

# Implementing play pedagogies within rural early childhood development centres: Practitioners' views

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**Background:** Early childhood development (ECD) practitioners are encouraged to implement play pedagogies and their views of play as a pedagogy in rural settings have not been captured widely. They are the main role players in implementing play pedagogies for learners' learning and development. The commitment to play can be traced through theory and ideology in early childhood programmes internationally and in South Africa.

**Aim:** This study explored the views and beliefs of the practitioners about the use of play pedagogy in rural ECD centres.

**Setting:** Six practitioners from three rural primary schools in Limpopo, South Africa, participated in the study.

**Methods:** Semi-structured interviews, document analysis and nonparticipant observation were used to collect data.

**Results:** The participants found integrating play pedagogies when planning their lessons and assessing children's progress challenging. The results showed that ECD practitioners in rural centres lack the skills and material resources to implement play pedagogies.

**Conclusion:** The study suggests that ECD practitioners in rural areas need professional development opportunities in the implementation of play activities as a teaching pedagogy.

**Contribution:** These findings can be used to assist ECD practitioners in rural areas in implementing play pedagogies. Educators could use low-cost, locally available materials such as natural resources, recycled materials or everyday objects to create play-based activities that could involve indigenous songs and games relevant to the children's cultural and social context. They could collaborate with parents and community members to develop and implement play-based activities, leveraging the knowledge and skills of the local community.

**Keywords:** play; pedagogies; ECD practitioners; learning; zone of proximal development; rural areas.

## Introduction

Early childhood development (ECD) practitioners experience challenges in implementing play pedagogies in the existing early childhood care and education (ECCE) curriculum for public primary schools. This statement is validated by Ogunyemi and Ragpot (2015) who explained that African countries such as Nigeria and South Africa have ECD practitioners who are insufficiently trained in play pedagogies contributing to challenges of conceptualisation and implementation of this strategy. Consequently, inconsistencies emerged, indicating a gap in the perspectives of ECD practitioners about the integration of play activities into the curricula of public primary schools (Dako-Gyeke 2011; Ogunyemi 2004; Vu, Han & Buell 2015). Thus, it is critical to explore the views and beliefs that ECD practitioners have on the application of play pedagogies, as it is emphasised as a teaching strategy both worldwide and in the South African education context. This study was conducted to learn more about the relationship between practitioners' practices and beliefs in integrating play activities.

Several researchers and theorists such as Lunga, Esterhuizen and Koen (2022), Parker, Thomsen and Berry (2022) and Vygotsky (1978) have shown that play-based learning is a valuable way to support learners' holistic development, which includes their social, cognitive, emotional,

intellectual and physical skills. In addition to thinking that play is a good way for kids to practise skills that help them learn and grow, they also know that play gives kids a solid base upon which to build their learning experiences. Through the development of both academic and nonacademic talents, this subsequently enables them to obtain knowledge that will aid in their future preparation.

Statistics South Africa (2016, 2019) proved that although children spend a lot of time playing and honing their early learning abilities, 63% of learners in public primary schools do not participate in any kind of early learning activities. Appropriate policies such as those of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF 2018) and the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2011) emphasise the need to implement play pedagogies in early childhood education.

The implementation of play pedagogies plays a significant role in early childhood. Much of the contemporary research on play was built on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Chaiklin 2003) which recognised the critical role of practitioners in enhancing learners' learning and development through play activities (Machado et al. 2019). Thus, to encourage the development of learners' higher mental functions and to support learning that challenges learners beyond their comfort zones, practitioners must offer suitable play-based learning experiences (Nugent 2017). However, studies have shown that a lack of resources for play-based activities in rural schools has a negative impact on developing learners' cognitive skills (Khalil et al. 2022; Mohangi et al. 2016).

Consequently, practitioners must understand Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and be able to apply it in the implementation of play pedagogies in rural contexts. Researchers state that Vygotsky's theory shapes ECD practitioners' views and beliefs in implementing play pedagogies within rural areas to teach and develop holistic skills (Parker & Thomsen 2019).

It is against this background that this article aims to explore the views and beliefs of practitioners in rural areas on play pedagogies.

## Background of the study

The early childhood curriculum formerly focused solely on social interaction for learning and development; however, since 2015, there has been a change in the way that many countries propose using play-based learning in these curricula. The DBE (2011, 2015) and UNICEF (2018) emphasised the need to use play strategy internationally and nationally. Cuartas et al. (2019) indicate that the majority of European countries adhere to South Africa's ECD admissions requirements, which are children between 4 and 9 years. Mwamwenda (2014) also explains that most ECD centres in Africa are found in rural areas. An increasing amount of research is supporting the use of play-based learning to

enhance several learning and development domains. The domains of social-emotional skills, general cognitive development and self-regulation abilities are all included in developmental learning (Frost 2010; Malik & Marwah 2021). On the physical level, children develop both gross and fine motor development through play (Dapp, Gashaj & Roebbers 2021). Murtagh, Sawalma and Martin (2022) affirmed that play-based activities impact student learning in academic subject areas such as literacy and mathematics. Learners learn from the educator and their peers through play (Parker et al. 2022) and integrate their language, customs and culture into play activities. This implies that play-based pedagogy plays a significant role in fostering young children's holistic development.

However, there is disagreement among academics and researchers about the best way for practitioners to apply play-based pedagogy, as well as on developmental and academic perspectives on play-based learning (Danniels & Pyle 2018). The current difficulty for educators using play-based learning curricula in rural regions is incorporating required academic requirements into play-based pedagogy (Isaacs et al. 2019). This study aims to explore the views and beliefs of practitioners on the implementation of play-based pedagogy in rural ECD centres. Implementation of play-based pedagogy is indeed a key parameter that leads to the achievement of the learning goals of early childhood without neglecting the interests of learners.

It is against this backdrop that it was assumed that early childhood practitioners have different views and beliefs on the implementation of play pedagogies. This indicates the need to solicit practitioners' views on the implementation of this pedagogy in rural ECD centres of South Africa. The key drivers that underpin play-based learning provide a framework for practitioners to understand their roles in the implementation of play-based pedagogy and to shape their decisions in ways that support young learners' holistic development, a critical aspect of contemporary education.

## Research questions

The research questions of this study were as follows:

- What are the views and beliefs of ECD practitioners on play pedagogies in rural ECD centres?
- What are the ECD practitioners' challenges in implementing play as a pedagogy in rural ECD centres?

## Literature review

A study by Lunga et al. (2022) conducted in the Gauteng and North West Provinces on play-based pedagogy to advance young learners' holistic development showed that educators and parents play a significant role in the implementation of play-based pedagogy. They indicated that to support holistic development in young learners, practitioners and parents should maximise the use of a play-based methodology in both social and learning environments. It was further

concluded that follow-up should be done to ensure that the pedagogy being used in ECD centres corresponds with requirements for the development of young learners (Lunga et al. 2022).

An international empirical study by Samuelsson and Björklund (2022) on the relationship between play and learning showed a significant relationship between the implementation of play-based pedagogy and the role of practitioners. They observed that play and learning have been conceptualised and influenced by policies and developmental pedagogy in early centres and emphasised the importance of curriculum in the early years (Samuelsson & Björklund 2022).

Pyle et al.'s (2020) study on play-based learning misalignments between public discourse, classroom realities and research found a discrepancy between policy and the implementation of play pedagogies. Their study found that educators do not understand their roles and the use of play or its integration in social and cultural contexts (Fesseha & Pyle 2016); this affects the implementation of play pedagogies in the teaching and learning of young learners. It was further suggested that educators need a broader understanding of play-based learning and its role in classrooms.

The South African curriculum does state that play should be used for teaching and learning. However, it does indicate how practitioners should do this explicitly in their lessons. This refers to guided play as it has benefits for learning academic themes and contributes to holistic development. The literature has indicated that practitioners are not struggling with free play as learners do what they want during this time. However, with guided play, the role of the teacher is very important. In this case, they are not clear on the role they play with guided play. Guided play refers to play activities that the practitioners use as a teaching strategy to achieve teaching and learning outcomes. Thereafter, practitioners need to use the zone of proximal development (ZPD) to develop learners' learning by guiding them in play activities that could assist them with their holistic development.

## Theoretical framework

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory underpinned this study. It was developed in 1978 and focuses on the ZPD, the core idea being that a more knowledgeable other (MKO) (such as a teacher or more advanced peer learner) can enhance learners' learning by guiding them through tasks that are slightly above their current ability level. This refers to guided play in childhood education. As the learners become more competent, the MKOs gradually withdraw their help until the learners can perform the skills by themselves. After this, the learners' initiative is crucial. Vygotsky (1978) asserts that the role of educators in supporting learners' development and academic skills is essential in the application of ZPD when using play pedagogies within the classroom context.

Different scholars explicitly believe that ZPD and play-based learning increase participation between learners and educators. Educators play different roles at different stages of the developmental trajectory of play to enhance participation between peers and the educator. The role of practitioners in implementing play pedagogies within the ZPD approach is to increase participation in the classroom. Vygotsky (1966:6) argues that 'play is the leading source of development in preschool years', as participating in a fun and spontaneous activity allows learners to increase their learning and developmental capacities (Bodrova & Leong 2003, 2015; Taylor & Boyer 2020; Vygotsky 1978). Furthermore, Vygotsky (1967) emphasises that the integration of play activities in early learning increases the chance of mental development for learners. This also enhances their social skills. Considering that learners might develop their cognitive, social and emotional domains through dramatic and pretend play, Vygotsky restricted his conception of play to this kind of play (Granic, Lobel & Engels 2014). However, it should also be noted that Vygotsky believed that all forms of play were important for children's development (Bodrova & Leong 2015).

## The philosophy of beliefs

Following an analysis of numerous research projects examining beliefs, Tabellini (2008) determined that beliefs are an individual's mental constructs that are shaped by their experiences as well as their social, cultural, political and historical circumstances. Because beliefs are subjective, they represent an individual's judgement, which shapes the actions that an individual chooses to take (Levin 2015). Abroampa and Simpson (2020:49) argued that 'if practitioners' beliefs influence their teaching, and therefore learners' opportunities to learn, then beliefs should be a central concern of teaching and teacher education'. When offering learners developmentally appropriate opportunities to play and study at the same time, ECD practitioners would not only apply their knowledge from their own learning experiences but also put it into practice. This begs the question, 'Why is there still no theory on the role of beliefs in understanding play?' More precisely, 'What role do beliefs play in the understanding of play?'

## Research methods and design

This article presents an interpretive qualitative case study of six ECD practitioners from rural areas. An interpretive qualitative case study permits an in-depth review of an existing or new phenomenon while maintaining meaningful characteristics of real-life events (Rashid et al. 2019). Bouncken et al. (2021) proposed that a qualitative case study allows the flexibility of collecting, analysing and interpreting data, elaborating on or refocusing research questions, while simultaneously identifying and dealing with validity threats. The research sites were chosen based on the availability and convenient locations of the public primary school centres.

## Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select research participants who would suit the purpose of the research (Mukherji & Albon 2011). Maree and Van der Westhuizen (2009:79) defined purposive sampling as 'the selection of participants based on some definite specific characteristics that qualify them to be holders of required data for the study'. Six practitioners working in three rural primary schools in the Limpopo province of South Africa participated in the data generation process. They were all females with at least three years teaching experience in the foundation phase. It was anticipated that they would be knowledgeable about the use of play pedagogies in rural areas. This study focused on schools that are based in rural areas of Capricorn South District because of limited teaching and learning resources provided by the Department of Basic Education.

## Data collection

Three methods were used to generate data: semi-structured interviews, document analysis and nonparticipant observation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with rural area ECD practitioners, and the interview schedule required them to respond to 11 questions while talking about their experiences, views and beliefs. The semi-structured interviews were administered two weeks before document analysis was undertaken. The document consisted of daily lesson plans designed by the practitioners. Data from ECD practitioners' lesson plans were matched against the views and beliefs of practitioners expressed during the interviews on the implementation of play pedagogies in rural areas. Observations were used to verify data from semi-structured interviews and document analysis. This included observing the types of play activities that were offered, the level of engagement and participation of children, the learning outcomes that were achieved from the guided play, and the ECD practitioners' ability to create a supportive and stimulating play-based environment.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations refer to ethical principles used to avoid harm to participants when conducting research (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden 2001). They involve receiving ethical approval from the Research Ethics Board to ensure that the researcher abides by the principles of confidentiality, nonmaleficence and respect (Aluwihare-Samaranayake 2012). Approval to carry out the study was sought from and provided by the Ethics Review Committee at the College of Education of the University of South Africa (No. 2020/10/14/64019209/07/AM) and permission to conduct the research was obtained from the DBE.

Ethical standards were carefully considered and upheld to protect participants' autonomy and confidentiality (Babbie & Mouton 2005). This included the main ethical principles of nonmaleficence and beneficence. The researchers ensured that no harm was done to anyone involved in this study, and all ethical considerations were attended to.

Participation in this study was voluntary (Oppenheimer, Meyvis & Davidenko 2009). To assert their autonomy, participants signed a consent form (Bertram & Christensen 2014), and pseudonyms (Practitioners 1–6) were used to ensure that their identity was concealed. They were informed that they could withdraw from participating at any point should they wish to do so.

Trustworthiness was addressed in terms of credibility and dependability. According to Polit and Beck (2017), credibility refers to the extent to which the research accurately represents the phenomenon being studied and the degree to which the research findings are believable and trustworthy. Credibility was ensured through data triangulation from the interviews and documents. Dependability, on the other hand, refers to the consistency and stability of the research findings over time and across different contexts. It involves establishing rigorous research procedures, collecting data in a systematic and standardised manner, and ensuring that the data analysis methods are reliable and replicable. During the interviews, audio recording was used to assist with internal validity in qualitative research. Together, credibility and dependability help to ensure that the research findings are robust and can be used to make informed decisions and draw valid conclusions.

This was a small-scale case study, and the results may not be generalised (eds. Terre Blanche, Durkheim & Painter 2006). No claim is made for the transferability of the results to other situations or contexts.

## Data analysis

We used thematic analysis to analyse the data (Nowell et al. 2017). We obtained data from the interviews, documents and nonparticipant observations by following Creswell's (2013) steps for data analysis to organise the data and define the codes. This involved the identification of themes and patterns while collecting, transcribing, editing and coding the interview transcripts (Sutton & Austin 2015). Patience was required in contemplating suitable codes and maintaining a constant comparative analysis of data collected for explanation and clarity (Sangasubana 2011).

Primary data were compiled from semi-structured interviews, document analysis and nonparticipant observation from each school. At first, we analysed data manually whereby open coding was used which involved looking at the data and reading it repeatedly to create labels to establish meaning from the information elicited from the participants (Sutton & Austin 2015). This involved looking at the relationships among the open codes, what influences these connections, what conditions precipitated them to occur, and the context and strategies used. Later, the data were recoded using qualitative data analysis software called ATLAS.ti version 22.0.7. The creation of codes was influenced

by keywords from research and interview questions. Additionally, categories developed from the theoretical framework support this article. Codes and categories assisted in generating themes that emerged from the literature review and what the rural area practitioners in early childhood education said. We then tabulated the data according to the themes that emerged from the data.

Data analysis and interpretation involved triangulation in validating the information and drawing conclusions. Triangulation in research involves using multiple methods or sources to collect and analyse data to increase the credibility and dependability of research findings. According to Maxwell, Locke and Scheurich (2013), triangulation is an important measure that deepens the understanding of a phenomenon while considering different aspects of it. In the current study, findings from the interviews, documents and observations were triangulated.

## Results and discussion

The results and findings of this article are discussed under two emerging themes. They can serve as guidance for the DBE in assisting ECD practitioners to implement play as a learning pedagogy to promote the quality of education in ECD centres, public primary schools and foundation phase classrooms, especially in rural areas.

### Theme 1: Implementing play pedagogies in rural areas assists children in holistic development

This article asked: *What are the views and beliefs of practitioners on play pedagogies in rural ECD centres?* When the ECD practitioners were asked about their views on implementing play-based pedagogy, all six generally answered that implementation of play pedagogy in teaching young learners and developing their essential skills is critical:

'The use of play, I find it very useful because it is learner-centered, the learners become actively involved and they are listening, they understand quickly.' (female, 10 years' teaching experience)

'Play plays an important role in the number sense because it encourages the learners to participate fully and then the learners will be, either to see what comes next and it encourages them to socialise.' (Practitioner 2, female, 5 years' teaching experience)

'Play is very much important because I use it to grab the learners' attention. They become more interested in the lesson.' (Practitioner 3, female, 4 years' teaching experience)

'It is important because learners can play whereas they are learning.' (Practitioner 4, female, 16 years' teaching experience)

'When I use to play, learners would pass because learners like playing.' (Practitioner 5, female, 3 years' teaching experience)

'My views are let's give what belongs to learners. The learners' work is play, I think playing and teaching number sense for mathematics as a whole in the foundation phase are like tools.

You can never separate them when teaching and learning activities.' (Practitioner 6, female, 36 years' teaching experience)

When learners learn through play, they develop skills that could be applied in teaching and learning activities. Learners learn while they engage in play activities that are enjoyable, interactive and active.

The ECD practitioners' views indicated that they understood the importance of integrating play-based pedagogy in teaching young learners. Even though ECD practitioners believed that the implementation of play-based pedagogies in the early years was vital, data from document analysis showed that they had difficulty integrating play into lesson planning. The lesson plans requested from Practitioners 1, 2, 3 and 6 verified that ECD practitioners still had challenges in implementing play. Only two of them were able to use play-based pedagogy as their teaching method. In addition, observation also validated that ECD practitioners were experiencing challenges in the inclusion of play-based pedagogy when teaching young learners. At least five educators used play-based pedagogy as an intervention strategy rather than as a teaching pedagogy.

The results highlighted that the ECD practitioners understood that it was important to use a play-based pedagogy when teaching young learners. This corroborates the findings of Walsh et al. (2010). It was further indicated that they had challenges in implementing this strategy in rural areas. The challenges of practitioners in implementing play pedagogies are supported by Wood (2014) whose study examined the views and beliefs of ECD practitioners regarding the use of play pedagogies in a rural area. He found that play pedagogies played a significant role in developmental skills and academic learning and that educators understood the role of play-based learning in teaching mathematics to young learners. Most studies mentioned in this research revealed that practitioners have challenges in effectively implementing play pedagogies in rural areas. To link this finding with the theoretical framework that underpinned this study, it can be concluded that practitioners understood the need for using play-based pedagogies in the ZPD as play provides a rich and dynamic context for children to learn and grow and helps them to reach their full potential for cognitive, social and emotional development. By providing appropriate assistance and guidance, the ECD practitioner as the MKO can help a child to accomplish tasks that they could not have done on their own and gradually increase their cognitive abilities and understanding.

### Theme 2: Lack of resources in implementing play pedagogies in rural areas

This theme showed that ECD practitioners have challenges in implementing play pedagogies in rural early education centres. In this section, we discuss the challenges they experience. Question 2 asked if the ECD practitioners used play-based pedagogies when planning their lessons:

'When planning, no. I just involve it when I am busy teaching, maybe if I come across a difficult concept that learners do not understand then I use play-based strategy to explain it, and that's when I switch to play.' (Practitioner 1 female, 10 years' teaching experience)

'Sometimes I do.' (Practitioner 2 female, 5 years' teaching experience)

'When I am planning my lessons, there is no provision for play strategy, so I don't use it.' (Practitioner 3 female, 4 years' teaching experience)

'Yes.' (Practitioner 4 female, 16 years' teaching experience)

'Yes.' (Practitioner 5 female, 3 years' teaching experience)

'Sometimes because of shortage of resources. Our lesson plan template does not require the use of play. I was never trained for that.' (Practitioner 6 female, 36 years' teaching experience)

Interview data indicate four ECD practitioners (i.e., 1, 2, 3 and 6) did not use play-based pedagogies when planning their lessons. Document analysis data confirmed what practitioners said during the interviews. Early childhood development Practitioners 4 and 5 were the only participants to integrate play into their lesson plans. Observations support this because they showed that Practitioner 1 used play during the lesson without planning it.

The challenges for implementing play-based learning in rural areas are that it is not explicitly stated in the lesson plan formats (Practitioners 3 and 6), and also that there is a lack of resources (Practitioner 6). The other challenges that hinder or prevent practitioners from using play-based pedagogy could be a lack of training and a lack of understanding of the link between curriculum and play-based pedagogy. Even though LEGO Foundation has free training on the interactions that take place between practitioners and learners during play-based learning, practitioners are still unable to link the training with the curriculum teaching activities. But again, it did not focus on how to implement guided play to achieve learning outcomes. A limitation of the study is that no urban or semi-urban ECD practitioners/sites were included, so we do not know whether urban or semi-urban practitioners might face the same challenges.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The article asked: *What are the practitioners' challenges in implementing play as a pedagogy in rural ECD centres?* The majority of ECD practitioners were aware of the importance of play, its benefits for the whole learner, and a range of play-based practices to make sure that kids had lots of opportunities to learn, grow and experience their surroundings, regardless of their primary schools or the difficulties they encountered. The role of play in helping children learn and develop was something that practitioners were appropriately aware of. Early childhood development practitioners' beliefs are realised in the practices they select to use, and these practices are frequently impacted by a variety of internal and external

variables. However, a play-based pedagogy should be clearly understood and implemented by all practitioners within ECD centres and primary schools.

The findings also attested that ECD practitioners experienced challenges in implementing play-based pedagogies. Practitioners did not know how to plan play-based pedagogies. The *Children's Act No. 38 of 2005* calls for early childhood programmes to promote learners' rights to play and leisure. There is a need for quality teacher education and in-service programmes that focuses on defining play and play as a pedagogy for learning in the ECCE curriculum. Practitioners need to be able to plan play-based programmes, using both the National Curriculum Framework and CAPS as a framework of what is to be included in the programmes. These curriculum documents indicate that the activities should be play-based.

Early childhood development practitioners at rural public primary schools have undergone some training in early childhood education. However, the training that they received was limited and did not focus on how to use play as a pedagogy for learning. Therefore, because of a lack of practical training, ECD practitioners are unsure of how to incorporate play-based activities in their lesson plans. Vu et al. (2015) revealed a lack of pre-service and in-service training focusing on play for ECD practitioners, which resulted in an early childhood workforce who were told that play is important without being shown how to use it or support it effectively in the classroom (Bodrova & Leong 2003; Kemple 1996; Nugent 2017). Ndabezitha and Gravett (2022) guided pre-service teachers in developing knowledge on how to implement play pedagogy in Grade R and how to infuse guided play activities in the foundation phase.

The same situation was found in this study. It is recommended that the DBE in collaboration with the Department of Social Development consider establishing a training programme on play-based activities that is compulsory for all ECD practitioners.

Further, ECD practitioners had a challenge with resources. A strategy suggested by Paasikesen (2020) is that practitioners could use low-cost, locally available materials such as natural resources, recycled materials or everyday objects to create play-based activities that are relevant to the children's cultural and social context. Another strategy suggested by Lunga et al. (2022) could be to collaborate with parents and community members to develop and implement play-based activities, leveraging the knowledge and skills of the local community. Lastly, it is important for all stakeholders concerned to remember children's rights and make sure that ECD procedures comply with the policies of South African public primary schools.

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## Data availability

The corresponding author, M.A.S., will provide the data supporting the study's conclusions upon reasonable request.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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