childhood centres; and
- To provide recommendations of how play as a pedagogy for learning can be used in early-childhood centres.

Finally, I outlined the key operational concepts which provided the analytical lens to make sense of the data. These included:

- **Play as a pedagogy for learning**
Wood and Attfield (2005) provide evidence that play develops children's content knowledge across the curriculum and enhances the development of social skills, competences and disposition to learn.
- **Constructivism**
It is "a way of learning that requires participation in an activity" (Sheehy, 2002:2). Bredekamp, Knuth, Kunesch and Shulman (1992:6) agree that

knowledge is constructed as a result of dynamic interactions between the individual and the physical and social environments.

- Early-childhood centres

Within the South African context, the early-childhood centre is defined as any building or premises maintained or used for the admission, protection and care of more than six children away from their parents (Department of Higher Education, 2017).

- Teacher-directed play

According to Gmitrova and Gmitrov, (2003), teacher-directed play means joint activity of the teacher and children with the teacher organising and continuously monitoring the process, elaborating situations that require simultaneous cooperation, and encouraging interaction of all children in the classroom.

- Child-initiated play

Brooker (2011) and Hedges (2011) consider child-initiated play as complex, fluid and dynamic, because children constantly adjust their actions and interactions to changing goals and circumstances.

- Free play

Free play It is associated with self-actualisation and existential qualities such as flow, which involves mood state, deep immersion, concentration, harmony between the task and the intentions and abilities of the player (Wood, 2010), a sense of wonder, creativity and inventiveness, harmony between the child and the natural world (Berger & Lahad, 2010) and the unity of affected child and cognition (Holzman, 2009).

Chapter 3 described the qualitative methodological approach that was used. The case study research method was used to present three cases at early-childhood centres. I provided an outline and justification of the purposive sampling method that was used to explore practitioners' understanding of play as a pedagogy for learning. I also outlined the data generation methods that were used. Next, I described the data

analytical procedures that I employed to make meaning of practitioners' understandings of play as a pedagogy for learning. The following themes emerged from the analysis of the data:

- Personal background about play and learning through play.
- Personal understanding of play as a pedagogy for learning.
- The role of free-play in learning.
- Planning for play.

In **Chapter 4**, I presented the data to describe practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning. These results are embedded in the relevant themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data.

In **Chapter 5**, I attempt to weave the different dimensions of the study together to shed light on the themes that emerged and then present the findings. In addition, I also provide an outline of the recommendations and directions for future research.

5.3 SUMMARY AND SYNTHESIS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

This study aimed to explore early-childhood practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning. In order to make sense of the different dimensions of the main research question, the following sub-questions were identified:

- How do early-childhood practitioners conceptualise play and learning through play?
- How do early-childhood practitioners understand play as a pedagogy for learning?
- How do these understandings influence their pedagogic practices?
- What do these understandings suggest about how play can be used as a pedagogy for learning in early-childhood centres?

The table below provides a synthesis of the research findings to answer the main research question: ***What do the early childhood practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning suggest about learning and pedagogic practice in early-childhood centres?***

How do early childhood practitioners conceptualise play and learning through play?	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Theme 1: Personal background about play and learning through play.						
Sub-theme 1.1 Childhood Memories of Play and Learning through Play	Did not attend an ECD centre but played indigenous games.	Played games with friends. Learnt to follow rules and learnt from others.	Played indigenous games with friends. Learnt to take turns. Play was fun.	Learnt how to follow rules, negotiate with one another, and correct self with friends.	Played pretend games with friends. Learnt to follow rules, negotiate with one another, follow and set rules.	Played games with no restriction from parents. Learnt to be independent. Solved problems when playing.
Sub-theme 1.2 Professional development and training	Attended training for two weeks. PIP (Pre-Introductory	Training for three weeks (PIP). Not enough training.	Training for two weeks. Training will help her to	Training for three weeks.	Training for three weeks.	Training for two weeks.

	<p>Programme).</p> <p>Was taught how to make resources and how to plan for play.</p>		<p>further her studies.</p>			
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Theme 2: Personal understanding of play as a pedagogy for learning.

<p>Conceptualisation of play</p>	<p>Play, body movements and a stimulation of the senses go hand in hand. Need to develop a close relationship with children.</p>	<p>Children they must play. Role is to provide time and equipment to play.</p>	<p>play is about fantasy play. Play is about using equipment in the classroom. Role of the practitioner is to provide encouragement, time and learning materials to</p>	<p>Play is about the development of perceptual motor skills. Role of the practitioner is to monitor safe play.</p>	<p>Play is about social engagement. Play is fun.</p>	
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			stimulate learning.			
Sub-theme 2.1: Importance of play	They learn on how to communicate. Children learn to share, negotiate how to play and what to play.	They correct each other. Learn from each other.		It is their duty to play, they like it.		Learn when they play. Important for children to play.
Sub-theme 2.2: Play and social development	Children learn to know each other better. Share ideas, strengthens relationships, become friends. Talk to each other, as they are playing they solve their problems.		Socialise and they enjoy one another.	As they play, they enjoy themselves. Correct each other. Learn from each other. Learn from each other.	When playing with each other – spontaneous play.	Get to know one another, socialise. Share ideas and come up with solutions. Learn language, correct each other.

Sub-theme: 2.3: Play and cognitive development	Cognitive development and listening, reading and writing go together	Difficulty in teaching cognitive skills, because of large numbers.	Not discipline enough, they play even if it is not the time to play.	Difficult to teach cognitive skills as children are always fighting in the class.	Cognitive development and listening, reading and writing go together	Teaches problem solving and creativity skills through the use of play.
Sub-theme :2.4: Play and emotional development	Through play children develop emotional competence and develop a sense of well-being.	Through play children develop emotional competence and develop a sense of well-being.	Tries to make children feel welcome and develop a sense of belonging in the classroom.	Children need to control their emotions.	Crying is not a good thing.	Parents to prepare children for school.
Sub-theme: 2.5: Play and physical as well as motor development	Play and exercises their bodies.	Gross and fine motor muscles.	Children develop fine motor skills by drawing and colouring	Provides activities for the development of fine motor	Writing and colouring to develop fine motor skills.	Provision of activities like using a scissors to cut,

				skills like cutting and pasting.		tying shoelaces ... - VCXdevelop fine motor skills.
Theme 3: The role of free play in learning.						
Sub-theme :3.1: Indoor play	Provides different learning areas.	Has different learning corners for the development of different skills.	Allows children to make own choices in the class when playing indoors.	Provides different kinds of activities like fantasy play, make-believe play. Important for social engagement.	Need to rotate indoor activities.	Role of the practitioner in indoor play – monitor and move from one group to another.
Sub-theme:3.2: Outdoor play	Important for the development of gross motor skills. Outdoor play areas must be safe and secure.	Children develop their muscles.	Role of the practitioner – motivate and support children.	Checking the playground – safe and secure.		Exercise their bodies and keep healthy.

Theme 4: Planning for play						
Sub-theme: 4.1: Curriculum.	Different themes. Follows a lesson plan	Follow daily programme.	Preparation for formal schooling.	Preparation for formal schooling.	Preparation for formal school	Follows daily programme.
Sub-theme:4.2: The role of practitioners	Facilitator during children's play. Engage and intervene when necessary.	Teach at the level of the children. Use simple language, objects and pictures.	Serve as a guide during play activities. Only intervene when necessary.	Follows a programme. Provides different learning corners for literacy and mathematics.	Uses pictures, songs, body movements to teach.	Uses actions, body movement, songs when teaching.
Sub-theme:4.3: School context and practitioners' pedagogy of play.	School context important – enough resources and support from matron easier to implement play.	Teach to get them ready for school.	Parents want their children to read and write.	Not enough space and resources to implement play-based programmes.	Role of the practitioner is to ensure that the spaces are safe. Parents and teachers at the schools want children	Parents want children to read and write.

					to be school ready.	
Sub-theme:4.4: The role of the Matron	Little support from the matron in terms of planning the curriculum and resource provisioning.	Not enough money to purchase resources – little support from the matron.	No support from the matron for planning the curriculum. Support from colleagues.	Supportive by communicating with parents.		Support from the matron in terms of curriculum planning and provision of learning materials.

5.4 FINDINGS: REFLECTING ON PRACTITIONERS' EXPERIENCES OF PLAY AS A PEDAGOGY FOR LEARNING IN EARLY-CHILDHOOD CENTRES

The table above provides a summary and synthesis of the practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning. The discussion that follows presents my reflections on the key findings and possible meanings I uncovered through my analysis.

5.4.1 Theme 1: Personal Background about Play and Learning through Play

The practitioners' earliest experiences of play and learning through play was explained through their childhood memories of play and learning. They talked about the different kinds of games, including indigenous games that they played. Through these games children learnt how to socially engage with one another by creating rules, negotiating with one another, as well as self-correcting. As argued by Wood (2013), play is the site where children constantly negotiate, explore and test their social identity. Therefore, it is important that practitioners plan for both child-initiated and teacher-directed play as it is through play that children begin to "exercise choice, freedom, control and autonomy" (Ibid, 2013: 133).

Practitioners talked about the differences in how they used to play as young children, and how children of today play. This could be because formal schooling seems to outmanoeuvre early-childhood education as school-readiness seems to be the norm (Martin, 2015). In addition, as argued by Bodrova and Leong (2007), the current dilemma facing early-childhood practitioners is whether to focus on teaching academic skills or to promote play-based learning, learning through self-discovery, and engagement with the environment.

The practitioners talked about the training that they received on how to implement play in their classrooms. They talked about the inadequacy of their training as it took place over two/three weeks. Vu, Han and Buell (2015) pointed to a lack of pre-service and in-service training of early-childhood practitioners. In addition, Biersteker (2012) agrees that 75,000 to 100,000 ECD practitioners in South Africa require training or upgrading concerning further training and qualification levels. Draper (2013) also talks about how early-childhood practitioners have been told that play is important but they

are not shown how to specifically implement play to advance the learning of young children. This has significant implications for teacher-training and in-service programmes where re-thinking should occur about how play can be used to enhance learning. In addition, there needs to be programmes on demonstrating how teachers can plan for implementing play for the advancement of learning in early-childhood centres.

5.4.2 Theme 2: Personal Understanding of Play as a Pedagogy for Learning

When asked about how they understand play as a pedagogy for learning, the practitioners equated these understandings to the different ways in which children learn when they play. Consequently, they talked about the skills that children acquire when they play, or their (practitioners) role during different play-based activities. This has implications for teacher-training and in-service training programmes where the focus needs to be on assisting ECD practitioners acquire an understanding of what a pedagogy of play is and the ways in which ECD practitioners need to make provision for play and playful approaches to learning and teaching (Wood, 2013). In addition, Van Heerden (2012) also states that practitioners need to make use of different quality learning experiences for learning through play to occur.

The practitioners talked about the link between play and social development, and they believed that children learn through social engagements with one another. In addition, they had some understanding of how to meaningfully integrate play in the classroom (Rothlein, Brett, 1987; Brett et al., 2002). As research suggests, it is through social play that children develop social and emotional competence (Newton & Jenvey, 2011; Broadhead, 2006). Clements (2004) Smith and Pellegrini (2013) and Van Heerden (2012) mention that sensory, social and pretend-play as well as playing with objects assist children with discovering, learning and solving problems.

The practitioners believed that the relationship between cognitive development and play was about getting the child ready for school where children should be disciplined and have acquired the skills needed for formal schooling. Bodrova and Leong (2007) highlight the important role that play has in preparing children for the rigours of formal schooling and suggest that the current dilemma facing early-childhood practitioners is

whether to focus on teaching academic skills or to promote and encourage developmentally appropriate activities for children. Bodrova and Leong identify that one of the important elements of play is the restraint placed upon the activity by the children themselves in the form of rules that the child must follow in order to play 'properly'. This notion of self-regulation was considered by Vygotsky (1978) as a way in which young children learned to follow rules and control their emotions rather than acting on impulse, and suggests that if children are able to do this they are likely to be able to master the academic skills required in formal schooling.

The practitioners had different understandings of the relationship between play and cognitive development. They believed that play was about the development of school-readiness skills such as shape, colour, counting, and number. Only P6 was the practitioner who considered it important for children to acquire skills of meaning-making, problem-solving, self-regulation and creativity. Smith and Pellegrini (2013) mention that sensory as well as playing with objects assist children with discovering, learning and solving problems.

The practitioners believed that children develop emotional skills when they play with one another. However, some of the practitioners talked about how children should not display their emotions. It is suggested by Merewether and Fleet (2014) that early-childhood practitioners establish children's emotional state during play by observing them and listening with intent. Results of this research show the importance of developing learning situations that contribute to the social and emotional well-being of children.

What was clear from the interviews is that the practitioners had knowledge and understanding of how to help children develop their physical motor skills. Literature reveals that physical and motor development helps to improve children's concentration span (Smith & Pellegrini, 2013). In addition, Wood (2008) supports spontaneous-movement activities, as well as guided movement experiences designed to strengthen specific aspects of gross motor, fine motor and perceptual motor development, which in the end, facilitates emergent literacy in young children.

5.4.3 Theme 3: The Role of Free-play in Learning

The practitioners created connections between learning and free-play and this was further differentiated into indoor and outdoor free-play. They talked about how they planned for indoor and outdoor play and the different learning stations in their classrooms. Such learning stations included the art corner, reading corner, fantasy corner and construction.

During indoor play, practitioners talked how they needed to plan different kinds of learning experiences. However, what was also evident was how they saw their role during indoor play. The practitioners' roles ranged from observer, supervisor and guide during indoor free-play. Observing, listening, and guiding form the core processes in early-childhood assessment (Martlew, Stephen & Ellies, 2011). Making use of different resources such as toys, cutting, colouring, and objects encourages exploration through play (Frobose, 2011).

Outdoor play was considered important for the early-childhood practitioners and this was related to the development of physical motor skills. The practitioners also talked about the importance of children's safety during outdoor play. Risky play or motivated play where maximum experimentation and exploration of the environment is encouraged which is usually associated with speed and height, is necessary for children to overcome fears as well as to explore and challenge themselves (Little, Sandsetter & Wyver, 2014).

5.4.5 Theme 4: Planning for Play

The practitioners indicated that they follow a curriculum for learning through play. They also indicated that they learnt how to plan for play during their training. The teachers made use of themes, teacher-directed activities and school-readiness activities. Because of their limited training, these planning procedures gave them a specific way of working with young children. However, what was also evident is that children's ways of knowing and doing are invisible during the practitioners' planning processes. This is confirmed by Samuelsson and Carlson (2008) who state that play as a pedagogy for learning is totally invisible in many early-childhood classrooms.

The practitioners were aware of their role during play and this ranged from being a guide and facilitator who organises different learning experiences, using different resources and different kinds of activities. According to Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff (2003), children should be supported by early-childhood practitioners to actively learn and construct knowledge through play. Learning should be a mediated, guided and facilitated process between the practitioner and the child where they (children) engage their own ideas while playing (Chaille', 2008; Thomas, Warren & de Vries, 2011). The results of the study in relation to the importance of early-childhood practitioners' role during children's play concur with the literature. It seems, however, that some early-childhood practitioners are unsure of when to get involved, mediate and guide children's play.

The school context had an influence on the ways in which the practitioners implemented play as a pedagogy for learning. The practitioners talked about how the school context pushed for the development of emergent literacy and school-readiness skills. Further, they also talked about a lack of support and insufficient resources that hindered the implementation of play as a pedagogy for learning.

From the statement above it is evident that practitioners do have knowledge and the skills on how to incorporate play in teaching and learning in early-childhood centres. Moreover, according to practitioners, they are able to show that their children are learning in preparation for emergent literacy. It is deduced that the matrons are supporting learning through play even though they don't have resources - with the little they have, children are playing during indoor and outdoor play thus supporting the principle of learning through play.

5.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study only included three early-childhood centres and six participants therefore generalisations to include the wider population were difficult to make. However, I do believe that whilst the study only included six early-childhood practitioners, these practitioners were chosen from different early-childhood centres in the district of QwaQwa. All the practitioners were teaching the same year group; 3-4-year-old

children. This assisted with addressing issues of trustworthiness and allowed me to make sense of how ECD experience play as a pedagogy in the context within which they work.

5.6 ANSWERING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

5.6.1 Sub-question 1

How do practitioners understand play learning through play and play as a pedagogy for learning?

It was found that personal background influenced practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning. Even though the practitioners did not attend ECD centres during their childhood, they remember having a lot of time and space to play. They talked about the different kinds of games that they played, including indigenous games. Whilst their training experiences were limited, they saw their training as assisting them acquire knowledge of how to plan for play and learning. In addition, their earliest memories of playing games during their childhood and their experiences at the ECCE centres went some way to contributing to their understanding of play as a pedagogy for learning. During interviews, the practitioners talked about play and its relationship to learning by saying that they give children time to play, more especially during indoor and outdoor play.

5.6.2 Sub-question 2

How do early childhood practitioners understand play as a pedagogy for learning?

Their understanding of play as a pedagogy for learning varied. For the practitioners, a pedagogy of play was about the skills that children acquire when they play and their role as practitioners during play-based activities. In addition, they also mentioned that it was important for children to play as it helped them develop cognitive, social, emotional and physical motor skills.

5.6.3 Sub-question 3

How do these understandings influence pedagogic practices at the early-childhood centres?

In order to answer this research question, the following themes and sub-themes emerged:

- Free play: Indoor and outdoor free play
- The curriculum
- The role of the practitioner
- The school context and practitioners' pedagogic practices
- The role of the matron

The practitioners saw the importance of free-play, both indoor and outdoor, as being important in the development of learning. They also followed a curriculum and made use of themes to advance learning through play. However, the majority of practitioners focused on the development of the school-ready child which left very little room for child-initiated activities, self-discovery and children's agency to come to the fore. In addition, the school context and the matrons at the centres pushed for the development of emergent literacy and school-readiness skills.

5.7 RECOMMENDATIONS AND FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Sub-question: What recommendations can be made for how play can be used as a pedagogy for learning in early-childhood centres?

The aim of this study was to explore practitioners' experiences of play and implementation of play as a pedagogy for learning in early-childhood centres. The findings, followed by recommendations made, are discussed below:

Finding 1:

Lack of professional training for practitioners.

Recommendation 1:

The Department of Basic Education must make it compulsory for all practitioners in SA to get the necessary training and qualifications in collaboration with the Department of Social Health.

Finding 2:

The findings revealed that practitioners in the study do not have an understanding of what a pedagogy of play is, nor do they understand the different play-based programmes that can be put into place to enhance learning through play.

Recommendation 2:

There needs to be quality teacher-education and in-service programmes that focus on the following:

Defining play and play as a pedagogy;

Developing play-based programmes;

Play-based pedagogies; and

Supporting children's learning through play.

Finding 3:

The school context and matrons of the early-childhood centres influence practitioners' implementation of play as a pedagogy for learning with a focus on teacher-directed approaches and the development of school-readiness skills.

Recommendation 3:

The matrons need to have an understanding of how children learn through play. They should assist by helping practitioners plan for play as well as the creation of learning environments that can enhance learning through play.

5.8 FURTHER RESEARCH OR STUDY

The following suggestions for further research are put forward:

Suggestion 1

A study that focuses on the practitioners' professional training and how this impacts on learning through play.

Suggestion 2

A study on how early-childhood programmes could assist the practitioners in applying play as a pedagogy for learning.

Suggestion 3

A study on how parental beliefs on how play can enhance learning.

Suggestion 4

A study on the different ways in which the matrons/principals of the ECD centre can enhance play as a pedagogy for learning.

5.9 CONCLUSION

How practitioners understand play as a pedagogy for learning is a complex and contextual issue. It is not only their beliefs, experiences and training that contribute to their application of play as a pedagogy for learning, but also the matrons/owners of early-childhood centres who have an impact on how they (practitioners) implement learning through play. This study demonstrated that guidance in South Africa concerning the education of 3-4 year old children's learning through play is restricted. Factors that influence the efficacy of play as a pedagogy for learning are: practitioners' lack of professional training, quality of early learning environments, availability of competent programmes, acknowledgement of learning through play as a pedagogy for learning, current experiences of play, playful environments, competent practitioners, demands set for teaching, and the quality of children's engagement in play.

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APPENDIX A

Interview questions and/prompts: (the questions are only guidelines).

What is your name?

1. Who trained you?
2. How long was it?
3. In what ways did training help you?
4. What do you think was missing in your training?
5. How old are the children in your class?
6. What advice do you have for other practitioners to implement play as a pedagogy for learning in early-childhood centres?

HOW DOES THE CONTEXT OF THE EARLY-CHILDHOOD CENTRE AFFECT THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PLAY AS A PEDAGOGY FOR LEARNING?

1. What kind of background do the children come from?
2. Does your centre get a subsidy from the government?
3. How does the background of the children affect what you do with them?
4. What would you like to see happen for the effective implementation of play as a pedagogy for learning?
5. What are practitioners' view about play?
6. Do you think play can and must be used as a pedagogy for learning?
7. Why? Can you substantiate?
8. According to your experience, what have you learned about play as a pedagogy for learning?
9. Do you agree that play should be regarded as a pedagogy for learning?
10. How do you prepare for play and what do you hope to achieve at the end of the day?
11. What is the purpose of play in children?
12. What are the challenges that you are facing and what have you achieved thus far?
13. How do you maintain outdoor playground equipment for outdoor play and how relevant are they towards the development of the children?
14. How do you ensure that during outdoor and indoor play, children are safe and that they don't get hurt?
15. How do you relate with the parents of the children?
16. Do you consider the age of children going out for outdoor play, as well as their development?
17. What do you hope to achieve with outdoor play and is it necessary for children to go out and play?
18. How much time do you set for these different plays; namely, outdoor and indoor?

WHAT DOES PLANNING, TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT SUGGEST ABOUT THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PLAY AS A PEDAGOGY FOR LEARNING?

1. Do you have the FS curriculum document and training materials?
2. How do you use them in your planning and teaching?
3. Is it easy or difficult to use it?
4. What are the challenges you experience in using it?
5. Tell me how you plan your work daily?
6. Where do you get the information to plan your work?
7. Do you use your FS curriculum document to do your planning? Why/Why not?
8. What are the challenges you experience in planning your work?
9. How do you teach babies? What do you do with them?
10. How do you teach toddlers? What do you do with them?
11. How do you teach nursery children? What do you do with them?
12. What are the challenges you experience in your teaching?
13. Do you find that the FS curriculum and training materials are helping you in your teaching? Explain.
14. How do you know that children in your centre are learning?
15. What do you do with the information about their learning?
16. Does the FS curriculum and training materials help you in assessment?
17. What kind of support do practitioners receive during the implementation process?
18. Was there a follow-up after you were trained? Do you think you needed that? Why?
19. What kind of support do you think is necessary to help the children?
20. Is there anything you want to tell me about your experiences of being a practitioner?
21. What is the importance of play; that is, indoor as well as outdoor play?

This you may/may not answer. [OPTIONAL]

1. How old are you?
2. How much do you earn?
3. Is your salary satisfactory?
4. What are your qualifications?

APPENDIX B

Information and consent form: Early-Childhood Practitioner

Researcher: M.M Mofokeng (Ms)

University of the Free State

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Tel No. 0587185465

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Date: 24/10/2016

Study Leader: Dr C.D. Martin

University of Free State

Nelson Mandela drive

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Dear Early-Childhood Practitioner

Re: Research on play as a pedagogy for learning in early childhood centres

My name is Mahudi Mofokeng and I am engaged in Masters studies at the University of the Free State. I am a lecturer at the University of Free State where my area of specialisation is early-childhood education.

I am investigating early-childhood practitioners' understandings of play as a pedagogy for learning

The ultimate goal of this study is to make early-childhood education more relevant and responsive to contexts of the learners. I would like you to participate in this research so that I could have an understanding of how play is being used as a pedagogy for learning in early-childhood classrooms for 3-4 year olds. Your participation in the project is important because of your firsthand knowledge and understanding of play as a pedagogy for learning. Through the study I hope to provide insights that will contribute to play as a pedagogy for learning research and practice within South Africa.

In this first-year of my project, I would like to interview you about your early-childhood history, the relationship between your own experiences (with play) and your own practices. I hope to focus intensively on your childhood centres' practices of play during our interview.

There are no possible risks to you participating in the research as I will take the following steps to protect you from any disadvantages.

Your participation will be totally voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any stage if you so wish. I will assure you of confidentiality and anonymity - the use of pseudonyms will be applicable.

While I greatly appreciate your participation in this important study and the valuable contribution you can make, your participation is entirely voluntary and you are under no obligation to participate in this study. If you do choose to participate, and if an issue arises which makes you uncomfortable, you may withdraw from the study with no consequences or repercussions.

If you experience any discomfort or unhappiness with the way the research is being conducted, please feel free to contact me directly to discuss it. You are also free to contact my supervisor – the details are given above. I will be available to address any question or request (including giving more information) should the need arise. Please sign the form below if you are willing to grant permission for me to conduct the research at your early-childhood centre.

Yours sincerely

SIGNATURE:M.M.Mofokeng.....

Mahudi Mofokeng (Ms)

I, Motlalepula Molotsi., (first name and surname) have read and understood the contents of this letter. I agree to participate in the study and give permission for the information obtained from this study to be used at faculty meetings, seminar presentations, conference proceedings and articles in accredited journals. I understand that:

- Participation in the interview is voluntary. I may refuse to answer any questions I do not wish to answer.
- I provide permission for the researcher to interview the practitioner
- I give permission to use the voice-recorder to record information.
- No information that may identify me will be included in the report, and my responses will remain confidential.
- All data collected in the study will be securely stored in a locked file cabinet.
- None of the information collected will have any bearing on my employment in this early-childhood centre.

I may withdraw from the research study at any time. My decision to withdraw will not result in the loss of my job or any other benefits to which I am entitled. If I chose to withdraw, all the information pertaining to my participation in the study will be destroyed.

Signed...M. Molotsi...

Designation: (ECD practitioner)

Date: 24/10/2016

APPENDIX C: ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER



[REDACTED]
Faculty of Education

05-Dec-2016

Dear **Mrs Mahudi Mofokeng**

Ethics Clearance: **Practitioners' experiences of play as a pedagogy for learning in early childhood centres.**

Principal Investigator: **Mrs Mahudi Mofokeng**

Department: **School of Social Sciences and Language Education (Qwaqwa Campus)**

APPLICATION APPROVED

With reference to your application for ethical clearance with the Faculty of Education, I am pleased to inform you on behalf of the Ethics Board of the faculty that you have been granted ethical clearance for your research. Your ethical clearance number, to be used in all correspondence is: **UFS-HSD2016/0319**

This ethical clearance number is valid for research conducted for one year from issuance. Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension.

We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your research project be submitted to the ethics office to ensure we are kept up to date with your progress and any ethical implications that may arise.

Thank you for submitting this proposal for ethical clearance and we wish you every success with your research.

Yours faithfully

Dr. Juliet Ramohai Chairperson: Ethics Committee



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