LET'S HAVE FUN: TEACHING STRATEGIES USED TO SUPPORT PLAY-BASED LEARNING IN ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS

By

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Abstract

In 2010, the Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten Program (FDK) (Draft version) replaced The Kindergarten Program (2006) and brought new visions, purpose, and goals such as incorporating a pedagogical approach known as Play-Based Learning (PBL). In the curriculum document, PBL is a child-centered approach where children learn through play (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2010). Although there are benefits associated with play, there are concerns with this new approach, which include assessment strategies targeting curriculum expectations (Karia, 2014; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015) and lack of time to create the environment for play (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Karia, 2014; Bennett, Wood, & Rogers, 1997). The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine the pedagogical strategies that teachers are using to support play-based learning in FDK. In the study reported here, two teachers were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. This qualitative research study found that there are different teaching philosophies for approaching play-based learning. In addition, the participating teachers expressed different teaching strategies used to implement play-based learning as well as share their concerns. Recommendations include access to professional development courses for teachers, providing appropriate teaching resources, and having a clear definition of play-based learning.

Key Words: Play-Based Learning, Full-Day Kindergarten, pedagogical strategies, support, teacher experiences
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Research Context

In 2010, the *Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten Program (FDK) (Draft version)* replaced *The Kindergarten Program* (2006) and brought new visions, purpose, and goals. FDK brought in new changes as a follow through to a report created by Charles Pascal (2009) known as *With our best future in mind: Implementing early learning in Ontario*. Pascal’s (2009) report was created to ensure a strong foundation for the early years, provide extended-day learning for four-and-five year old children, and ensure a smoother transition for Kindergarten children to Grade 1. The Ontario Ministry of Education adapted these changes and included these visions with their new FDK program. The new FDK program also incorporated a pedagogical approach known as Play-Based Learning (PBL) featured in Pascal’s report.

Within the curriculum document, PBL is a child-centered approach where children are engaging and learning through play (OME, 2010). Play allows children to explore their environment and construct their knowledge; play and learning have strong links to one another in terms of numeracy, literacy, social, physical and emotional development (OME, 2010). Play also introduces students to problem solving skills with rich connections to real-life experiences and support experiential learning (Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). Although learning through play can have a significant impact on young children’s learning, there are concerns with this new approach, such as: assessment strategies (Karia, 2014; Pelletier, 2014; Martlew, Stephen, & Ellis, 2011), balancing play with teaching curriculum expectations (Bennett et al., 1997; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015), and lack of time to create the environment for play (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Karia, 2014; Bennett et al., 1997). Despite these concerns, there is little information on the strategies to address them.
1.1 Research Problem

Teaching through PBL can cause both excitement and frustrations for teachers. The need for research within this topic is gradually becoming recognized, but extensive research must be done in order to effectively understand and use this approach. Within the framework of this research, scholars have provided key insights on teacher’s experiences with PBL but there are missing insights addressing how to solve certain frustrations and concerns. Karia (2014) stated that teachers find it difficult to integrate subjects with play and it is difficult to get on board with the expectations. Also, researcher Janice Pelletier (2014) at the University of Toronto, found similar findings when she conducted a longitudinal study at the Peel District School Board on the implementation of the new FDK. Pelletier concluded that within the first and second year of implementation, teachers expressed concerns about the curricula areas.

Having this less structured Kindergarten Program makes it difficult to plan and integrate subjects into play which causes teachers to feel unsure and frustrated (Martlew et al., 2011; Karia, 2014). Many teachers find it frustrating because there are no guidelines to follow in order to teach play (Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Baker, 2014). Baker (2014) states that with no guidelines for PBL, teachers have different perspectives on play and learning and therefore this makes it challenging to integrate play within their classroom. There are various strategies to address some of these concerns, such as the use of documentation (Shindler, 2010; Guillaume, 2012), connecting literacy through workshops (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007), and using a High/Scope teaching approach (Bennett et al., 1997). Although some strategies have been documented to support play-based learning, much of the research and suggestions come from international studies. Also, strategies provided are positive examples of how to teach PBL. However, considerations must be made on how these international strategies fit within a
Canadian classroom. Based on the current literature, this study examined the rationale behind PBL, teachers’ experiences with PBL, and includes other teaching strategies that are currently being used by teachers.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The topic of this research study was to examine the pedagogical strategies that teachers are using to support play-based learning in FDK. In light of this topic, understanding these strategies would better assist teachers to feel more confident in order to support children’s learning. Teachers have acknowledged that play is important to young children (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). Play allows children to practice skills and apply the knowledge they have learnt in class to various situations (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). Play also motivates and supports children’s development of language acquisition, social and emotional development, and mathematical concepts (Martlew et al., 2011). However, many teachers are unsure of how to plan an environment for play and learning (Martlew et al., 2011). In order to alleviate teachers’ stress and frustration, new research is needed in order to understand different classroom-based approaches to PBL (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). This would benefit me as a novice teacher as I could implement these strategies within my classroom, while also providing more support for experienced teachers. Learning through play is incorporated within every classroom across Ontario, and in order to effectively teach it, it is important to understand what it is, what it looks like, and how it is being taught.

1.3 Research Questions

The key research question which guided this study was: What pedagogical strategies are teachers using to support play-based learning in FDK? My sub-questions were:

- What are teachers’ experiences in play-based learning in FDK?
• What pedagogical strategies are teachers using to implement play-based learning?
• What are the benefits and challenges of using the pedagogical strategies?
• What changes do teachers notice in their students when using a play-based approach?

1.4 Background/Positionality of the Researcher

I graduated from Ryerson University with a Bachelors of Arts degree in Early Childhood Education. During my fourth year, I did my practicum in a Kindergarten classroom. This placement was a great experience because I gained insight on the various ways to teach kindergarten. The primary teacher was the first person to provide insights and broaden my view about the new program. She expressed a lot of concerns about the new play-based curriculum and how to implement it. Both her and her Early Childhood Educator (ECE) expressed how hard it was to distinguish between too much play and whether play affected children’s learning. The teacher and ECE gave an abundant amount of time for the children to play and construct their knowledge.

They did however have a hard time using different teaching strategies to reinforce children’s learning. There was a difficulty in balancing between teacher and child directed learning. Even with these concerns, I was able to utilize everything I learnt from previous years of experience and implement it in the classroom. At the end of my practicum experience, I thought about other strategies and ideas to support experienced teachers. With PBL being fairly new, teachers are constantly trying out new strategies and methods through trial and error but at times this process stretches to the full school year. I believe this topic is very important because being able to utilize different teaching strategies can affect children’s learning in a positive way. As a novice teacher, I too would like to use these strategies within my classroom, especially with the growing impact that play has on children. I believe that play is important because learning
happens through play and offers teachable moments for teachers to engage and enhance student learning.

1.5 Overview of the Study

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of my research study, the purpose of the research, my rationale as to why this topic is important, and my positionality. In Chapter 2, I review the current literature of my topic, include both benefits and concerns with PBL, teachers’ experiences, and teaching strategies. In Chapter 3, I provide the research methodology and procedures, data analysis, and limitations. In Chapter 4, I provide the research findings and described the data in relation to my research study. In Chapter 5, I describe the implications of the study, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction to the Chapter

Play-based learning (PBL) brought much curiosity and excitement into FDK classrooms, but teachers encountered frustration and uncertainty in its implementation (Karia, 2014). The focus of this literature review, therefore, is to gain insight on the experiences and pedagogical strategies that teachers are using to implement play-based learning. Since FDK is fairly new, it is important to understand what teachers’ experiences are with FDK, and what teaching strategies can be used to alleviate their frustrations with the new program. This literature review will also examine the rationale behind play-based learning and its importance on student development. In addition, teachers’ experiences with play-based learning will be further examined both positive and negative. Lastly, I will be examining possible teaching strategies that are currently being used by teachers in a PBL environment.

2.1 Full-Day Kindergarten and Play-Based Learning

The implementation of play-based FDK began in 2010 and was to be completed by 2014 to address the issue of students moving onto the next grade level raised in 2009 (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2013). In an assessment done in 2009 involving kindergarten students, 27% of students were seen as “vulnerable when they enter Grade 1” (OME, 2013, p. 3). This is because these children had “learning, health, and behaviour problems that would interfere with their academic achievement and ability to get along with others” (OME, 2013, p. 3). Therefore, in order to tackle this situation, the introduction of FDK was aimed to provide improvements in children’s development with enhanced cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development (Pascal, 2009).
In the curriculum document, play-based learning is a child-centered approach where young children are engaging in learning through play (OME, 2010). Play and learning are seen to have strong links with each other “especially in the areas of problem solving, language acquisition, literacy, numeracy, and social, physical, and emotional skills” (OME, 2010, p. 13). Teachers and Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) are expected to provide learning experiences for young children that are “meaningful, relevant, and respectful” either through “whole-class instructions, small group, independent, or at learning centres” (OME, 2010, p. 8). Teachers and ECEs are co-educators working collaboratively in order to provide their students a high-quality play-based learning environment (OME, 2010). Educators should ensure that they are balancing between teacher and child directed learning in order to foster creativity and support experiential learning (Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; OME, 2010). The teacher and ECE should provide children with a literacy rich environment, materials to explore with, and foster connections to real-life experiences (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015).

Learning through play promotes social interactions and self-regulation (OME, 2010; Lynch, 2015). Play provides children with more time to interact with their peers and understand how to regulate their behaviours when engaging in certain situations (OME, 2010). As the Ontario Ministry of Education (2010) states, “self-regulation allows children to have positive social interactions and sets a pattern of behaviour that will benefit them through their lives” (p. 7). Self-regulation will allow students to master skills that can be utilized within and outside of school (Martlew et al., 2011). Within academic learning, teachers can teach and meet curriculum expectations through methods of classroom set up or guidance during play (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015; Lynch, 2015). For example, contributing key ideas to children’s play and constructing the classroom to fit both the children’s and teacher’s interests (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015).
Theorists such as Lev Vygotsky (1978), a social cultural constructivist, also supports PBL and believed in the role of a more knowledgeable person and their affect on a child’s development. He believed that play is a leading factor in development because as children are playing and exploring, they are learning the skills and knowledge of every day experiences. Vygotsky stated that children often bring reality or real life contexts within their play; in it, they would often set up rules, roles, and behaviours to follow. Vygotsky stated that as the child plays, the child would be working within his/her Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and be assisted by a more knowledgeable person to help him/her move beyond his/her daily skills. He understood that play leads to ZPD because it motivates children to learn and move ahead in their development.

In relation to Lev Vygotsky, theorist Jerome Bruner (1983) also supports play. Bruner believes that play allows children to freely explore different activities. It is an open-ended and a trial-and-error process where children are constantly creating inventions and new goals for themselves. Bruner states that play is where children are taking the external world and making it part of themselves. They are bringing in knowledge from their surroundings and practicing and learning it through their play.

As a novice teacher, I too believe that play is important to children’s development. I draw on the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1983) to understand that learning does happen through play. Students are bringing in knowledge from the real world and practicing them through their play. As teachers, we need to provide play-based experiences for our students and facilitate their learning; it is important to understand how to teach and learn within this approach. Since a play-based learning approach is fairly new in Ontario, teaching from a child-centred approach may cause discomfort for teachers who are newly acquainted with it. However, with
the appropriate strategies and knowledge of play-based learning, teachers can feel more confident and comfortable teaching this program.

Teachers’ beliefs about play-based have been tracked by researchers such as Pyle and Bigelow (2015), Goulden (2012), and Bennett et al. (1997). Teachers have expressed positive outcomes of play-based learning. They noticed that because play-based is a child-centred approach, they were able to understand students’ interests and provide support through differentiated instruction (Goulden, 2012). Also, with play-based learning, play provides children with a much more practical experience because they are able to manipulate and understand learning at their own pace (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). They are able to retain the information better when they are engaging in play (Bennett et al., 1997). More importantly, teachers have expressed that play has no right or wrong answer (Bennett et al., 1997). This allows children to feel confident and take ownership of their learning since they are in control of their play (Bennett et al., 1997).

2.2 Teachers’ Experiences with Play-Based Learning

With play-based learning being fairly new, research on teachers’ experiences has been ongoing. Although teachers have expressed the positive aspects of play and learning, they still have concerns with the new program. In terms of positive experiences, teachers have expressed that play-based learning has helped them define what their role is, has promoted a sense of inclusivity, and has allowed them insight on how to set up the classroom to support learning (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Martlew et al., 2011; Karia, 2014; Bennett et al., 1997; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). In terms of concerns with PBL, teachers have noted a lack of time, difficulties in assessment and teaching methods, understanding the meaning of play, and balancing between teacher and child directed learning (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Karia, 2014; Bennett et al.,
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1997; Martlew et al., 2011; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015; Baker, 2014; Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; McInnes, Howard, Miles, & Crowley, 2011; Walsh, McGuinness, Sproule, & Trew, 2010).

2.2.1 Positive experiences

The new play-based curriculum brought in different positive experiences for teachers. Firstly, teachers were expressing through their experience teaching kindergarten, they were able to gain insight on what their role is within the classroom. They understood their role to be that of co-learners, facilitators, and scaffolders of children’s learning (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Martlew et al., 2011). Teachers are engaged in co-constructing the curriculum with children in mind so that it includes children’s interests as well as meeting curriculum expectations (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). While children are playing, teachers are acting as observers (Karia, 2014; Bennett et al., 1997); as the children are problem solving, observing provides a clear understanding of what is happening within a child’s mind to understand how they learn and how to assist them (Bennett et al., 1997). Within a daily routine, play would include students sharing knowledge with each other, asking questions, and demonstrating individual skills (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015).

Secondly, play-based learning provides inclusivity within the classroom. Martlew et al. (2011) conducted a study on six teacher experiences with a play-based environment and concluded that it gave students a sense of inclusion. Regardless of what the children were doing or where their abilities are at, children were still learning different skills. In an inclusive environment, Martlew et al. concluded that teachers notice a faster rate of learning and collaboration between peers.

Lastly, teachers have an understanding of how to set up classroom activities to support play-based learning. In relation to the first theme of teachers being co-constructors of
knowledge, teachers often choose themes within the classroom that are based on children’s interests (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). In fact, Van Oers & Duijkers concluded that children are constantly adding new ideas to their play, and they take what they have learned and put it into practice. For example, in the dramatic centre, children are playing and taking on different roles, incorporating different tools, and deciding what scenario they would like to engage in.

From these positive experiences, it is evident that teachers do understand their role is within a PBL classroom. Not only does it have an impact in the classroom, but also has an impact to their teaching and student learning. With the suitable classroom set up of activities, students are able to practice their skills while feeling included. Children have different learning styles that should be acknowledged within the classroom, making learning centres vital to optimize their abilities.

2.2.2 Concerns

Although play-based learning may provide positive experiences for teachers, it is important to note that not all teachers have had positive experiences. There have been numerous concerns with this new approach. Firstly, teachers expressed how there is a lack of time when creating a play-based classroom (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Karia, 2014; Bennett et al., 1997). Van Oers & Duijkers (2013) acknowledged that teachers are constantly changing their classrooms to fit children’s needs and expressed how providing a supportive classroom does not happen immediately. In fact, Van Oers & Duijkers (2013) states that providing a supportive classroom for students requires teachers to seek constant support from colleagues and reach out to different schools to see good examples of practices (as cited in Tharp et al., 2000; Van Oers, in press). This connects with the results found in Karia (2014), whereby teachers described how there is not enough time to plan while keeping up with the children’s interest. Playing all day is a
big concern for teachers because playing is non-stop within the classroom and has no limits or little structure (Karia, 2014). When teachers provide activities that are based on children’s interest, they have to be observant in order to acknowledge when activities turn less exciting for students (Karia, 2014; Bennett et al., 1997). In order to regain the children’s interests, teachers must think of new ways to excite them. This may mean changing the entire learning centre (Karia, 2014).

Secondly, teachers expressed a concern about the difficulties with assessment and teaching within play-based to meet curriculum expectations (Karia, 2014; Pelletier, 2014; Martlew et al., 2011). With class sizes slowly increasing, gaining insight on students’ development is difficult, especially when there is a lot of movement going on within the class. Throughout, teachers must find the time to constantly observe children and create activities (Karia, 2014). To be able to assess children, teachers would have to be involved in play (Bennett et al., 1997). Teachers within Karia’s (2014) study state that assessing play is not the only concern, but meeting curriculum expectations is difficult as well. Researcher Janice Pelletier, at the University of Toronto, found similar findings when she conducted a longitudinal study at the Peel District School Board (2014) on the beginnings of implementing the new FDK. Pelletier concluded that during the first and second years of implementation, teachers expressed concerns about curriculum areas. Similarly, having a less structured kindergarten program makes it difficult to plan and integrate subjects into play for students each day (Karia, 2014). Planning a curriculum such as this causes teachers to feel unsure and frustrated (Martlew et al., 2011; Karia, 2014). Martlew et al. (2011) suggested 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 teachers responding to the interests of the children is the best approach to
curriculum planning” (as cited in Wood & Attfield, 2005, p. 32). Also, teachers are expected to move away from traditional uses of workbooks and worksheets in order to assess students’ learning. This has left them with challenges in assessing and measuring progression in students learning (Martlew et al., 2011).

Thirdly, teachers’ understanding of the meaning of play is different across various research (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015; Baker, 2014; Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; McInnes et al., 2011; Walsh et al., 2010). Different definitions and perspectives of play and learning make it challenging for teachers to integrate play within their classroom (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). The FDK curriculum document does not provide teachers with a clear and consistent definition of play and play-based learning, and how it supports social and academic development (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). Baker (2014) suggests that there should be a common understanding of what play-based learning is so that teachers would have a general understanding and guideline to follow. One of the main reasons behind the confusion is that teachers often view play and learning as two separate entities (Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006). Teachers who believe this are often planning their activities with a heavy reliance on teacher-directed learning with difficulties in interpreting children’s learning (McInnes et al., 2011; Walsh et al., 2010). Also, another way teachers view play and learning as separate is when teachers are withdrawing students for teacher-directed instructions and assessment (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). Through this thinking, they believe that to assess students, it is done when the child is no longer playing and is taking part in teacher directed activities. Play would not be seen as a way of demonstrating student learning.

Lastly, teachers often express concerns on how to balance between teacher and child directed learning. Teachers have said that they are careful when intervening in children’s
learning because too much involvement means it is teacher directed (Bennett et al., 1997). Teachers have to resist the urge to jump into children’s play since it would be seen as controlling their learning (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). They need to determine the right time to get involved within these experiences (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015).

Through these various concerns, it is evident that not all teachers will have positive experiences with teaching play-based. Without a clear understanding of play and learning, it would be difficult for teachers to plan such an environment. If teachers were to understand play and learning as being interconnected with each other, then assessing, managing time, and balancing between teacher and child directed learning would be easier to address. With that being said, this now leads to the next section of teaching strategies that support play-based learning.

### 2.3 Teaching Strategies for Play-Based Learning

A variety of teaching strategies help to address some of the concerns teachers raised about PBL. These strategies were used in various countries such as United States, Scotland and Netherlands, and are helpful examples to support children’s’ learning. They provide a lens into the child’s mind and create a sense of confidence for teachers to support PBL.

#### 2.3.1 General strategies

There are many books that provide different pedagogical strategies to teach kindergarten to Grades 12. Within the book, *Transformative Classroom Management* by John Schindler (2010) stresses the importance of observations, used to gather information about children’s learning (OME, 2010). In order to effectively teach young children, we need to be aware of their learning, which can be done through observations (Schindler, 2010). Teachers should shift focus from following a detailed lesson plan to actually teaching children and understanding students’
thought processes. Teachers should focus on how the lesson should be changed in order to better support children’s learning (Schindler, 2010). Observations are a great form of assessment along with portfolios (Schindler, 2010).

Portfolios and documentations provide concrete examples of children’s accomplishments, growth over time, and serves as a tool to help write report cards (Schindler, 2010). Portfolios can include samples of children’s work, photos and observation notes as documentation to record students’ progress (OME, 2010). Instead of intervening during child’s play to gain information on their thinking, teachers often engage in interviews after play has ended. This interview is then placed into a portfolio or displayed throughout the classroom to track students’ work (Guillaume, 2012). Displaying children’s work can also be done through integrating technology (Guillaume, 2012).

In terms of being able to balance child and teacher directed learning, Schindler (2010) suggests project-based learning. Project-based learning is an opportunity for students to engage in projects that students can bring in all the knowledge they have learned from a unit studied and demonstrate it however they like to their peers and teachers. He states that project-based learning allows students to feel ownership of their learning while still achieving curriculum expectations. He acknowledges that although teachers are expected to meet curriculum expectations, they also need to provide it in a way that is meaningful for children. He notes that teachers can do this by connecting materials to students’ own experiences, relating curriculum expectations to current events within the community, and providing ways to connect practical skills with their learning.

Although these strategies are general and can be used within various grades, they are practical strategies that support a child’s learning. Through daily observations, they can be incorporated within a child’s portfolio where teachers can go back and make assessment.
Observations, portfolios, and documentation are an ongoing process that teachers should incorporate daily within their classroom. However, what are not described are the strategies that being used in order to teach the children. The next section will provide an understanding of what kindergarten teachers are using within their classroom.

2.3.2 Strategies used by kindergarten teachers

Teachers acknowledge that in a kindergarten classroom, students learn in their own ways. In order to better teach their students, they understand the importance of differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction is an approach where teachers are accommodating and modifying their teaching in order to support diverse academic needs (Grant, Hindman, & Stronge, 2010; Guillaume, 2012). Teachers are constantly observing in order to understand their students’ learning needs so that activities enhance their confidence.

Guillaume (2012) states that when teachers create lesson plans, they place it in a three-tiered format. The first tier looks at the content meaning, the goals and materials provided for children. The second tier looks at the methods teachers are considering, such as independent, small group, or as a whole group, when teaching the lesson. The last tier looks how children are demonstrating their learning through a product. Guillaume expresses that teachers acknowledge the product tier as important because the children are the ones picking how they will be demonstrating their learning (for example through projects).

The teachers also expressed how they took on a HighScope curriculum model in order to teach and connect with play-based learning (Bennett et al., 1997). In fact, Bennett et al. (1997) concluded that this approach is closely related to play-based because it focuses on active learning, child-initiated play, and plan-do-review. There are positive experiences with plan-do-review because it is led by children. Plan-do-review includes a three-part sequence known as
planning time, work time, and recall time. During the first stage, children are planning on what they want to do and work on (DailyRoutine, n.d.). In the second stage, children are playing and carrying out their plan (DailyRoutine, n.d.). Finally, in the last stage, children are explaining and sharing what they have learned with teachers and peers (DailyRoutine, n.d.). In a HighScope model approach, teachers provide time for the children to explore, investigate activities, and use circle time as way to gather the group to review and discuss what they have learned or achieved. Bennett et al. (1997) state that circle time promotes respect between the children because they are actively listening to what their peers are expressing. They acknowledge that instead of intervening in children’s learning, teachers use this review time as a form of assessment.

With setting up the classroom, teachers find it easy to manage when both the teacher and student are co-constructing the learning environment Diamond (2008) states that at the beginning of the school year, classroom routines should be co-established. She states that within a play-based classroom, teachers hold students accountable for their learning environment so they take care of it. She notes that teacher/facilitators need to model appropriate behaviour; for example, teachers need to demonstrate how to clean up during clean up time.

Through these teaching styles, teachers understand the true potential of a play-based learning. Although Karia (2014) stated that play-based learning has little structure, it has an advantage because it is very open-ended. This would allow teachers to engage in trial-and-error and construct new knowledge to figure out what teaching approach fits the needs of their students.

2.3.3 Researched based strategies for play-based learning

There have been some strategies provided through research on teaching play-based learning. When connecting curriculum expectations to children’s learning, a study done by
Jones, Reutzel, & Fargo (2010) found an interactive way for teachers to incorporate literacy into the classroom. The use of writing workshops has a positive affect on students learning (Brown, 2010). The approach was to give students a designated time where they could engage in writing or drawing (Brown, 2010; Jones et al., 2010). During the workshops, students choose any topic, include words or drawing, and express it in a way that is meaningful to them (Jones et al., 2010). Teachers viewed this as child-led because any idea is welcomed and students work at their own pace (Jones et al., 2010). During this time, teachers have commented that they encourage students to invent spellings and mistakes are not corrected (Jones et al., 2010). When the students have completed their work, they come back to share their writing with a teacher or a peer (Jones et al., 2010). Teachers have expressed that over the course of the school year, their students have engaged in authentic and meaningful writing, and improved in their writing skills and spelling (Brown, 2010; Jones et al., 2010).

Besides literacy development through writing workshops, teachers found that read-a-loud was effective as well (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). McGee & Schickedanz describes that read-a-louds is where teachers are reading out loud to students while students are actively listening, asking questions, and making predictions. They concluded that teachers within their study who used read-a-louds, found a significant difference in students learning. Students were able to comprehend the story better, recall, and were able to increase their vocabulary skills.

Van Oers & Duijkers (2013) provide a step-by-step process on how to take children’s learning interests and elaborate to keep students engaged. Van Oers & Duijkers provided five steps, which are orienting, broadening, structuring and deepening, contributing, and reflecting. They described these five steps as a way for teachers to reflect on their teaching practices. For example in orienting, they showed how teachers can explore play with children and encourage
them to continue their experience. If children are playing in the dramatic centre and the theme was a doctor’s office, initiate the play by asking what they do at the doctors’ office. They described another example of broadening where teachers are relating one activity to another for children to understand the relations of two different things.

Documentation is a key strategy within the kindergarten classroom. Documentation allows teachers to keep record and track children’s progress (OME, 2010). Research done by Shindler (2010) and Guillaume’s (2012) on the importance of documentation is supported by researchers. Teachers found that documentation allows them to make connections with curriculum expectations because observation serves as a guide into students learning (Karia, 2014; Wood, 2014). Documentation is children’s work where they created products and pictures (Karia, 2014). It is often displayed throughout the classroom and gives a sense of the value of play (Wood, 2014).

Through this research, it shows that there are some strategies that teachers could use within their classroom that has positive effectives on students learning. These strategies are suggestions to integrate within classrooms and open to modifications to fit the teacher and students need.

2.4 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the pedagogical strategies teachers are using to implement play-based learning in FDK in Ontario classrooms. Teachers have noted both benefits and concerns about play-based learning. Teachers displayed an understanding of their role, and how play-based learning brings inclusion, and understanding of classroom set up (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Martlew et al., 2011; Karia, 2014; Bennett et al., 1997; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). But they also expressed the lack of time, difficulties with assessment, understanding play,
and balancing teacher and child directed learning as concerns of play-based learning (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Karia, 2014; Bennett et al., 1997; Martlew et al., 2011; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015; Baker, 2014; Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; McInnes, Howard, Miles, & Crowley, 2011; Walsh, McGuinness, Sproule, & Trew, 2010). In order to address some of the concerns, teachers have used previously mentioned strategies within their classroom such as differentiated instruction, taking on a different curriculum philosophy to teach play-based learning, observations and documentations, and workshops (Grant, Hindman, & Stronge, 2010; Bennett et al., 1997; OME, 2010; Brown, 2010; Jones et al., 2010). Although some strategies have been documented to support play-based learning, much of the research and suggestions come from international studies. Also, a limitation to the strategies is that there is no indication of how long it may be used within the classroom. It would be beneficial to know if the teachers who used these strategies used it for a short interval of time or for a whole school year. Moreover, some of the strategies mentioned within the general and teacher used strategies have a lack of evidence of the usefulness of these strategies. Therefore, although these strategies are positive examples of how to teach within play-based, considerations must be made on how these international strategies fit within a Canadian classroom. This study aimed to better understand the strategies that teachers are using in Ontario to support play-based learning in FDK classrooms. Chapter 3 that follows outlines the methodology used in this study.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction to the Chapter

In this chapter, I discuss the research methodology to answer the research question: What pedagogical strategies are teachers using to support play-based learning in FDK? I first examine the research approach and procedures before introducing the instruments of data collection, and my rationale of its importance and value to my research. I then describe the sampling criteria, the sampling procedures, and provide information about my participants. Next, I describe the data analysis and its procedures before acknowledging the ethical considerations that are vital to my research. To conclude the chapter, I identify the limitations and strengths of my research, and provide the next steps.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This study used a qualitative research approach. I used semi-structured interviews with two teachers within the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). Creswell (2013) defines qualitative research as an approach to inquiry that begins with a broad assumption and an interpretive/theoretical lens to explore a research problem. A key aspect to qualitative research is how it addresses questions to social or human problems and being able to understand and make meaning of it (Creswell, 2013; Fossey, Harvery, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002). In order to do so, qualitative research describes and explains participants’ experiences and interaction in a natural setting, such as the setting in which the problem has occurred (Creswell, 2013; Fossey et al., 2002). Creswell describes that the outcome of qualitative research is to present the voices of participants, encourage reflexivity, and address the need for change.

Many researchers conduct qualitative research in order to gain a detailed understanding of the issue and gain insight into the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013).
Therefore, given my research purpose and question, qualitative research provided me with an authentic insight into teacher experiences and concerns with PBL, and their strategies in overcoming them. My research captured teacher’s experiences with PBL and how to teach within it.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The primary instrument of data collection within this research is semi-structured interviews. Interviews provide in-depth information on the participant’s experiences within a topic (Turner, 2010). Turner (2010) describes that there are three forms of interview design known as informal conversational interview, general interview guide approach, and standardized open-ended interview. In terms of informal conversational interview, the researcher does not follow specific questions but relies on the interactions as a direction for their interview (Turner, 2010). In comparison, general interview guide approach is much more structured but allows some flexibility during the interview (Turner, 2010). However, questions that are asked during a general interview may vary across participants, which may in turn be of concern when analyzing and interpreting the data. Lastly, standardized open-ended interview are structured interviews where participants are asked identical questions but are open to allow flexibility and open-endedness for participants (Turner, 2010).

Standardized open-ended interviews and semi-structured interviews are closely related to one another in which they both provide opportunities for participants to contribute much detail and the researcher to ask additional questions that emerge during the interview (Turner, 2010; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). These two forms of interviews provide great insights for researchers as they are open-ended and allow opportunities for the researcher to address issues that were unforeseen. As noted, this form of interview is appropriate for my research question, as
I examined strategies that teachers are using in order to implement PBL. Some strategies that teachers discuss may be new and might need further explanation to discuss the benefits and limitations of that specific strategy. I organized my protocol into four sections beginning with, background information about the participants, followed by their experiences with PBL, teaching strategies they have used, and changes they would like to see moving forward within the program (located in Appendix B).

3.3 Participants

Turner (2010) states that it is important to select appropriate candidates when conducting interviews. In order to select these appropriate candidates, it is important that researchers utilize sampling strategies such as criterions and procedures to provide participant (Turner, 2010).

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

The following criteria was used when selecting the participants:

1. Teachers who had at least 1 year working in a Kindergarten classroom
2. Teachers who were part of the Toronto District School Board (TDSB)
3. Teachers had to have an understanding of play-based learning
4. Teachers had to demonstrate some knowledge about strategies in order to teach within a play-based learning environment and its impact on students development

In order to address my main research question, the teachers were expected to have an experience of at least 1 year working in a Kindergarten classroom. This was to ensure that teachers have some knowledge about the benefits and concerns with PBL and an understanding about the approach itself. Teachers also needed to work within the TDSB since I was interested in learning about what teachers in this school board were doing and what their teaching practices were. Teachers were also required to have knowledge about various strategies to teach PBL and
its impact on student’s development. This would provide information and act as a guide for novice teachers on how to effectively teach this new learning approach.

3.3.2 Participant recruitment

There are three forms of sampling approaches within a qualitative study known as convenience, judgement (or purposeful), and theoretical sampling. Convenience sampling provides researchers the chance to select accessible participants as it spares time and effort (Marshall, 1996). Judgement (or purposeful) sampling allows the researcher to select certain participants who may have certain qualities relevant to the research question (Koerber & McMichael, 2008; Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, & McKibbon, 2015). Lastly, theoretical sampling suggests researchers build on theories that emerge in their data and select new samples to examine it (Koerber & McMichael, 2008; Marshall, 1996). Given the small-scale nature and methodological parameters of my study, I used both convenience and judgement sampling. Convenience sampling allowed me to have the flexibility in recruiting and choosing participants from my existing contacts and networks. On that note, judgement sampling provided me the opportunity to choose participants based on the information they present for my research questions.

3.3.3 Participant biographies

Both participants of the present study had solely been teaching within the TDSB as a Full-Day Kindergarten teacher. They both had at least two years of experience in the classroom and brought various background experiences that impacted how they support PBL. The participants were given pseudonyms to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.
Joanna

At the time of the interview, Joanna was in her third year as a FDK teacher. She had experience teaching Grades 1 to 6 in home school programs under Special Education. She also had experience teaching Grades 4 to 5 in math, dance and drama. As a recent kindergarten teacher, Joanna often attended and sought professional development courses in order to enhance her teaching approaches to support her students.

Melissa

At the time of the interview, Melissa was in her sixth year as a FDK teacher. Within those six years, she also took on the role as an Early Childhood Educator (ECE) until she got a permanent position as an FDK teacher. In addition, she did a short-term teaching position for Grade 2. Before changes in the FDK, Melissa worked as a kindergarten teaching partner where she adopted teaching experiences that she learnt from her colleague as well as her school experiences.

3.4 Data Analysis

Analyzing the data and figuring out how to represent the data is a challenge yet an important aspect within a qualitative study (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013) describes that qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data for analysis, grouping codes and organizing themes, interpreting the data, and representing it. Before creating the themes, I created codes taken from my transcript, then placed them into categories and subcategories, and finally organized them into themes (Saldana, 2009). The themes that were created were based on codes that had consistent phrases, expressions and ideas articulated by my participants (Turner, 2010). Throughout the process, I also included analytic memos to help myself gain a rich understanding of the data I had collected. The codes that I created included reflections with
prompts on the meaning behind the codes (Saldana, 2009). It also helped me think critically as I was able to challenge my assumptions and recognize my decisions on what I saw (Saldana, 2009).

Throughout my data analysis process, I used Descriptive, In-Vivo, and Value codes in order to help move my codes to categories/sub-categories and then into themes. For Descriptive codes, I used short phrases and words in order to describe the overall topic or idea behind my data (Saldana, 2009). The primary goal for these descriptive codes was to allow me to gain what I heard and saw from my data. These descriptive codes were eventually placed into categories and sub-categories through constant re-examination and re-evaluating.

In some cases, I included In-Vivo codes where I took sentences “verbatim” from my transcript to help enrich my categories/sub-categories (Saldana, 2009, p. 74). I also used Value codes where I was able to gain an understanding of my participant’s beliefs and attitudes (Saldana, 2009). I utilized all three coding methods in order to create three major themes of my paper. Once my themes were created, I connected them back to existing literature on this topic.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

It is important for researchers to consider the ethical issues that could occur within a study and address them beforehand (Creswell, 2013; Tracy 2010). Tracy (2010) states that there are four practices to ethics known as procedural, situational, relational, and exiting ethics. Within procedural ethics, researchers must provide informed consent, provide participants information about the study and any risks involved, ensure privacy and confidentiality, and assure participation is voluntary (Tracy, 2010; Fontana & Frey, 2000). Participants within my study were provided a consent form before the interview process regarding information about my study. The consent form included the overview of my study, ethical implications, specific
expectations of participants, and interviews being audio-recorded (located in Appendix A). Participants were asked to sign the consent form in order to ensure that they have given their consent to be audio recorded and interviewed. As a method of procedural ethics, participant’s personal data and recordings were secured through a password locked computer and destroyed after 5 years (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Participants’ privacy were also protected through the use of pseudonyms and have the right to withdraw at any given stage of the study. Fontana and Frey (2000) mention that participants are protected from any harm either physically, emotionally or mentally. There were no known risks to the participation of my study, however if there were questions that participants do not wish to answer, they had the right to pass.

Situational ethics deals with unpredictable yet ethically important moments that come from the field (Tracy, 2010). It is important that researchers reflect upon them and question their ethical decisions (Tracy, 2010). Within relational ethics, researchers are mindful of their actions on others and value mutual respect, and connectedness between themselves and their participants (Tracy, 2010). Participants in my study were respected during the interview process and were provided a safe environment where information shared was not judged but rather used in order to benefit novice teachers and the field of education. As a researcher, information received were transcribed and shared with participants to clarify or retract any statements before analyzing the data in order to avoid misinterpreting information (Tracy, 2010). Lastly, exiting ethics requires researchers to consider ethics after interviews are conducted and findings are shared (Tracy, 2010). This was taken into consideration once my study was completed.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

A concern within this research study is how it cannot be generalizable due to the nature of the limited number of participants (Bogan & Biklen, 2007; Anderson, 2010). As I only
interviewed two teachers, data concerning strategies would not apply for all classrooms but provide considerations to take forth and adapt within the classroom. However, although it may not be generalizable to the public, there are still strengths to this methodology. By only interviewing two teachers, it allowed me the chance to examine the issues in more depth (Anderson, 2010). It also allowed the participants to reflect on a topic that matters most to them especially in an environment that is most safe. When I interacted face-to-face with participants, it provided more authentic information and allowed me to revise and redirect questions as new information emerged (Anderson, 2010). By only interviewing teachers, their input was still valid even if I was unable to conduct interviews with students, parents, or principals. However, interviewing and listening to teachers still provided me with rich information that immersed from the conversation.

Bogan and Biklen (2007) suggest that biases can occur that may affect the data as researchers may record the data according to what he/she wants to hear and that is where subjectivity can arise. However, in order to tackle this situation, researchers must record notes objectively as possible (Bogan & Biklen, 2007). Not only that, but the presence of the researcher may affect the participant’s responses (Bogan & Biklen, 2007; Anderson, 2010). As suggested by Turner (2010), remain calm and neutral when asking questions and listening to responses. Bogan and Biklen (2007) states that it is crucial to interact with participants in a natural way. As researchers, it is important to conduct an interview in a safe and comfortable environment so that it would decrease the level of tension and be easier for participants to answer questions (Isaacs, 2014). Also, it is important that after interviews have taken place, participants are able to review their answers to clarify the meaning and make any necessary changes they see fit.
3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I explained my research methodology and looked at the use of qualitative research and its significance for my study. Engaging in qualitative research allowed social and human issues to be heard and provide change for the future. Next, I described the use of semi-structured interviews as the main instrument for my data collection. I explained what semi-structured interviews were and the benefits of providing authentic and rich data from teacher participants. I also provided a detailed section for participants that included the sampling criteria, sampling procedures, and participant biographies. My sampling criteria included a list of how I selected my participants and my rationale behind such criteria. The sampling procedures included three forms of sampling approaches, but my research focused on convenience and judgement sampling for selecting participants. Moving forward, I included the process of my data analysis followed by the use of Descriptive, In-Vivo, and Values coding. I used the three coding methods to gather my data, grouped them according to categories and subcategories, and then into themes. I then moved onto discussing the ethical issues within my study and how I have addressed them. Lastly, I included both the limitations, such as generalizability, and strengths, such as rich data from teacher participants, as part of my research. Next, in Chapter 4, I discuss the research findings.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction to the Chapter

In this chapter, I report and discuss the findings that derived from two interviews I have conducted with elementary school teachers working within the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) in Ontario. To maintain the participants’ anonymity, they will be identified as Melissa and Joanna. The data collected from the two interviews provided me with rich data that helped answer my main research question: What pedagogical strategies are teachers using to support play-based learning in FDK? To answer my research question, I organized my data into three main themes (followed by several sub-themes):

1. Teacher’s understanding of play-based learning in full-day kindergarten,
2. Strategies in supporting play-based learning in full-day kindergarten,
3. Concerns with play-based learning in full-day kindergarten.

For each of the theme, I report my findings and examine them in connection to existing literature within Chapter 2. Finally, I conclude with a summary of my findings, and a preview of Chapter 5.

4.1 Teacher’s Understanding of Play-Based Learning in Full-Day Kindergarten

A teacher’s understanding of play-based learning can affect the way they run and create their classroom. Therefore, a method to gain this information is through discussions on participant’s definition of play-based learning and understanding the teacher’s role within the approach.

4.1.1 Constructing an understanding of play-based learning

When examining the data, both participants displayed similar understandings of play-based learning. Melissa believed that play-based learning is student-centred where students
are able to engage with their environment to construct their knowledge. Melissa stated that, “it’s giving students the opportunity to learn through inquiry and discovery while also acknowledging that they learn through their own friends”. Melissa recognized the importance of allowing students to have a voice within the classroom and the impact of peer-to-peer interaction on student learning. Similarly, Joanna believed that play-based learning consists of student inquiry, discovery, and social interactions; however, it also includes hands-on activities and centres. She stated that:

It’s a lot of hands-on activities and involves us taking the kids interests and turning it into learning opportunities and social interactions. They are learning in different centres throughout the classroom, such as the drama centre, the science centre and all of those centres involve different topics that are of interest to the kids but they are carried out through a play-based approach.

Joanna acknowledged that play-based learning is where students learn through different play centres while including student voices and connecting to the curriculum. Also, having hands-on activities within the centres would allow for student inquiry to unfold. This understanding coincides with the one provided by the OME. The OME (2010) highlights the importance of creating a child-centred approach where students are learning through play while engaging with their peers.

4.1.2 Understanding the teacher’s role within play-based learning

Along with an understanding of play-based learning, both participants described varying views of their role within a play-based classroom. Melissa expressed that her role within the classroom is to model student’s learning and engage in explicit teaching. She mentioned that:
As a teacher you are listening and observing and then at times asking questions to allow them [students] to come up with the answers and explicitly teaching children to listen to each other, explicitly teaching children what kind of questions they can ask each other or think about. And sometimes it’s also modeling too.

As a teacher, Melissa appeared to be engaged in more direct teaching where she modeled certain skills and behaviours for her students to follow. In contrast, Joanna focused on being the facilitator to her student’s learning and co-teaching with the students. She expressed, “being observant of the kids and what their interested in and seeing how we can take those interests and kind of bridge it throughout the centres together.” Joanna focused on student inquiry and used that to guide her teaching with the students.

In connection to relevant research, Van Oers and Duijkers (2013) believe that teachers are co-learners, facilitators and scaffolders of student’s learning. However, teachers are also observing student’s learning and assisting them (Bennett et al., 1997). Although the two participants expressed different views about their role, they understand that observing students is important in creating a student centred environment.

4.2 Strategies in Supporting Play-Based Learning in Full-Day Kindergarten

Throughout the interviews, my participants brought up many strategies they used to incorporate play-based learning into their classroom. They expressed how they used the strategies and the benefits associated with each strategy. The participants also brought up different ideas on how they set up and plan for their classrooms to support play-based learning.

The following sub-themes will be explored: teaching philosophy, mindfulness, observations, setting up, and planning.
4.2.1 Teaching philosophy

Due to the nature of play-based learning being open to different interpretation on how to teach students, this allowed both participants to adopt varying teaching philosophies within their classroom. Although they may be different, both these teaching philosophies had a strong connection to inquiry learning and cross-curricular content. When asked about the most effective teaching lessons, Melissa stated that she used an educational approach known as STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics). STEAM allowed her to effectively teach her students with connections to cross-curricular content while keeping play-based learning in mind. For example, she stated that:

I feel like it encompasses so much of the play-based and so much is learned within those. And then you can add literacy easily to that through writing like making little signs for what you made […] even oral through guided questions.

Melissa stated that STEAM allowed students to be highly engaged in the learning while she guiding students through questions in order to move their thinking forward. STEAM also allowed Melissa to address curriculum content through different centres making it meaningful to student’s learning. In comparison, Joanna appeared to not take an educational approach to her teaching. Instead, Joanna used her student’s interest as the guiding force to her teaching. Joanna believed that her students’ voices are pivotal to the success of her program. She mentioned that “We’ll always ask them questions, what they would like to learn or what they want to find answers to. We [teacher and ECE] don’t want to create it based on what we want”. Students within her classroom take ownership of their learning and explore with student and teacher interactions. The students in her classroom share ideas about what they want to learn while also sharing ideas on what they want from their teachers.
Similar findings have been reported in literature, where play-based is viewed as being open-ended which allows educators to adopt teaching philosophies into their classroom. Bennett et al. (1997) notes how educators take on educational approaches within their classrooms much like STEAM. In comparison, Diamond (2008) states that educators are co-learners and co-constructors within the classroom. Both teaching philosophy has significant value within the classroom in terms of it being student-driven and meets curriculum expectations.

4.2.2 Mindfulness

The participants acknowledged the varying developmental stages of their students and used mindfulness practices in order to promote positive self-regulation skills. When asked what mindfulness strategies were being used to promote self-regulation, Melissa stated that she used concrete materials. She stated that “definitely self-regulation being a huge part of play-based and promoting how they interact and learn with each other through yoga exercises […] breathing exercises, and making calming bottles”. The materials she used supported student’s self-regulation skills and social interactions. However, Joanna did not incorporate the use of materials into the classroom, but instead modeled various situations to foster appropriate socialization skills. She stated, “We [Herself and ECE] model a lot when it comes to behaving, interacting, sharing and cooperating, and helping students to stay calm”. Joanna modeled various phrases and expressions that students can say to their peers while remaining calm in order to problem solve. Although these strategies are different, both teachers agreed that the overall goal of these strategies is to have students learn independently and use these skills in different situations.

Mindfulness is also highlighted in current literature where researchers agree that educators have a big impact on students learning when it comes to mindfulness practices and self-regulation. Self-regulation allows students to express their feelings as well as engage in
positive social interactions with their peers (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). As an educator, it is important to create an environment that fosters self-regulation and integrates strategies that allows students to learn within a play-based approach (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). The two participants show a good understanding of various ways they can incorporate mindfulness into their classrooms.

### 4.2.3 Observations

One of the main teaching strategies that both participants used is observation to assess student’s learning. Both participants, however, utilize observations in a different way in terms of assessing students’ knowledge. When asked how observations are used to support play-based learning, Melissa stated that she used a “clipboard” where she wrote what the students were doing. She then “referred to the observations when time came for reporting”. This illustrated that Melissa used her observation notes towards the end of the unit or lesson to check for students understanding. In contrast, Joanna used her observation notes to check for students understanding in the moment. That way, she would figure out ways to move her students forward within their development. She used her notes to see what her students have “learnt” and “what they need help” with. She believed that the students need constant experiences to practice certain skill sets before moving onto new curriculum content.

Schindler (2010) and the OME (2010) both support the use of observations to gather information about student’s learning. Teachers can use those observation notes to understand student’s thought processes and focus on how to change and enrich lessons for their students (Schindler, 2010). Both participants showed an understanding of the use of observations, however, using the information gained in the present moment like Joanna would provide more rich lessons to enhance student’s skills.
4.2.4 Setting up the play centres

The participants acknowledged that the materials provided in the classroom supports curriculum content, student inquiry, and ownership. However, both participants presented the materials in different ways which led to different student inquiries. For example, Melissa provided materials that were connected to the curriculum however what the students chose to do with it was entirely up to them. She presented the materials for her students and waited for inquiry to emerge. Melissa stated that:

If we’re working on geometry right now, and […] we’re going to learn about 3D shapes, how are my centres at that point supporting those ideas and supporting the students in that learning. So it’s providing materials for the students.

Melissa’s understanding of setting up her centres is to provide her students with materials in order to support curriculum content. While the students are exploring the materials, she would intervene and guide the students. In comparison, Joanna gathers different interests from her students through “voting” and uses them to create her centres. She followed up and stated:

When we did the ice cream centre (drama centre), the votes turn into a math activity. The kids had to express to the teachers what they wanted us to include in the centre. And we tell them there are certain things we could provide but there are other things that we need them to work on.

This demonstrates that Joanna includes her students’ voices prior to setting up the centres and interwoven curriculum content throughout the process. However, what differs between the two participants is that Joanna allows the students the opportunity to take ownership of their learning. The students had to create their centres and bring it to life. While the literature agrees
that play-based learning has little structure (Karia, 2014), there is scarce research on how to set up a classroom that supports it.

### 4.2.5 Planning

Play-based learning is open to interpretations on how teachers would like to plan for their centres and lesson. Both participants have varying views on planning due to student engagement and supporting curriculum content. For example, when asked about planning, Melissa stated:

Play-based learning is a lot of planning and thinking and it’s not just something you show up and say hey today we’re going to do this. It doesn’t work that way especially if you expect your students to learn and grow through everything that’s within the curriculum.

Melissa viewed planning as an important aspect to creating her centres and lesson. She viewed played-based and planning as intertwined with one another and it’s up to the teacher to ensure that their lessons support curriculum content or else it would be “free play”. Joanna, however, does not see the value of planning. She stated that she often goes with the “flow” and saw “no point in just sitting there and planning in advance because you’ll never know if its going to work or not”. Therefore, it is important to observe the level of engagement that the students are demonstrating and use that to co-teach and co-construct centres. Although it is up to the teachers to plan, there is scarce research on whether or not it is important. Further research needs to be provided in order to support teachers in setting up their classroom.

### 4.3 Concerns with Play-Based Learning in Full-Day Kindergarten

Many concerns were expressed from the participants about play-based learning. The concerns that were shared have come from past experiences that the participants have encountered and witnessed over the years. The various concerns shared were the different appearances of play-based classrooms and lack of support in play-based learning.
4.3.1 Different appearances of play-based in classrooms

When stepping into a different classroom, educators cannot help but notice the way other educators set up their classrooms. Although both participants stressed the importance of student involvement and co-learning, many other educators view it differently, which can affect the way they set up their classrooms. For example, Melissa visited several kindergarten classrooms and quickly noticed the difference in classroom set up. She expressed that “play-based is misguided and misunderstood which is why people are left with interpreting it on their own”. This prompted Melissa to attend professional development courses in order to enhance her understanding. This demonstrates how she felt uneasy about her views of play-based learning from that of others. She wondered if she was meeting requirements of play-based learning. Surprisingly, Joanna had a different view about the different appearances. She believed that the “structure depends on the teachers and its their whole teaching philosophy behind it”. Joanna viewed this concern as a positive aspect and continued to reflect on her classroom set up to better meet the needs of her students. The appearance of her classroom was based on her student’s interest and reflected them. Setting up the classroom looked different in various classrooms as it reflects on the students that the educators are currently working with.

Current literature reports how different understandings of play-based learning makes it challenging for teachers to integrate it within their classrooms (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). Baker (2014) states that there should be a common understanding and examples of what it looks like for teachers to follow.

4.3.2 Lack of support in play-based learning

The participants within the study expressed how there is a lack of support that is given to teachers for play-based learning. Both participants expressed two different support systems that
should be required for teachers new to play-based learning. Melissa mentioned the changes she would like to see:

  More training and give us the tools to use. Who is going to provide materials for me? If we think play-based learning works pedagogically then how do we support our classrooms and our teachers, and how do we attain those materials to support students and the curriculum.

  Melissa’s concern veered towards the lack of materials that are given to the classroom and how this resulted in “going out to buy materials” on her own. She also mentioned gaining information about play-based learning through personal research and additional qualification courses. In comparison, Joanna’s response focused on the disconnect between bridging senior kindergarten (SK) students to Grade 1. She stated that, “something needs to be changed in kindergarten or the Grade 1 program in order to close this gap” or “provide teachers with more support”. This resulted in her working closely with the SK students in order to “prepare them for Grade 1”. This demonstrates how the two perspectives are important to the success of creating a play-based classroom. Both teachers are constantly finding ways to support their students within the classroom even if it requires them to go above and beyond.

  The lack of supports given to teachers is acknowledged by current literature. Fesseha and Pyle (2016) states that the OME has failed to provide educators with the appropriate support for play-based learning. These appropriate supports are vital to the success of students and the play-based program.
4.4 Conclusion

Three themes emerged through analyzing the data from the interview with Melissa and Joanna, two elementary school teachers in Ontario. The main themes (followed by several sub-themes) are:

1. Teacher’s understanding of play-based learning in full-day kindergarten
2. Strategies in supporting play-based learning in full-day kindergarten
3. Concerns with play-based learning in full-day kindergarten

Teacher’s understanding of play-based learning discussed the importance of how teachers interpret play-based learning and what their role is within the classroom was. Both teachers described how they saw play-based learning as a way for students to construct their knowledge, while also supporting student inquiries through centres and hands-on materials. However, the participants had differing views about their role as an educator within the classroom. Melissa believed that her role, as an educator, was to guide student’s learning and engage in explicit teaching. In contrast, Joanna saw the importance of co-teaching with the students in order to learn with them and support their inquiries.

As play-based is open to interpretation, educators can adopt teaching philosophies within their classrooms. Melissa stated that STEAM was a great educational approach to use within her classroom because it connected to different curriculum strands. In contrast, Joanna did not use an educational approach, but used her student’s interests to teach her students the necessary skills. Another teaching strategy that emerged was the use of mindfulness within the classroom to promote positive self-regulation skills. It was eye-opening to see Melissa use materials and yoga exercises with her students whereas Joanna modeled various situations. What was important was how these two mindfulness practices had a common goal, which was to allow students to use
them independently. Lastly, the use of observations as an assessment tool was expressed amongst the two participants. Although they expressed using observations within their classroom, both had a different purpose for them. Melissa used the observations towards the end of a unit in order to address certain needs whereas Joanna used them immediately. There were varying strategies as to how the participants were setting up their classrooms. Melissa sets up her centres by providing students the materials and waits for student’s inquiry to emerge. In contrast, Joanna gathers her student’s interests to create her centres. Planning was also addressed between the two participants. Melissa saw planning to be an important piece to play-based learning whereas Joanna did not. Joanna noticed student’s interest often change which is why she does not plan ahead.

In order to successfully promote a play-based learning environment, teachers need the proper support in order to do so. Melissa expressed that many play-based classrooms often don’t look alike. She often wondered if she was meeting the requirements of play-based learning. In contrast, Joanna believed that it is up to the teacher on how they would like to structure their classrooms. Next, Melissa noticed that there was a lack of support when it comes to providing materials for educators. The lack of materials resulted in having to purchase them on her own. However, Joanna noticed that there was a lack of support when it comes to bridging SK students to Grade 1.

The next chapter of the MTRP will focus on the implications of these research findings in connection to the pedagogical strategies teachers are using to support play-based learning in FDK. Recommendations and suggestions for further research will also be provided.
Chapter 5: Implications

5.0 Introduction to the Chapter

In this chapter, I further discuss the significant findings found through the research question: What pedagogical strategies are teachers using to support play-based learning in FDK? This chapter includes a summary of my key findings and their significance followed by my implications for both the educational community and my practice as a novice teacher. In addition, I outline my recommendations for a variety of stakeholders such as teachers, administrators, and ministries of education/school boards. Then, I provide areas of further research that would benefit my study.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

The key findings of this research study provided various insights about play-based learning. The first theme explored teachers’ understandings of play-based learning and what their role is within the classroom. The participants expressed similar views of their understanding of play-based learning, however their implication for play-based learning differs. Melissa engaged in explicit teaching where she modeled different behaviours and skill sets during play while Joanna facilitated her students’ learning by partaking in co-teaching where she focused on student inquiry.

The second theme included strategies that teachers are using to support play-based learning. The participants’ philosophies had a significant impact on the way they teach within the program. One of the participants used a teaching philosophy (e.g. STEAM) while the other used students’ interests. Both participants also incorporated mindfulness practices into their classroom but approached it in different ways. However, they still see the value of mindfulness within their classrooms pertaining to student development. In addition, both participants use daily
observations within their classrooms as a form of assessing students’ knowledge. There was also a focus on how teachers are setting up their classrooms to support play-based learning. Both participants had different ways of approaching classroom set up. Melissa provided materials for her students and waited for inquiry to happen. In comparison, Joanna used students’ inquiry to set up the classroom. They also had different views when it comes to planning for centres and lessons.

Finally, the third theme looked at the concerns that the participants expressed with play-based learning. Joanna and Melissa both expressed that there was a lack of support when it comes to providing appropriate resources and preparing students for grade 1. They also acknowledged that there are different classroom set ups for play-based learning. Melissa expressed that it has a lot to do with the definition of play-based while Joanna believes it’s the teacher’s philosophy that affects the way he/she sets up the classroom.

These findings are significant as they highlight the importance of how teachers are approaching play-based learning. Both participants have varying views about play-based learning and teaching philosophies. It is important to remember that appropriate strategies and resources should be put in place to help support teachers. This would allow teachers to implement an effective play-based classroom for students.

5.2 Implications

In this section, I discuss the broad implications of my findings for the educational community and how to better support teachers in taking on a play-based learning approach. Then, I discuss the narrow implications of my research as a researcher and novice teacher.
5.2.1 Broad: The educational research community

The findings of this study reported the importance of having play-based learning clearly defined within the ministry of education curriculum document (OME, 2010). If it is clearly defined, teachers may be able to better teach within this new approach. My participants noted that because play-based learning is not clearly defined within the curriculum document, it is often left misinterpreted or misunderstood by teachers. It is up to the teachers to construct their classrooms on what they believe play-based is and looks like. Therefore, when my participants visit other classrooms, they noticed differences on how other educators approached play-based learning. For example, in one class, students could be completing worksheets before engaging in play versus a different class where students are engaged in inquiry-based learning through play. Research also supports that although the ministry of education provides a list of the benefits of play-based learning, it should be clearly defined (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015; Baker, 2014). This would allow teachers to have a deeper understanding of play-based learning and how to better support their students.

This study further revealed how there is a lack of materials for teachers to support play-based learning. If teachers were provided with the appropriate materials, they would be better prepared to support student learning. These materials could consist of building blocks, math manipulatives, and drama props (e.g. costumes, kitchen supplies, play coins, dolls). The participant in my study mentioned how there is a lack of ministry resources for teachers. Melissa would often purchase the resources with her own money in order to replace the used materials. Since the ministry considers play-based learning as an effective teaching approach, materials are required for its implementation in a kindergarten classroom. These materials will allow teachers to feel more confident in teaching through a play-based approach while meeting curriculum
expectations. As mentioned by Fesseha and Pyle (2016), the ministry of education has failed to provide educators with the appropriate support such as learning materials and manipulatives.

In addition to materials, there is a lack of support in teaching strategies when helping educators teach within a play-based approach. My participants mentioned how they often seek additional information and programs to enrich their learning of play-based. Educators who are constantly updating their teaching philosophies and practices are better prepared to take on this teaching approach. The ministry may consider providing appropriate networks for teachers to seek teaching strategies. This would allow teachers to increase their awareness of effective strategies and increase their success within the new teaching approach. In connection to research, Van Oers & Duijkers (2013) state that providing a supportive classroom for students requires teachers to seek support from professional sources.

5.2.2 Narrow: My professional identity and practice

As a novice teacher, the findings of the study provided me with instructional strategies (e.g. STEAM, planning, and setting up centres) and insights on how to become an effective teacher. As an educator, I believe in the importance of allowing students to learn through play in the early years. However, it is important that educators are supported throughout the process of teaching through play-based learning. Support systems (e.g. workshops and professional conferences) should be provided throughout the year especially when there are educators new to the kindergarten program and to keep up with the changing dynamics within the classroom (e.g. different needs of students). Teaching strategies provide educators with different approaches they can take while still adapting play-based learning. Although there are scarce teaching strategies available for educators, this made me realize the importance of seeking professional
development conferences in order to improve my teaching practices. This would allow me to support students’ learning by using the appropriate teaching strategy.

Furthermore, my research demonstrates a need for a clear definition of play-based learning. A clear definition would help prepare educators to teach within a play-based approach while also supporting students’ learning. It would also help with planning and constructing a play-based classroom. It is important that the ministries provide teachers with documents about the definition of play-based learning and what it could potentially look like. Therefore as an educator, it is vital that I constantly seek to gain new information about play-based learning, which could be through workshops or professional conferences.

5.3 Recommendations

The recommendations that arise out of the present study focus on what teachers can do to seek additional information and resources about play-based learning. This also includes addressing areas of improvement for a variety of stakeholders such as the administration and ministries of education/school boards.

5.3.1 Teachers

With the information that I have gathered from my participants about play-based learning in schools, I propose that teachers should have monthly meetings or workshops to help support each other. Play-based learning may be new to teachers who have not taught kindergarten before so it is important that teachers have the necessary support from their colleagues. These meetings would allow teachers to share resources and ideas to gain a better understanding of play-based learning. These meetings/workshops would allow teachers to be constantly updated on new resources or pedagogies and share how it can be used within the classroom. This would allow teachers to be aware of how they can support their students better. From what my participant
[Melissa] shared in the interview, a play-based learning environment is different across all classrooms that she has visited. Having these meetings or workshops would clarify any misinformation and build teacher efficacy.

In addition, teachers should have access to professional development courses provided by their administrations or ministries of education. This would allow teachers to gain a deeper understanding of play-based learning besides the meetings/workshops at their school. These professional development courses would connect teachers to other educators or resources that have been researched.

5.3.2 Administrators

Based on the findings from my study, I propose that the administrators should provide their teachers with appropriate professional development courses to help build teacher efficacy. This would allow teachers to feel that they are being supported throughout the year. Students entering kindergarten come from various backgrounds and needs, and therefore educators need the appropriate guidance to help support their students. I propose that the administrators should also be aware and keep up-to-date on relevant resources to become knowledgeable about current best practices. This could be through visiting other schools or meeting with various administrators from different schools to discuss occurrences of themes that are expressed by their educators.

5.3.3 Ministries of education/school boards

From my findings, I suggest that school boards should reduce the class size for every kindergarten classroom (e.g. maximum 20 students). This would allow teachers to provide the appropriate learning experience for students while taking on student interests to plan lessons. Having a small classroom would ensure that all student’s needs are being addressed and
supported throughout the year. If the class size cannot be reduced, provide additional support for students by perhaps having two Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) within the classroom. I also propose that the ministry of education should provide mandatory training programs for teachers new to teaching kindergarten. This would allow them to gain a better understanding of what kindergarten entails and feel prepared to know where they can seek additional resources.

The ministries of education should also incorporate a clear definition of play-based learning within their curriculum. Although the current curriculum document explains the importance of play, teachers are left to interpret what play-based learning consists of. I suggest that the document should also include examples of what play-based learning looks like, how to plan, and how to set up students for success. This would allow a more smooth transition for students who are entering Grade 1.

In addition, I suggest that the ministries of education provide their educators with the appropriate resources. If play-based learning is seen as the best pedagogical approach for kindergarten, there should be resources provided for teachers to do so. Teachers and administrators should discuss and gather a list of resources necessary for the classroom. This will then be sent to the Ministry in which it can be enacted for all classrooms.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

Based on my research findings, I propose two key courses of action 1) strategies and resources to support teachers, and 2) having a clear definition of play-based learning. In order to support teachers, there is a need for further research on strategies and resources. If new strategies are explored, teachers can utilize the ones that best suit their needs and students’ needs. There is also a need for a close examination of resources in preparing teachers to bridge the gap between kindergarten students entering Grade 1. My participant [Joanna] noted that there would always
be groups of students who are ready for Grade 1 compared to other students. It is challenging to prepare those students without adequate support. Research needs to be conducted on whether the kindergarten or the Grade 1 program requires a change within the curriculum.

In addition, there needs to be research done on a clear definition of play-based learning. Although there is research about the importance of play, conducting research on the definition of play-based would help inform teaching practices. This would allow teachers to provide the best learning environment, understand how to integrate play-based into the classroom, and plan for lessons. If there is no general understanding of what play-based consists of, teachers are left to interpret its meaning, which will influence their classroom structure and teaching practice.

5.5 Concluding Comments

The goal of this study was to find out what pedagogical strategies teachers are using to support play-based learning in FDK. As play is becoming well known within the early years, this makes my research an important study for educators teaching within kindergarten classrooms. What I found through my research is that play-based learning is open to different interpretation, which affects how educators are approaching it within their classrooms. There is a mix between modeling students’ learning and engaging in explicit teaching versus becoming a facilitator and co-teaching with students. I also found that teachers lack teaching resources and support systems for play-based learning. Often times, teachers had to seek teaching resources and supports on their own without guidance. However, this research did provide key insights on how teachers are constantly updating their teaching practices and developing their teaching philosophies to meet students’ needs.

Recommendations provided not only targeted teachers, but administrators and ministries of education/school boards. These recommendations included providing professional
development courses, creating new documents that ensure a clear definition, and providing appropriate resources. This new shift would allow teachers to feel confident while enriching their teaching practices.
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Appendix A: Letter of Consent

Date: _______________________________

Dear ______________________________,

I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on pedagogical strategies teachers are using to support play-based learning in FDK. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have experience working in Kindergarten classrooms within the TDSB. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide important insights that are pertinent to this topic.

I will be conducting a 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded after. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as an informal presentation to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. I will assign a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and confidentiality and will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored in my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my research coordinator Angela Macdonald. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. There are no known risks to you participating, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,
Michelle Tran

Phone Number: ______________________________
Email: michellely.tran@mail.utoronto.ca
Research Coordinator: Angela Macdonald  
Phone Number: ______________________  
Email: angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by __________ and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name: (printed) ______________________________________

Date: ______________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol/Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn about what pedagogical strategies teachers are using to support play-based learning in FDK. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes where I will ask you approximately 16 questions. The interview protocol has been divided into 4 sections, beginning with, background information about the participants, followed by their experiences with play-based learning both positive and negative, then teaching strategies they have used, and concluding with what change they would like to see moving forward within the program. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Section A – Background Information
1. How long have you been teaching kindergarten?
2. Have you taught other grades?
3. Can you tell me a bit about your class this year?
4. Which board have you previously worked at?

Section B – Experiences with Play-Based Learning
5. How would you define play-based learning?
6. What are your beliefs about play-based learning?
7. How do you create a learning environment for play-based learning?
   a. What types of learning centres do you have?
8. Can you tell me your experiences with teaching play-based learning in FDK?
   a. What are some of the positive aspects of these experiences?
   b. What are some of the negative aspects of these experiences?

Section C – Teaching Strategies
9. What are your best and most effective teaching lessons that take a PBL approach? Give specific examples.
10. What are some of the ways in which you are implementing play-based learning?
11. Can you describe a teaching strategy that you are using to implement play-based learning?
    a. What are some of the benefits with using this strategy(s)?
    b. What are some of the challenges with using this strategy(s)?
    c. Can you describe how the teaching strategy supports/connects to curriculum expectations?
d. What developmental changes have you noticed in your students when you are using these strategy(s)?

12. Can you describe some of the assessment strategies you use in order to assess students’ learning?
   a. What are some of the benefits with using these assessment strategy(s)?
   b. What are some of the challenges with using these assessment strategy(s)?

13. What strategies do you use to balance child and teacher directed learning?

Section D – Supports, Challenges, and Next Steps

14. What aspects of your play-based program would you change next year?
15. What aspects of the play-based program would you want to see changed in the future?
16. What advice would you give to FDK teachers new to play-based learning?

Thank you for your participation in this research study.