

EXPLORING TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF PLAY-BASED LEARNING AND ITS
INTEGRATION IN PRACTICE IN PUBLIC KINDERGARTENS IN AZERBAIJAN

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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF PLAY-BASED LEARNING AND ITS
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By

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This is a qualitative study that explored public kindergarten teachers' perceptions of play-based learning and integration of it into practice. Play is emphasized in early childhood education as a part of children's development. Although the National Preschool Education Curriculum of Azerbaijan (2022) highlights the importance of play in children's pedagogy and holistic development, there are limited local studies on teachers' understanding of play and experiences of it in real classrooms. This study explored two research questions: (1) How do public kindergarten teachers in Baku understand play-based learning? (2) How do public kindergarten teachers in Baku integrate play-based learning in classroom practices?

In this study, 9 in-service female public kindergarten teachers participated in semi-structured interviews, and an inductive thematic approach was used in the data analysis. The findings presented that while all participants uniformly recognized the value of play in children's development, their understandings vary from pedagogical frameworks (active, sensory activity) to narrow, activity-focused views. In terms of integration, play is used as a core part of daily classroom activities and subject learning instead of being an isolated activity. Teacher roles are mainly described as facilitators and co-participants who are actively involved in the process of play, join children during play, scaffold children's development, and clearly do not accept traditional and passive Soviet-era models. Main influencing factors include challenges, such as neurodivergent needs and limited resources. In contrast, parents' alignment with teachers for

reviewing the gained knowledge with children at home, and teachers creating their own materials, are included in the supportive factor of integration.

Additionally, the findings of the study suggested a new model called *The Teachers' Understanding and Integration Model of Play-Based Learning*, describing the mutual influence between teacher cognition and integration, at the same time, how contextual factors (supportive and challenging conditions) influence the integration of play into daily practice. Proposed implications are a need for training programs, improved availability of resources, and pedagogical guidance for teachers to support the pedagogical value of play and effective integration of play-based learning in the classroom.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	6
1.1 Definition of terms	7
1.2 Purpose and Significance of the Study	8
1.3 Research questions	8
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	9
2.1 Introduction	9
2.2 Theoretical Framework	10
2.3 Teachers' Beliefs in Play-Based Learning	11
2.4 Integration of Play-based learning	14
2.5 Summary	17
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY	19
3.3 Sampling	21
3.4 Data Collection	22
3.5 Data Analysis	23
3.6 Trustworthiness	24
Credibility	24
Triangulation	25
Member checking	25
Dependability	25
Transferability	26
Confirmability	26
Ethical Considerations	27
3.7 Delimitations	27
3.8 Limitations	28
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS	29
Overview of the Findings	29
Teacher Cognition: Foundational Beliefs about Learning	29
Research Question 1: How do public kindergarten teachers in Baku understand play-based learning?	32

Definitions of Play-based Learning.	32
Beliefs of Play-Based Learning.	35
Summary	39
Research Question 2: How do public kindergarten teachers in Baku integrate play-based learning in classroom practices?	39
Ways of integrating play-based learning.....	40
Teachers' Role in Integration.	44
Challenges in Integrating Play-Based Learning.	45
Supportive Conditions for Integrating Play-Based Learning.....	48
Summary	50
Teachers' Understanding and Integration Model of Play-Based Learning	51
Summary	53
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSIONS	54
Discussion.....	54
Implications.....	62
Implication for Research.....	62
Implications for Practice	63
APPENDICES	64
APPENDIX A	64
APPENDIX B	66
REFERENCES	69

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Play is a foundational pathway for young children in early childhood education, where their development and learning unfold through play, and play is not an extra; rather, it supports whole-child development (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978; NAEYC, 2020). Similarly, in the Azerbaijan context, the National Preschool Education Curriculum (2022) highlights the importance of play by emphasizing that play is the main activity for school readiness and holistic development of young children in preschool education.

The preparation and implementation of the National Preschool Education Curriculum of Azerbaijan (MoSE, 2022) are based on the standards of State Standards for Preschool Education in Azerbaijan (MoSE, 2019, sec. 1.3), which frame learning outcomes and development domains by age levels in preschools. Although the National Preschool Education Curriculum of Azerbaijan (MoSE, 2022) highlights that “All types of play should be the basis of pedagogical activity for pre-school children’s development and training” (MoSE, 2022, p. 38), and provides general guidance on play for teachers by listing types of games with brief explanations. However, the interpretation of this approach is left to each teacher’s own views. Besides, local studies (e.g., Sadigova, 2022; Jafarova & Nasibova, 2021; Mammadova, 2023) also reflect this limited conceptual clarity; they focus on play conceptually or theoretically rather than teachers’ own understanding and their practice in public kindergartens. Therefore, this study aimed to fill this gap by giving a voice to public kindergarten teachers to share their perceptions and experiences related to play-based learning in classrooms.

In international studies, play is highly valued by teachers (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019) and supported in theory (NAEYC, 2020). However, factors such as assessment, time, and external pressure from both institutions and parents influence the

implementation of play-based learning in classrooms, making it difficult to do in practice (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). While international empirical research has already explored kindergarten teachers' perceptions of play and its implementation in real classroom settings, in Azerbaijan, it remains unexplored.

To explore these complex classroom dynamics, this study uses two theoretical frameworks: Teacher Cognition Theory (Borg, 2003) and Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978).

1.1 Definition of terms

Play- internationally, play is viewed as an experience that is self-motivated, voluntary, and activity-centered, which promotes engagement, enjoyment, and exploratory freedom without focusing on the outcomes (Smith, 2009; Bergen, 2013; NAEYC,2020). From the local context, the National Preschool Education Curriculum of Azerbaijan (MoSE, 2022) defines play as a main activity of a pre-school-aged child. Besides, it emphasizes that “Play stimulates exploration, risk-taking, socialization, and motivation for learning in children” (p. 38). The International Step-by-Step Association (ISSA, 2024) framework conceptualizes play by stating, “Play is not just about fun and games; it’s a fundamental aspect of early childhood development” (para. 2).

Play-based learning – the international literature conceptualizes this term as a range of activities from child-led (free play) to teacher-led (guided play) (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). However, the National Preschool Education Curriculum (MoSE, 2022) does not explicitly conceptualize the term; it states that teachers should prioritize play in their pedagogical instructions without clearly stating specific types of play. This research used the international perspective of play-based learning as a perspective to explore the local educational practices.

Teacher belief – In this study, this term is based on the Teacher Cognition Theory by Borg (2003). The term “Teacher belief” in this study means what teachers personally assume, feel, and understand about teaching, learning, play, and their roles in play in early childhood education.

Integration- in this study, it refers to how public kindergarten teachers align their teaching goals with play and connect it to activities in the classroom through their roles and interactions with children (Pyle &Daniels, 2017; Abdolmalaki et al., 2024)

Preschool education – according to the Law on Preschool Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2017), preschool education is formal education for children aged between 1 and 6 years old. In this study, kindergarten teachers with preschool-aged children between 3 and 6 years old were the focus.

1.2 Purpose and Significance of the Study

This study aims to explore how public kindergarten teachers in Azerbaijan perceive and integrate play-based learning into their classroom practices. Since in Azerbaijan, previous studies primarily focused on the concept of play through policy or theoretical lenses (Sadigova, 2022; Jafarova & Nasibova, 2021; Mammadova, 2023), this research instead explores teachers' instructional approaches and their understanding of play-based learning by giving them a voice to share their experiences. The findings of this study contributed to teacher education and the curriculum design process and strengthened the alignment of policy goals and classroom realities.

1.3 Research questions

1. How do public kindergarten teachers in Baku understand play-based learning?
2. How do public kindergarten teachers in Baku integrate play-based learning in classroom practices?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on examining studies related to this study. These studies helped to gain deep insight into exploring how kindergarten teachers interpret play-based learning in preschool settings and enact it in their real classrooms. Additionally, this chapter helped to learn more, such as how kindergarten teachers' perspectives, understanding, and their experiences in preschool education have a significant role in its integration in practice. The primary aim of this chapter is to examine how play-based learning has been conceptualized, promoted, and investigated in different educational contexts; moreover, to explore what factors enable and inhibit teachers' instructions while integrating play into daily classroom practices. Besides, this chapter highlights the studies connected to teachers' understanding, their daily practices, and challenges in implementing play-based learning in preschool education.

To maintain both contemporary focus and regional significance, studies that were published within the last fifteen years are prioritized. The review includes a blend of empirical and theoretical research conducted in international, regional, and local contexts. Considering post-Soviet countries and Azerbaijan share a similar historical background and pedagogical features, there is particular focus on studies and research from Russia, Kazakhstan, and Türkiye. Additionally, reviews of studies in Western contexts contribute to this chapter to gain a comparative understanding of successful practices and conceptual perspectives of play-based learning. This approach helps to compare how play-based learning is conceptualized in various settings and forms a foundation to explore the experiences of the kindergarten teachers in Azerbaijan.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Teacher Cognition Theory

The other theoretical framework that guided this study to explore teachers' understanding of play-based learning in preschool settings is Teacher Cognition Theory by Borg (2003).

According to this theory, there are several interrelated factors, such as teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and experience, that influence how they perceive and implement play in practice.

Borg (2003) highlights that teachers' personal and professional experiences play an important role in shaping their beliefs. Their beliefs lead them to make decisions in educational settings. Supporting this view, studies by Edward (2017) and Siraj and Hallet (2014) show that teachers' own beliefs and daily interactions can be significant in using play as a learning tool rather than what policy prescribes only.

For this study, Teacher Cognition Theory (Borg, 2003) was referred to as the lead theoretical framework. This framework was used to conceptualize teachers' unobservable cognitive aspects, specifically how teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge shape their perceptions and integration of play-based learning in Azerbaijani public kindergartens. Additionally, this framework enables deeper analysis of teachers' diverse understandings, and simultaneously, clarifies why they interpret play-based learning differently. Moreover, Teacher Cognition Theory by Borg (2003) provides insights into differences in the integration of play into practice by illustrating how teachers in public kindergartens adjust their individual pedagogical beliefs with real classroom situations and contextual contractions.

Sociocultural mediation of learning through play

According to Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), learning occurs in cultural contexts through social interaction. The theory guides this study to interpret how public kindergarten

teachers understand and enact their roles in play-based learning and how they translate this approach into practice. Besides, this theory is particularly relevant as it reorients the analytical focus from play as an individual activity to the teacher-child interaction. Play in early childhood education creates an environment for this kind of social interaction where children socialize, talk, adopt roles, and develop cognitive skills. From this angle, when children learn, teachers stay with them and support them by guiding and assisting with tasks that children cannot do on their own (Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, the theory enables this study to interpret teachers' classroom practices as observable reflections of their internal beliefs and instructional choices.

Overall, this theoretical framework allows for a coherent analysis of how teachers understand their roles and agency and reflect on the integration of play-based learning into practice, which establishes a social environment to support children's development.

2.3 Teachers' Beliefs in Play-Based Learning

International studies (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; McInnes et al., 2011; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019) suggest that teachers' beliefs play an important role in their perceptions of play-based learning, for example, how they understand its purpose and meaning.

In the Western context, teachers have different attitudes toward play-based learning. According to Pyle and Danniels (2017), some teachers perceive play-based learning as dichotomous, meaning it is a separate activity where children are free to interact with peers, teachers make no inferences during play, and academic concepts are not included during this period. On the other hand, many teachers embrace holistic perspectives that view play as a meaningful and valuable activity, and at the same time, a pedagogical tool for academic development.

Additionally, Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) reported that teachers hold various and contradictory views towards play-based learning. While some teachers believe play is part of learning and that learning occurs through social, emotional, cognitive, and language development, others see play and learning as a dichotomy: direct, teacher-led instruction focuses on learning and development standards, and free, child-led play without adult interference.

Cultural factor is considered as one of the influential factors on kindergarten teachers' beliefs in Türkiye (Aras & Merdin, 2020) and Russia (Iakshina & Le-van, 2022). Their assumptions and perspectives are affected by their cultural aspects. In Türkiye, early childhood education teachers have positive thoughts about play and possess diverse understandings of what play-based learning is. Some Turkish preschool teachers believe that play-based learning is essential for holistic development, such as social-emotional skills, cognitive and language, and psychomotor skills, where play and learning are inseparable, so children cannot learn without play. Besides, they said, play-based learning is lasting and meaningful learning for keeping children motivated and engaged. According to the study (Aras & Merdin, 2020), some teachers also perceive play-based learning as a tool to understand children, their feelings, and solve problematic behaviors.

In Russia, Iakshina and Le-van (2022) highlighted in their study that Russian preschool teachers have various approaches towards play-based learning. While some of them value play and believe it is a resource for children's development, such as communication and cognitive skills, others perceive it as a fun tool to achieve instructional goals or manage children's behaviour. The researchers also add that, importantly, those teachers who view play as a fun way to reach academic or behavioral goals usually do not focus on the quality or level of complexity of the play; instead, they give attention to visible academic results. For example, how well

children speak, or how they share things, or take turns. Overall, teachers use play sessions to test certain skills rather than viewing them as meaningful activities that have their own requirements.

In other post-Soviet countries, such as Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan (World Bank, 2022; UNICEF, 2019), there is a lack of published peer-reviewed and empirical research on kindergarten teachers' understanding of play-based learning. Reports from UNICEF (2019) and the World Bank (2022) early childhood development reviews for Central Asia usually focus on the quality of the curriculum, school readiness, and environment in the kindergartens. However, in Kazakhstan, according to Chukurova (2021), teachers in public kindergartens in Kazakhstan hold diverse understandings of play. The study revealed that although the majority of teachers understood the value of play, they still favor academic learning as a form of traditional teaching over play. Chukurova (2021) also noted that teachers described play-based learning as a teacher-led instructional tool rather than a child-led process.

When it comes to the local context, the National Preschool Education Curriculum (MoSE, 2022) promotes play as a pedagogical approach, and the existing studies mainly focus on the importance, the variety of play, and offering other types of activities (Sadigova, 2022; Jafarova & Nasibova, 2021; Mammadova, 2023). As a result, it remains unclear how kindergarten teachers in Azerbaijan understand play-based learning, how they value play-based learning, and view their roles in learning through play. Additionally, the National Preschool Education Curriculum (MoSE, 2022) lacks pedagogical expectations, which may include teachers' roles, their intentions, and practices in play.

Overall, the literature shows that teachers' beliefs vary across different contexts. They perceive the meaning and purpose of play-based learning differently based on their own assumption, which they gain through working with children, the teaching and learning process,

and work responsibilities. The first research question of this study (How do public kindergarten teachers in Azerbaijan understand play-based learning?) is directly supported by this theme. Understanding teachers' beliefs is essential in exploring how kindergarten teachers perceive play-based learning in Azerbaijan, as it comes before exploring how they apply it in practice.

2.4 Integration of Play-based learning

In many countries' curriculum frameworks, play is described as a structured and purposeful approach, and teachers use it to connect learning goals and children's daily experiences(New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2017; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). According to NAEYC (2020) and Wood & Hedges (2016), integration occurs when teachers act as guides, notice children's ideas, and connect play with teaching and learning goals. At the same time, Pyle and Danniels (2017) noted that as teachers hold diverse understandings of play-based learning, their integration varies. This study examines the names of integration under the umbrella of "a continuum of play-based learning," which provides the descriptions of each integration, such as free play, inquiry play, and so on. The scholars- Pyle and Danniels (2017) also highlighted the challenges teachers face during integrations. While some teachers have fears about introducing academic concepts, they consider play-based learning as free play, and also struggle to balance mandated learning and development standards with play-based methods. The other challenges are planning, a lack of training, and external pressure from the institutions and parents.

Besides, Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) showed in their studies that the teachers use a "balancing act" when integrating play-based learning - The level of teacher involvement to balance the tension between achieving the curriculum and development requirements and supporting child-led play. The level of intervention depends on the types of integration. For

example, in child-free play, teachers do not intrude; they let children lead play without setting any instructional goals. Therefore, teachers' roles become dependent on the type of integration. The study (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019) also highlighted the role of the teachers in integration, as while some teachers described their roles as facilitators, mentors, and guides, others described their roles as insiders and outsiders in play with children. Various challenges are also highlighted in the study (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Many teachers mentioned that mandated learning and development standards are prioritized over free play, which is seen as an activity without any goal, and not as valuable as directed and guided play that teachers find purposeful to deliver instructions and ensure that mandated standards are met. The other challenge is a limited understanding of play-based learning, which leads to implementation anxiety and underestimates the value of free play. Finally, teachers identify children's individual characteristics as one of the challenges in their practices. They explain that the misalignment between children's behaviors during play and teachers' pedagogical expectations can reduce the effectiveness of integration of play. The study (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019) also highlights that children may not benefit from play-based learning equally. Children who have difficulties in language, learning, or social communication may face challenges in engaging in play types where they can be meaningfully guided by their teachers in terms of their holistic development. (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019).

Besides, ongoing observations are also a part of integration, where children's ideas are observed, their development, and actions are documented by the teacher, and as a result, teachers decide what materials, questions, or engagement will enable learning to happen (NAEYC, 2020). In Russia, kindergarten teachers have diverse understandings of play-based learning, its purpose, and their role in this instruction; therefore, they integrate play-based learning either by staying out during play or by ruling it rather than supporting and guiding it (Iakshina & Le-van,

2022). The scholars of this study explained that preschool teachers in Russia mostly act in an outsider position, not intervening in play, while others integrate play-based learning through didactic intervention, intervening in the process of play-based learning by frequently asking questions, directing the nature of play.

In Kazakhstan, according to the study by Chukurova (2021), teachers integrate play-based learning in various ways. While some teachers use broad cross-curricular themes to meet academic outcomes, others use “surprise moments” to spark children’s curiosity. In addition to them, Chukurova (2021) showed in her study that teachers mentioned incorporating resources, such as blocks, rods, and games, to develop children’s motor skills. In the study, it is noted that while organized play is embedded in activities, free play is seen as an extracurricular activity and performed after learning sessions finish. Besides, teachers describe their roles depending on the stage of integration. Regardless, during the integration, frequently mentioned roles are as observers who monitor and give orders, and conflict resolvers who solve conflicts between children. According to Chukurova’s study (2021), different challenges affect the integration of play-based learning in Kazakh kindergartens. Most teachers viewed academization as a challenge that does not give space to have meaningful play for children; play is used as a didactic tool to make activities more interesting for children. Simultaneously, limited time for effective play occurs as another challenge. Because kindergartens prioritize teacher-led academics, extra-curricular programs, and performance rehearsals in kindergartens, as a result, play becomes less important due to a lack of time. Limited resources and teacher knowledge, pressure from parents and administrators, and children’s undeveloped independent play skills are also reported as challenges in the study (Chukurova, 2021).

Moreover, in Türkiye, Aras and Merdin (2020) studied that Turkish teachers in preschool settings integrate play every day in their classes as they perceive it as a core element of learning. So, they do not isolate play; instead, they integrate play through different academic activities such as math, science, and literacy. To have successive integration, teachers use concrete materials, semi-structured activities, and some strategies that spark curiosity in children, for example, hiding objects. In addition, the study (Aras & Merdin, 2020) shows that many teachers described their roles as scaffolding by asking meaningful questions and giving feedback. While some teachers favor child-led explorations, others implement didactic approaches or face challenges in balancing learning and development standards with play-based learning.

In the local context, Azerbaijan's National Preschool Education Curriculum (MoSE, 2022) conceptualizes play and how teachers are expected to observe children's learning as a part of their everyday practice. However, neither legal frameworks nor existing studies have documented teachers' perspectives on how they actually integrate and apply play-based learning. Existing studies heavily focus on the types of play and the importance of it (e.g., Jafarova & Nasibova, 2021; Mammadova, 2023; Sadigova, 2022). This gap shows how important it is to explore teachers' own perceptions and teaching approaches, which is the purpose of this study.

2.5 Summary

Two important themes are highlighted in this literature review chapter. They were often found in reviewed studies. One of the main themes is about kindergarten teachers' beliefs and roles in play-based learning. The way they interpret play-based learning is one of the key themes in this chapter. The other major theme is about the applications and integration of play-based learning into practice by kindergarten teachers. The findings through studies in the global and regional context are based on a sociocultural perspective. This perspective stresses that social

interaction and environment shape teaching and learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991).

Besides, Teacher Cognition Theory (Borg, 2003) argues that teachers' beliefs and personal and professional experiences influence their understanding of an idea and its implementation in their practice.

The literature review part provides a base for exploring how kindergarten teachers in Azerbaijan understand and integrate play-based learning in real classrooms. The National Preschool Education Curriculum (MoSE, 2022) emphasizes how play is essential as an activity in preschool settings. So, exploring whether kindergarten teachers really understand this pedagogical practice and integrate it into their classroom is the aim of this study.

Researching both global and post-Soviet studies, the review shows a clear lack of empirical research on whether and how Azerbaijani early childhood educators integrate the curriculum ideals about play into their instruction. Filling this gap helped to gather a deep understanding of how teacher beliefs link to play-based learning.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

To explore kindergarten teachers' perceptions of play-based learning in Azerbaijan and their integration of it into their instruction, a qualitative research design was chosen.

When the researcher seeks to explore how participants of their study understand and interpret their experiences, they use qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize that this research type is significant when there are few existing studies related to the research topic, so it helps build understanding directly from participants of the study. The researcher conducted this qualitative research in the context of the interpretivist paradigm. The interpretivist paradigm enables researchers to understand how individuals explain their experiences in certain and cultural environments (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This interpretivist paradigm connects with theoretical frameworks used in this study – Teacher Cognition Theory (Borg, 2003) and Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which promote that knowledge and understanding emerge through experience, interaction, and context.

To achieve the goal of this study, qualitative research enables in-depth and rich insight into teachers' perceptions, classroom circumstances, and influencing aspects.

As Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize, qualitative research aims to understand participants' approaches rather than measure their behaviors. According to the interpretivist paradigm, knowledge is generated in the researcher-participant interaction (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Hence, a descriptive qualitative design was employed to gather in-depth accounts of how kindergarten teachers in Azerbaijan perceive and experience as they implement play-based learning in their instructional practices.

3.1 Research Site

To conduct this study, four Azerbaijani public kindergartens were chosen, which were part of the state education system and administered by the State Agency for Preschool and General School Education under the Ministry of Science and Education. To provide consistency in curriculum implementation and institutional settings, the research site consisted of only public kindergartens. All four selected public kindergartens were in Baku according to contextual relevance and the variety of kindergartens. In addition, given that Baku is the capital and Azerbaijan's most populous city, it includes many public kindergartens and offers a rich context to investigate different range of classroom practices and institutional settings. The chosen public kindergartens were from different districts of Baku to reflect variations in demographics.

Official rules and procedures were followed to get access to the research site of the study. After requesting and receiving formal permission from the Baku City Education Department, I visited each public kindergarten individually to meet with its administration. I provided them with the aim of this study and ensured that they were willing to participate voluntarily in the research.

3.2 Participants

Nine in-service female public kindergarten teachers were the participants in this study. A purposive sampling was adopted to choose relevant participants, since they demonstrated adequate teaching experience and pedagogical knowledge to provide rich and meaningful data related to play-based learning integration. After I received formal permission from the Baku City Education Department to conduct my study in the chosen settings, I met the potential participants in their workplaces. I provided them with information about my study, the aim of the study, the

interview process, and let them know the interview was voluntary. Moreover, participants with at least 5 years of experience were prioritized.

Table 1. Participants Profile

Participant	Years of Experience	Educational Background	Current Teaching Level
Teacher 1	10 Years	Specialized Degree (Preschool Education)	4-5-year-old children
Teacher 2	32 Years	Specialized Degree (Preschool Methodology)	4-5-year-old children
Teacher 3	18 Years	Specialized Degree (Primary School Teacher)	3-4-year-old children
Teacher 4	16 Years	Specialized Degree (Primary School Methodology)	5-6-year-old children
Teacher 5	29 Years	Specialized Degree (Preschool & Primary Methodology)	4-5-year-old children
Teacher 6	19 Years	Specialized Degree (Pedagogy and Psychology)	5-6-year-old children
Teacher 7	10 Years	Specialized Degree (Preschool Education)	5-6-year-old children
Teacher 8	23 Years	Specialized Degree (Preschool Education)	5-6-year-old children
Teacher 9	36 Years	Specialized Degree (Preschool Pedagogy and Psychology)	5-6-year-old children

3.3 Sampling

To gather detailed insights from teachers, a purposive sampling was employed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), as it was mentioned in the participant section. The goal of the research was to gain in-depth, diverse insights into teachers' experience of practicing play-based pedagogy in

public kindergartens. After receiving the permission letter from the Baku City Education Department, I visited the kindergartens one by one to meet with each administrator and make sure that the purpose of this study was clear to them. To choose relevant kindergartens, the purposive sampling approach was also employed based on geographic accessibility.

Participants were those with at least 5 years of experience in preschool education. According to Feiman-Nemser (2001) and Ingersoll and Strong (2011), teachers who have just a few years of practice are considered novice teachers, and they are in the process of understanding and adapting curriculum and real classroom practices. For this reason, teachers with at least 5 years of experience have more time to engage in real classroom practices.

Overall, I met 25 total teachers in person from the selected four kindergartens and introduced the purpose of the study in their workplaces, and I asked them to contact me within a certain period to inform me whether they would volunteer to participate in the study. 17 of them contacted me to be interviewed, and they were sent the Consent form (Appendix A) before the interviews. The estimated sample size of this was 8-10 teachers, and 9 teachers were interviewed at the end. The sample size selection followed the principles of data saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Saturation occurred when no new additional information or thematic patterns appeared throughout the continuous data analysis. Participants were female in this study.

3.4 Data Collection

A semi-structured interview was employed as the core data collection method. Merriam & Tisdell (2016) and Creswell & Poth (2018) define semi-structured interviews as a set of prepared open-ended questions that enable interviewers to ask additional questions and support both structured and flexible interview processes. This approach allows participants to share their perceptions and experiences openly while allowing the researcher to ask spontaneous further

follow-up questions to explore insights in more depth (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants had already been provided with the consent forms (Appendix A) beforehand to save time at the interview sessions. To collect accurate data, an audio recorder was used in all interviews except 1, as the participant did not want to be voice-recorded. Therefore, I wrote her responses in my journal. Besides, I had a reflective journal to take notes after each interview. It helped me to document details I saw in the institutional settings, early impressions, and any ideas or thoughts that appeared while interviewing the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Open-ended questions were designed for the interview sessions, and they helped me explore how teachers perceived and integrated play-based learning. Interview questions were initially presented in the Interview Protocol (Appendix B) and translated into Azerbaijani, as public kindergarten teachers I interviewed preferred speaking in our native language. Each interview took a different length of time depending on the participant. The average time for each interview lasted about 25 minutes. Interview sessions took place in a suitable place and time for the participants from the end of January to the end of February.

3.5 Data Analysis

An inductive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) guided the data analysis process in this study. This analysis was iterative and interpretive in nature. It did not rely on numerical response patterns but rather focused on an in-depth understanding of participants' responses. Additionally, data analysis also involved a multi-phased process of familiarization with the interview transcripts, coding, and developing themes. Firstly, I transcribed all audio-recorded interviews entirely, and to ensure accuracy, they were checked a couple of times, which also enabled me to become deeply involved in the data. Meaningful phrases and patterns were

identified and extracted that reflect participants' understanding and integration related to play-based learning. Descriptive labels were utilized to identify these phrases and patterns. Later, I grouped them into broader categories that showed frequently emerging concepts. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that codes are short labels that help researchers identify important and common ideas in data analysis. From these broader groups, key themes were created. It showed the major components of how kindergarten teachers in Azerbaijan understand and integrate play-based learning in classrooms. Rather than focusing on the code frequency alone, the analysis focused on a deeper interpretive understanding of codes, which highlighted the complexity of teachers' pedagogical reasoning. Throughout the data analysis, a constant comparison method was employed to identify commonalities and distinctions among teachers from public kindergarten (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Four main categories emerged: Teacher Cognition, Integration of Play-Based Learning, Supportive Conditions, and Challenging Conditions. These categories comprise the proposed model of this study, Teachers' Understanding and Integration Model of Play-Based Learning.

As notes and reflections were written during and after interviews, these helped the researcher to record thoughts, examine interpretations, and check whether they aligned with participants' data.

3.6 Trustworthiness

There are four criteria developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability, which was employed to make sure that this qualitative study is rigorous and contributive.

Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that credibility occurs when the researcher represents the data accurately, the data reflects what participants actually said, and participants confirm the researcher's interpretations. To improve the credibility of this research, triangulation, member checking, and discussions with the supervisor were employed.

Triangulation

Denzin (1978) defines it as analyzing findings from multiple angles rather than a single perspective and thereby enhancing the credibility of the study. I collected data from four public kindergartens, which enabled me to compare different perspectives, beliefs, and experiences of participants. I also compared teachers' interview answers with my field notes. Additionally, including two theoretical lenses helped compare the interpretations through these theories: Teacher Cognition Theory (Borg, 2003) and Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Using multiple angles provided triangulation for the study.

Member checking

Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain member checking as a process in which researchers present their interpretations, understandings, and findings to participants to obtain their confirmation whether the presented documents reflect their real intentions, perspectives, and experiences. As part of this process, the participants were provided with the summaries of findings after their interviews. They checked the summaries and approved that my interpretations were accurate. Additionally, I also discussed with my supervisor to receive external viewpoints. They helped me with the coding process and theme interpretation.

Dependability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that dependability is achieved when the study process is logically connected, systematic, and well-documented. In this study, a transparent research process supported dependability. Methodological decisions were clearly recorded. Interview and data analytical procedures enabled dependability to be achieved. The same interview protocol and systematic coding were employed for all participants, thereby supporting the coherence of the research procedure. No changes or adjustments happened throughout the study.

Transferability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) highlight that transferability happens when other researchers or readers of the study read and decide whether the findings of the study can fit and be used in their own context. For this study, transferability was achieved by providing rich and well-documented findings. Comprehensive descriptions of participants, research settings, and the kindergarten environment in Baku were included, and enhanced the transferability of this study. They provided clear accounts. As a result, readers of this study will be able to decide whether they can use the findings of this study in other relevant settings in their research.

Confirmability

Findings were based on participants' statements, and I avoided including my biases and personal perceptions, thereby achieving confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants' own words and responses were directly taken from the interviews and used as quotes in the findings. Besides, using a systematic thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) ensured the confirmability of the study. The findings were not random; they were coded, categorized, and later themes were identified.

In this study, reflective journaling supported confirmability. I documented assumptions, reflections, and observations before, during, and after the interviews. They minimized my biases throughout the study.

Ethical Considerations

According to Hammersley and Traianou (2012), one of the significant aspects of qualitative study is considering ethical principles in the research. When researchers employ interviews to collect data, they need the agreement of participants to participate in the interview process. Cohen et al. (2018) emphasized that participants should be informed that participation in the interview process was voluntary and their identities were protected.

In this research, all stages of the research process followed ethical principles. Teachers, as participants, were informed of the purpose of the study, procedures involved in the research, and they were told that they could withdraw from the study anytime they wished, and no penalty would be applied for it. All of them were well-explained and explicitly written in the consent forms and aligned with the British Educational Research Association. (2024) guidance. The participants were provided with these consent forms to read and sign before the interview. All recorded interviews and data were secured by storing them on a password-protected device and were not shared with anyone. The raw data was accessible only to me as a researcher. Using numbers for each participant and not revealing the number or name of the institutions in transcripts, and reporting guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity.

3.7 Delimitations

Creswell (2014) explained that delimitations are the boundaries that are purposefully created by the researcher to determine the scope and focus of the research. As a result, the researcher set limits to make the study feasible and purposeful by deciding what to include and

exclude. In this study, only public kindergartens in Baku were delimited. While participants were chosen among in-service early childhood education teachers, parents, children, and administrators were not included because the focus was on perceptions of teachers and their integration of play-based learning into real classroom practices. Method choice was only interviews. Observations or document analysis were not included in the methodology.

3.8 Limitations

Several limitations were encountered throughout the study. Firstly, the research site was limited to only public kindergartens in Baku, meaning other public institutions in other regions were not included in the sampling. This limited the ability to gain more diverse views from other teachers' perspectives and experiences in other regions of Azerbaijan. The second limitation was that self-reported interviews were conducted, and the results were based on teachers' responses rather than direct classroom observations. Additionally, as some participants informed me, they did not have much time, which affected the study and led to limited depth in their responses. The other limitation was the gender of participants, as they were all female. In any kindergartens that were visited, did not have any male teachers. Finally, due to a lack of empirical local studies on play-based learning, it was challenging to make deep comparisons.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In this study, I explored the following research questions: How do public kindergarten teachers in Baku understand play-based learning? How do public kindergarten teachers in Baku integrate play-based learning in classroom practices? In this chapter, I first provide an overview of the findings, which show the relevant categories for the two research questions of this study, and then show the detailed findings in the remainder of the chapter.

Overview of the Findings

The findings of this study reveal kindergarten teachers' perceptions of play-based learning and the way they integrate it into classroom practices. Four categories were suggested according to the data analysis: Teacher Cognitions, Integration of Play-Based Learning, Supportive Conditions, and Challenging Conditions. They were included in the proposed model of this study, the Teachers' Understanding and Integration Model of Play-Based Learning (See Figure 1). Below, I presented the findings of the research, opening with the foundational beliefs of teachers in children's learning that influence their understanding and practice, followed by the findings of the study according to the research questions of the study.

Teacher Cognition: Foundational Beliefs about Learning

The data suggest that teachers have various beliefs about how children learn. All participants recognize that there is more than one way children learn. They stressed that young children's diverse learning styles, interests, abilities, and capacities shape the way they learn, underscoring the requirement for individualized approaches in their teaching practice. Several participants mentioned that modifying activities, considering the developmental level of children,

is crucial to creating an effective learning environment for all children to learn together. For example, Teacher 8 said:

Elə uşaqlar var ki, onlar audiyal götürümlüdür, eləsi də var kinestetik, və ya elə uşaq var sadə tapşırığı belə öyrənə bilmir, eləsi də var daha çətin tapşırıqları sevir. İndi mən burda hamısını bir yanaşmaya məcbur edə bilmərək ki. Ona görə də hər birini nəzərə alıram məşğələlərimdə. [There are children, who are auditory learners, while others are kinesthetic learners, or some cannot learn a simple task, while others love challenging tasks. So, I cannot apply the same approach for all children. Therefore, I consider each of them in my teaching.]

This indicates that they believe every child learns in different ways, and applying one approach for all does not work. Teacher 6 also shared similar approaches to Teacher 8 by adding:

Hər uşağın öz gücü var, öz potensialı var. Məsələn sən fikirləşirsən ki, bütün uşaqlar qayçını tutur, kəsir, amma elə uşaq var bunu hələ edə bilmir. Elə bir təlim forması seçmək lazımdır ki, heçbir uşaq bundan kənar qalmasın. [Every child has their own strength and potential. For example, you may think all children are capable of holding scissors and cutting them, but it is not true for every child. So, you should choose an activity where every child is involved.]

Some teachers strongly believe that teachers' positivity has a big impact on children's learning. They mentioned that when teachers create a positive environment, children love them, which encourages them to learn with eagerness during activities. Teacher 5 explicitly talked about the influence of teachers' attitude and characteristics on children's learning and continued to add:

... amma uşaqlar daha çox sevir, daha çox öyrənməyə meyillənir. Yəni belə deyim, müəllimin pozitiv olmağı uşaqların öyrənməsi üçün çox vacibdir. [... but children love more and are eager to learn more. In a nutshell, teachers' positivity is vital for children to learn.]

Teacher 5 believed that teachers' positive characteristics play an influential role regardless of their knowledge in children's learning, at the same time, Teacher 7 highlighted that children's learning becomes dependent on teachers' moods:

Ama görəndə ki, müəllim kefsiz olur, uşaq da öyrənməkdən, nəşə soruşmaqdan çəkinir və çəkilir bir küncə. [When children see that the teacher is not in her/his mood, the child becomes hesitant to learn or ask questions and retraining into her/his own shell.]

This shows that teachers' mood influences children's learning and their participation. While all participants share similar perspectives, one participant shares a different approach to how children learn. The participant favors children's desires above everything and said:

Birinci, uşaqların istəyi nəzərə alınmalıdır. Bütün məşğələlər uşaqların istəyi əsasında qurulmalıdır. Ondan sonra uşaq öyrənmək də istəyəcək. [First, children's desires must be considered. All activities must be built upon their desires. Then children will want to learn.]

Unlike most participants, this participant believes that when children's desires are recognized and considered, they learn more effectively.

Summary

This section focused on teachers' beliefs about children's learning. Teachers generally showed a similar belief about how children differ in learning. Therefore, teachers adapt activities to children's learning abilities, interests, and needs. Additionally, some teachers highlighted the

importance of teachers' positivity and ability to catch children's attention in encouraging them to learn.

Research Question 1: How do public kindergarten teachers in Baku understand play-based learning?

The first research question of the study aimed to explore kindergarten teachers' perceptions of play-based learning in Baku. According to the analysis of the interview data, teachers had diverse but interrelated perceptions of play-based learning. Their responses showed that their views are not only based on teachers' theories or beliefs, but also on their classroom experiences and practices. Based on the data, teachers link play-based learning with children's engagement, participation, interaction, and learning support. Nevertheless, according to some detailed and narrower answers the participants provided, the related findings for the first research question were categorized into themes and subthemes. These findings are detailed below.

Definitions of Play-based Learning. In this section, public kindergarten teachers' definitions and beliefs about play-based learning were analyzed. According to the findings, teachers in public kindergartens understand play-based learning as a structured pedagogical tool where children are active, and as different types of games. Although they used different words to express their perceptions, the meanings are still very similar. However, a few teachers shared different perspectives from the rest. All these views were grouped into several subthemes. Teachers' responses show that they share a common understanding of play-based learning when defining it, although they expressed their understanding with different words.

Play-based learning as active and participatory learning. Most teachers defined play-based learning as a process where children learned actively; they were involved in learning rather than being made passive learners by simply sitting at their desks and listening to their teachers.

They explained that learning is interrelated with participation, hands-on activities, and interaction. For example, Teacher 3 conceptualized play-based learning as active learning with these words:

Mən bu metodu belə anlayıram ki, uşaqlar qaynamalıdır, aktiv olmalıdır. Mən qəbullana bilmirəm ki, müəllimlər uşağı 20 dəqiqə otuzdurur ki, sırf o dərslərini tədris edə bilsin. Qıraqla durub uşaqları oyuna daxil etməməyi, nə bilim bir kitab üzərində və ya şəkil üzərində bir şeyi öyrətməməyi qəbul edə bilmirəm. Uşağa dərsləri bir oyun şəklində bir az maraqlı, kreativ və hərəkətli formada keçəndə çox maraqlı olur. [I assume this method as something where children are active. I do not accept that you make a child sit in one position for 20 minutes so you can teach your class. If you just stay far and do not involve children in play, or if you do not explain what table is, chair is on a book or a picture, I do not accept it. When you teach in a play form, active, creative and engaging, it becomes really interesting.]

She also defined play-based learning as a rejection of traditional requirements, such as children just sitting in one position, and a teacher-centered learning session where the teacher lectures and children remain passive. She explained that play-based learning keeps children active and engaged; therefore, they can learn easily. In addition, Teacher 5 emphasized how children were treated in Soviet years, even play was conceptualized differently when she worked during that period, and she continued:

İndi oyun deyəndə mən onu belə təsvir edə bilərəm ki, artıq bu uşaq yönümlü metoddur. Yəni uşaqlara şəxsiyyət kimi yanaşırıq, onların fikri artıq daha vacibdir, bu da özünü oyunlarda çox biruzə verir. Daha əvvəlki kimi uşaqlarda oturub öyrənməyi gözləmək düzgün deyil. [When you say play, I would describe it as child-oriented method. We

approach children as individuals, their thoughts and opinions are more important, and it shows itself during play. It is not right to expect children to learn while sitting as they used to do.]

This shows that Teacher 5 thinks that children do not learn in a traditional way, which was a requirement in the Soviet regime period, and defined play-based learning by what it is not, which meant that she viewed play-based learning by contrasting it with teacher-centered and traditional teaching, where children are usually passive. Similarly, Teacher 8 described play-based learning with these words:

Oyun əsaslı belədir ki, uşaq əylənərək öyrənməlidir.... Oyun elə olmalıdır ki, uşaqlar onu həm görür, həm toxunur, həm oynayır. [Play-based learning is that children learn through fun. Play should be that children touch, see and play at the same time.]

She defined play-based learning as active and sensory learning by touching and seeing. Teacher 2 also expressed that play-based learning is sensory education, where children are given physical objects such as dolls and teapots to see, touch, move around, and use them while playing. She also added that teachers use these objects to teach children abstract objects, such as size and color.

Play-based learning as types of game. Some participants defined play-based learning as categorization of specific types of play. When the participants were asked how they understood play-based learning, some teachers named some types of play that helped children learn and play at the same time. For example, while Teacher 7 talked about *qaydalı oyunlar* [games with rules], such as mobile and didactic games, and *yaradıcı oyunlar* [creative games], such as role play, dramatized, and constructive play. Similarly, Teacher 5 and Teacher 6 defined play-based learning as an approach where children play didactic games, puzzles, and constructive play.

Overall, this section indicates that teachers in the Azerbaijani public kindergartens perceive play-based learning as a child-centered pedagogical tool. They additionally emphasized the way learning happens through active involvement, sensory involvement, and physical engagement.

Beliefs of Play-Based Learning. The data showed that teachers hold diverse beliefs about play-based learning in children's learning and development. They shared similar beliefs about the influence of play-based learning. According to the collected data, play-based learning was a supportive approach for children's understanding, cognitive, and social development, and improved their engagement.

Play as promoting engagement and motivation. Based on teachers' responses related to the value of play-based learning, they frequently highlighted the effectiveness of this method in children's engagement and motivation in classroom activities. They commonly stated that children show a big interest, want to participate, and pay attention when teachers demonstrate teaching through play, not in a traditional way where children just sit and listen. Several teachers mentioned that play fosters an enjoyable and engaging environment for children, where they become encouraged to voluntarily participate in activities. For example, Teacher 4 said:

Oyun əsaslı öyrənmə deyəndə uşaqlar birincisi o qədər də sıxılmırlar məşğələdən və yorulmurlar. Oyun əsaslı olanda məşğələ şən keçir. Arada musiqilə də qoyuruq, idman dəqiqələri keçiririk ki, ortada - məşğələ arası. Oyunları musiqilə, hərəkətlə qoyanda həm yorgunluqları çıxır, həm də əhval ruhiyyələri qalxır. [When we say play-based learning, firstly, children do not get bored and tired of the activity. When it is play-based learning, activities become fun. We sometime play music, have exercise time in the middle of

activities. When play is through music and physical activity, they get rid of their tiredness, and their mood improves.]

This shows that she believes that play-based learning is a tool to boost children's mood and motivate them to learn. Similarly, Teacher 6 believed that young children often lose their attention very quickly; therefore, if teachers want to teach something, it is important to maintain children's focus, and here, play is an effective way. She continued with these words:

Mən oyun-əsaslı öyrənməni belə başa düşürəm ki, həm uşaqlara nəisə başa salım, həm həvəsini qaldırım, həm onların iştirakı üçün motivasiya verim. Mən balaca uşaqlara uzun uzadı nəisə başa sala bilmərəm ki, bütün məşğələni. Elə etsəm, nə onların həvəsi olar, nə də mənim dedimlərimi dərk edərlər. Oyunu elə qururam ki, bunların hamısını orda gerçəkləşdirə bilim. [To me, play-based learning helps me when I want to teach something smoothly, boost up their interests and reinforce them to engage in the classrooms as well. I cannot give long lectures to little children. If I do it like that they could both lose their interests and not be able to understand me. I organize play to realize what I want to achieve.]

Moreover, Teacher 8 added that children's participation and interaction with both their peers and the teacher depend on how interesting play activities are. She also added that sensory play-based learning improves children's interest in the activity, and they become willing to actively participate in play and feel motivated when they physically experience during play. Additionally, one of the participants related children's engagement to their active nature by saying:

İndiki dövr uşaqları bir az əvvəlki qədər stabil deyirlər, hərəkətlidirlər, ona görə hər şey oyun şəkilində olmalıdır. [Children today are not stable as in past years, they are more active, that is why everything should be in the form of play/game].

She believes that if activities are play-based, children will burn their energy and focus better, otherwise they will not be able to learn.

Overall, these teachers' perspectives show that teachers perceive play-based learning as a way to improve children's motivation and engagement in the teaching and learning process.

Play as a bridge to abstract learning. The data demonstrated that some teachers believed that play-based learning supports children's easier understanding, which means that play makes learning easier and reduces difficulties for children to understand abstract objects. Participants also mentioned that play allows them to avoid long explanations, instead lets them, considering children's development stage, transform knowledge easily. For example, Teacher 2 said:

Oyunları quranda nəzərə alıram ki, riyazi hesablamalarda, cümlələri qurmaqda, nağılları danışib söyləməkdə onların çətinlikləri az olsun. Biz ancaq bunun üzərində çalışırıq ki, onlar gələcəkdə, məktəbə mi deyim, böyük qrupa mı deyim, gedənə qədər bu cür bilikləri və qabiliyyətləri inkişaf etdirlər. [When I design play-based activities I consider some skills and knowledge such as mathematical calculation, linguistic formulations, narrative expressions for reducing difficulties children face . We are working on children to have already developed that knowledge and skills till they start school or transfer to a bigger group.]

This shows that she used play as a facilitating tool in a way to make children learn certain skills and knowledge in her practice. At the same time, Teacher 3 shared her belief in this way:

Mənim qrupların rus dilli qruplardır deyə onların rus dilində danışmaqları da mənim üçün vacibdir. Oyun burda mənə çox kömək olur. [I teach in Russian steam, that's why children speaking Russian is important for me. Play really helps me with that.]

She highlighted the importance of play in her practices, and added that although some children come from Azerbaijani language-speaking families, they have difficulties understanding Russian, play-based learning enabled her to teach Russian easily and playfully. Similarly, Teacher 1 shared how play-based learning facilitated easier understanding in her practice:

Oyun əsasında öyrənirik ki, məsələn, uşaqlarla oynayırıq qaz-qaz oyunu. Orada canavar obrazı da var. O canavar obrazında canavar qazlara hücum edir. Burada obrazda uşaqlar başa düşürlər ki, canavar bir vəhşi heyvandır, o yırtıcı bir heyvandır. Artıq onlar dərk edirlər ki, o bir təhlükəli bir heyvandır. Qaz zərər verici deyil. Belə obrazlarla uşaqlara izah etmək olur. [We learn through play, for example, we play goose-geese. There is the image of wolf which attacks geese. So, children understand that wolf is a wild and dangerous animal whereas geese are not. We explain things with help of images.]

Her response indicated that she believed that when knowledge was transferred through play, children grasped the content easily. Overall, based on teachers' beliefs, play-based learning is seen as a facilitator for easy understanding of the content.

Play as supporting memory retention. The data showed that there was another common belief among the participants that they assumed that play-based learning supports children in lasting memorization. For example, Teacher 5 stressed that physical play makes children happy and active, and continued with these words:

Uşaqlar daha çox fəallaşirlar, yaddaşlarında da qalır. Məsələn, günün ikinci yarısında da ikinci müəlliməyə deyirlər ki, müəllimə, filan müəllimə ilə biz bunu eləmişdik, onu bir də

edək də. Yəni, bu görsənir ki, uşağların yaddaşına oyunla birlikdə öyrəndikləri daha çox həkk olunur. [Children become active and they remember it better. For example, in the second part of the day, they tell the second teacher to do the same things again that they did with the first teacher. It shows that children keep things in their memory better when they learn it through play.]

It shows that she believed that children engraved things in their memory better through play rather than passively listening to facts or concepts. At the same time, Teacher 6 shared the same belief with Teacher 5 by giving an example of learning time with hands-on practice. She added that even after a period of time, if you asked children again, you would see that they really remember, because of play and the experience during play.

Summary

In this section, findings on kindergarten teachers' definitions and beliefs about play-based learning in Baku were presented. The data demonstrates that teachers hold diverse perceptions of play-based learning. While some teachers were able to show clear definitions of it, others shared their beliefs based on their classroom practices. Teachers' definitions of play-based learning were grouped into two key perspectives, as some teachers defined it as active learning, while some perceived it as specific types of games. Moreover, the data indicated that teachers believed that play-based learning was an approach that improves children's engagement and motivation, facilitates easier learning, and supports children's memory retention.

Research Question 2: How do public kindergarten teachers in Baku integrate play-based learning in classroom practices?

The second research question aimed to explore how kindergarten teachers in Baku integrate play-based learning in their classroom practices. According to the analysis of the

interview data, teachers typically described play-based learning as a part of their daily teaching; they did not assume it as a separate activity. Similar integration approaches were seen in teachers' responses, but they varied in how teachers implement play in the learning sessions, in their descriptions of their roles as teachers during the sessions, and in the challenging and supportive factors in practice. Accordingly, teachers' integration approaches to play-based learning do not depend solely on their pedagogical decisions and teaching experience, but also on classroom realities such as resources, children's diverse learning needs, parent support, etc. As a result, the related findings to the second research question were categorized into one main theme and several subthemes. These findings are provided in detail below.

Ways of integrating play-based learning. According to the findings, the ways of integrating play-based learning in teachers' practice are similar. Most teachers described play as part of teaching and learning, embedding it in classroom activities. Integration emerged at different stages of the activities, but the purpose of it remained similar- supporting children's understanding and engagement.

Integration into subject/content learning. One common perspective the participants shared was integrating play into subject-oriented activities. For example, some teachers stated that play is used to encourage children to actively engage in the academic concept and develop language. Teacher 1 highlighted a game (qazlar [geese]), which is used to teach children to count, and continued:

Məsəlçün, uşaqlar necə dənə qaz var? Burada necə qaz var? Bu cərgədə beş dənədir. Bu cərgədə isə beş dənədir. 10 rəqəminə qədər qazları saymaq o deməkdir ki, 10-a qədər saymağı da uşaqlar öyrənir. [For example, how many geese are there? In this line, there

are five. In that line, there are five. Counting geese to 10, means children learn to count to 10.]

She later added that after this part, she included physical education (idman dərsi) and the children moved different parts of their bodies by counting to 10. Similarly, Teacher 4 added that she also related the play/game to the concept of the day, such as natural phenomena, to help children learn the concept better:

.... Mövzuya uyğun oyunlar seçməyə çalışırıq ki, uşaqlar məşğələni daha yaxşı mənimsəsin. [We try to choose concept-related play/games to make children better understand it.]

These teachers' responses indicated that they embedded play-based learning in learning process during activities to reach the learning objectives of the day.

Additionally, some teachers also expressed how they give children choices during the learning sessions (məşğələ). For example, Teacher 3 and Teacher 6 noted that they gave children autonomy to choose what they wanted to talk about or how to create things. For example, while Teacher 3 said: “ Mən bugün uşaqlara seçim verdim ki, bizim mövzumuz əsas mebellər olsa da stolnan stulu seçdik. [I gave a choice to children, although our topic was furniture, we chose chairs and tables.], Teacher 6 highlighted:

Yəni uşaqların özünə də əsasən də fikirləşmək, yəni təxəyyüllərini inkişaf elətdirmək üçün yön göstərilir. [Children are guided to think to improve their imagination]

They continued their answer by adding that this autonomy encourages children to actively participate in play/games, and they can successfully integrate play into the classroom.

Furthermore, some teachers mentioned that they use hands-on and creative activities such as play scenarios and role play, as well. For instance, Teacher 3 shared her practice experience like this:

Gəlin plastilinlə düzəldək. Məsəl üçün, mən onlara başladım deyməyə ki, plastilini götürürük, əlimizdə isidirik, plastilin bizə tabe olsun. Hər uşaq özünə uyğun stol düzəldəcəkdir. Yəni, əlaqələndirmişəm plastilin oynamaqla. [Let's make it with plasticine. For example, I started to tell them to take plasticine and warm it in our hands to make plasticine obey us. Every child makes a table for themselves. I have integrated activities with playing plasticine.]

Similarly, Teacher 7 described a role-play scenario with detailed descriptions as an integration of play-based learning in her classroom, in which she taught mathematical concepts through a scenario she designed for this class. At the same time, Teacher 4 also favors role-play scenarios as a way of integration by stating the purpose:

Uşaqlara rol veririk ki, bunu oynasınlar, biri nənə olur, biri baba olur. Oyunda o qədər əylənirlər ki, inanın oyun qurandan sonra deyirlər bir də, bir də oynayaq. Belə rollu oyunlar da oynayanda nəşə öyrətməyə çalışırıq əlbəttə. [We give roles to children to play as a grandmother, as a grandfather. They enjoy in play so much, believe me, when we finish they say, “ Let's play again!”. Of course, we try to teach something throughout play.]

Teacher 6 also mentions role-play in her answers, and she adds the purpose behind it, which is why she integrates role-play as play-based learning in her practice:

... emosionallıq gedir, uşaqların jest-mimikaları, nə bilim, bunların hamısı onun içində gedir. Bədii təfəkkürdü, nitq inkişafıdır bunlar. [... social-emotional, children's gestures

and facial expressions, all of them are within it. They are artistic thinking and speech development.]

This subsection showed that there was not a single way teachers integrate play-based learning in their practice.

Integration across activity stages. Some teachers also mentioned the stage of the activity sessions where play was integrated. The National Preschool Education Curriculum of Azerbaijan (MoSE, 2022) states that each learning session (məşğələ) consists of three stages: Aktuallaşdırma və ya Motivasiya (Actualization/Motivation) to grab children's interest and recall prior knowledge, Dərketmə (Cognition/Understanding) to activate new investigation and learn new skills, and Tətbiqetmə (Application) to apply the new skills they learn in the previous stage. Teacher 2 stated that she organized play at the beginning of the session-Aktuallaşdırma və ya Motivasiya (Actualization/Motivation) , even before the activity actually started, for the specific purpose:

.... Oyunu qurmaq üçün uşaqları dairə şəkilində yığıram, özümə həvəsləndirirəm uşağı. Sonradan başlayıram məşğələ keçməyə, çünki onlar mənə diqqət yönətməzlər axı.
Kiçik, əyləncəli oyunla özümə cəlb edirəm, sonra başlayıram məşğələ. Çünki həvəslənməsə çətindir. [... To organize play, I gather children in a circle and encourage them. Then I start the activity, because otherwise they will not give me their attention ... I draw their attention to me with short, fun games/play. Because, without encouragement, it is challenging.]

Several teachers incorporate play during learning session. For example, while Teacher 5 stated that she applied play during the application stage of the learning activity, Teacher 7 used these words:

..... məşğələ təməmən oyunun içində idi. [The activity was entirely with the play/game.]

Similarly, Teacher 4 explained that she chose appropriate play according to the topic of that day's activity (məşğələ), and applied play throughout the activity. The answers show that play is integrated into the learning process at different stages, and sometimes it even leads the whole activity.

Teachers' Role in Integration. The collected data showed that teachers have various aspects of having a role in the integration of play for children. Almost all participants reported having active, flexible roles depending on the type of play with children, such as guide, supporter, facilitator, or observer.

Teachers as guides and facilitators. One of the roles most participants described is serving as a guide and facilitator in children's play-based learning. They stressed in their answers that they not only monitor while children play and engage in activities such as cutting, gluing, or writing, but also give directions, explain rules when children show misunderstanding, and offer support when teachers see that children need. Teacher 5 used described her role as "bələdçilik edirəm" [I guide] and continued her sentence:

Müəllimə nəzarət edir uşaqlara. Lazım olsa köməklik göstərir, nəzarət edirik, baxırıq, bələdçilik edirik bir sözlə. [Teacher monitors children. If necessary, we provide assistance, we monitor, we observe; shortly, we provide guidance.]

Similarly, Teacher 6 and Teacher 7 emphasized that they provide guidance to children while they work on an activity and support them when they see that children have difficulties. These participants added the word "istiqamətləndirirəm"[I facilitate] to their responses. According to the responses, teachers describe their roles in integrating play-based learning as facilitators who shape and support the learning process. Although Teacher 9 also supports the

description of the role of the teachers in integrating play-based learning, like other teachers, she noted that “Artıq sərbəst oyundursa, çalışırıq çox müdaxilə eləməyək.” [If it is already free play, we try not to intervene too much.] to let them learn how to work independently and form their personality.

Teachers as co-participants. However, a few teachers described their role differently from others, seeing themselves as a main part of the learning process. Both Teacher 3 and Teacher 4 expressed how important it is to be with children rather than monitoring and giving directions from a distance. For example, Teacher 3 emphasized it with these words:

Yəni qıraqdan ötürüm, elə baxım yox. ... məktəbdəki kimi müəllim mövzunu verir, uşaq da qıraqdan o dəqiqə onu alır, yox. Uşaqlarla bərabər. [It is not like I deliver from distance and observe/watch. It is not like at school where teachers deliver the content and children learn immediately, no. Together with children.]

She explained her role as not only a facilitator and observer, but also, she described her role as an engaged participant with children, working with them together, as she thought some children misunderstood the instructions. Likewise, Teacher 4 stated “Kənardə qalmaq yox, oyunun içində olmaq, oyunun içində oluruq.” [Not staying at a distance but being inside play; we are inside play.] to describe her role as a co-participant in the learning process together with children.

The data showed that teachers play various roles in integrating play-based learning in their classroom, from being a guide to letting children play freely with minimum involvement.

Challenges in Integrating Play-Based Learning. Based on the participants’ responses, teachers face several challenges in integrating play-based learning in their classrooms. Although they highlighted the importance of play-based learning in children’s development and teachers’

practice, they also admitted that integration does not always proceed smoothly due to some factors, such as children's individual differences, behaviors, and limited resources.

Child-related challenges. One of the most frequently mentioned challenges was neurodivergent children who have autism, hyperactivity, and speech delay. Teacher 2 talked about her experience with children who have speech delays and explained how it is difficult to have speech-delayed children with other children in the same classroom with these words:

... nitqində geriləmə olan uşaqlar çox çətin olurlar. Onlar yola gəlimli olurlar.

Danışmağında əziyyət çəkirlər, sözlər deməkdə çətinlik çəkilir, deyə bilmirlər çox. Çətin olur onlara da, bizə də. [Children with speech delays are quite challenging. They are not easily managed. They struggle to speak and pronounce words; they do not say much. It is challenging both them and us.]

Similarly, Teacher 7 and Teacher 8 discussed “inkluziv uşaqlar” [children with disability] and children with autism by explaining that involving those children in play and teaching them is not easy, and those children usually do not want to be involved, sometimes may prefer staying away from other children during group activities and play. Teacher 7 also added “Onlar səsi köyü götürmürlər, qulaqlarını tuturlar.” [They do not tolerate noise; they cover their ears.] and continue to stress how children with hyperactivity and autism interfere with other children, make a mess, and distract others.

Differences in learning and development. While some teachers mentioned the challenges posed by children's different developmental levels and learning needs, others highlighted the barriers in children's social interaction and varied behaviors in play-based learning. Teacher 3 and Teacher 4 explicitly discussed that not every child is the same and does not have the same learning approach as others. They differ in their understanding and familiarity

with the topic of the day. While Teacher 3 used “ Uşaq var ki, başa düşmür. Uşaq var ki, istifadə edə bilmir.” [There are some children who do not understand. There are some children who are not able to use (it).], Teacher 5 shortly said “ ... uşaqlar hansı eyni qaydada qəbul eləmir.” [... children do not perceive in the same way.] and saw the good planning as a solution to it.

Additionally, a few teachers clearly mentioned tantrums and difficulties with peer interaction as a challenge in their classroom practice when integrating play-based learning. They reported that although this challenge disrupted the flow of activities and strained peer relations, teachers eventually succeeded in managing the situation using personal strategies. For example, Teacher 4 shared some:

... belə olmaq lazımdır, qaydalara əməl eləmək lazımdır. Bu şeyləri çox eləyirik ki, bizim məşğələlərimiz də, oyunlarımız da daha səmərəli alınsın. Ona görə qaydalar, gözləntilər, bunlar çox önəmlidir. [It is necessary to be like that, to follow the rules. We often do them to make our activities and play more productive. That is why rules and expectations are crucial.]

Resource-related challenges. Another challenge teachers mentioned was the limited available materials and classroom resources. For example, Teacher 6 explicitly stated:

... vəsait olur problem, onu da özümüz çalışırıq ki, nəşə edək. [There is a problem with resources, so we try to do something by ourselves]

She added that the state actually provides some resources, but unfortunately, they are in small quantities, so they had to either borrow from other colleagues or make them, which is quite time-consuming. Besides, she appreciated that parents, as teachers, often asked parents to donate or buy new resources for the kindergarten, such as books, puzzles, Legos, or blocks. Similarly,

Teacher 7 briefly highlighted the limited resources as one of the challenges in her classrooms alongside others.

These findings demonstrate that although teachers understand how play-based learning is necessary for both teachers and children, when it comes to integrating it into real classrooms, challenges become unavoidable due to children's behavioral issues, diverse learning needs, and limited resources.

Supportive Conditions for Integrating Play-Based Learning. According to the data analysis, several supportive factors were identified in integrating play-based learning in the kindergartens. Participants' responses demonstrated that making integration play-based learning successful in the kindergartens does not depend solely on their efforts, but also on the availability of resources, supportive classroom conditions, and cooperation from parents and the administration.

Availability of resources. When the participants were asked about the supportive factors that helped integrate play-based learning in the classroom, they provided a consistent answer: resources. Most participants frequently mentioned, especially pre-designed, ready-to-use teaching materials, that supported play-based learning in the classroom. They reported that when they had available resources to organize activities, integration became easier, less stressful, and more effective. For example, Teacher 1 said:

Vəsaitlər olanda əlbəttə bizə asan olur. [When there are resources, it becomes easy for us]

She also stated that when there are no available ones, they create materials by themselves. Similarly, Teacher 3 mentions that resources smooth their work during play-based learning by emphasizing the resource as a main supportive factor, while Teacher 4 and Teacher 6 appreciated pre-designed resources for smooth activities and for encouraging children to use them while they

play. Additionally, Teacher 7 talked about pre-prepared resources as a support for her classrooms:

Bilirəm ki, bu məşğələ mənim növbəmə düşəcək. Mən onu (vəsaitləri) hazırlayıram. Detal-detal, hər dəfə bir hissəsini axşam növbəsində biz hazırlayırıq, boş vaxtımızda. [I know that that activity will be on my shift. I prepare it (materials). Detail by detail, we prepared each part of it in the evening shift, in our free time.]

She also added that when she had pre-prepared materials, it would be a lot easier to apply play. However, she also expressed that it was not always possible to prepare just before. Overall, the teachers highlighted how the availability of resources supported them throughout the activities during applying play, it eases the process and helps children learn better.

Support from administration and parents. Although Teacher 7 and Teacher 8 emphasized the value of resources for learning, they added that parents and administration played a big role in providing these resources. Teacher 8 appreciates cooperative parents like that:

Valideynlər sağ olsun. Valideynlərin dəstəyi çoxdur oyuncaqların, vəsaitlərin gətirilməsində. [Thanks to parents. They have a big support in providing toys and resources.]

Although Teacher 9 mentioned the cooperation between teachers and parents, she did not specifically address it in the context of play-based learning. That support was related to children's learning rather than play-based learning integration. However, Teacher 7 used these words:

Onlar (validenylər) bizə yardım edirlər bir çoxları. Məsələn, deyirik ki, biz bu gün bunu öyrəndik, bunu oyandıq, yaxşı olardı ki, siz də bir az xatırlatma edəsiniz, bunları eləyirlər

bəzi valideynlər. [They helped us, some of them. For example, we tell them what we have learned and played, it could be good if you review it again. Some parents do these.]

She added that when parents spend time at home with their children to review activity by playing as they did in class, she could see and feel in their learning development, which also helped the following learning sessions.

Physical environment and classroom conditions. Teacher 9 began her response by citing resources as a supportive factor in integrating play-based learning; she added other factors: the absence of a sports hall, wider spaces, and physical facilities. She stated that she believed they would help teachers to successfully implement play-based learning in their practice. Teacher 4 also added a similar factor to Teacher 9:

Oyun keçirdiyimiz yer şəraitə uyğun olmalıdır, otağımızın şəraiti. [The physical condition of the classroom must be suitable for conducting play-based activities.]

Teacher 4 and Teacher 9 also mentioned that these would support their integration of play in their practice; they did not excuse them, instead, they found something to replace these absences.

Modelling. However, only one of the teachers gave a different answer to that question. Teacher 2 stated:

Məşğələrimizdə kiçik səhnəciklərlə göstəririk. İndi də mən öz sinifimdə elə edirəm. Göstərirəm, sonra da onlar öyrənir. [In our learning sessions, we show small skits. Now, I use it in my own classes. I demonstrate, and then they learn.]

While the participant was sharing her answer, she often compared the Soviet and modern periods to better express her perspectives, and overall, she saw modelling as a supportive factor, although she summarized play-based learning as a role-play or theatrical activity.

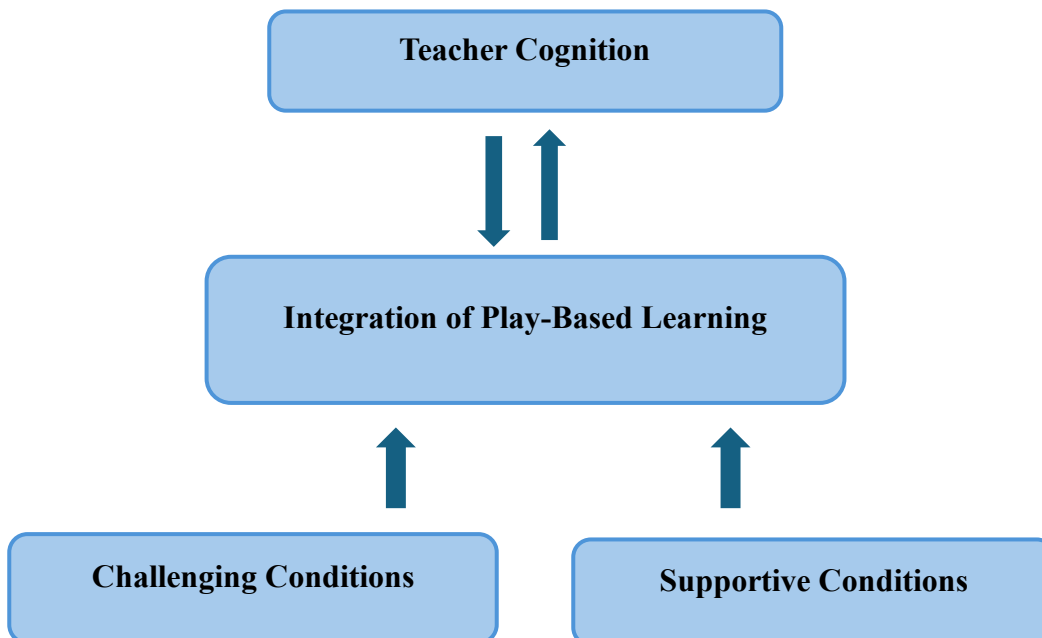
Summary

This section showed how teachers integrate play-based learning into practice. According to their responses, four main themes and thirteen subthemes emerged. The ways of integration, teachers' roles in it, and the factors, both challenging and supportive, were presented. Teachers shared their perspectives and daily experiences related to play-based learning. Although the integration process varies in teachers' classroom experiences, they emphasized how important the teachers' role is in the process as a guide and facilitator. Additionally, the factors that influence the integration of play-based learning are almost the same among teachers.

Teachers' Understanding and Integration Model of Play-Based Learning

Findings of this study proposed a new model that helps illustrate kindergarten teachers' perceptions and integration of play-based learning into practice. Figure 1 visualizes a general overview of the model called The Teachers' Understanding and Integration Model of Play-Based Learning.

Figure 1. Teachers' Understanding and Integration Model of Play-Based Learning



The Teachers' Understanding and Integration Model of Play-Based Learning describes the relationships between teachers' beliefs, their classroom experiences, and the environment where they practice the experiences. In this model, Teacher Cognition refers to teachers' beliefs, thoughts, and knowledge, which influence each other and are not observable. This covers what teachers personally think, believe, and assume about teaching, learning, and their roles in play-based learning.

Teachers' beliefs about how children learn and descriptions of play-based learning are the core of this model, which shapes teachers' mindset, teaching approaches, understanding of how children's needs differ, and attitudes towards the application of play and classroom activities in real classrooms. Using these perspectives, teachers shared their beliefs and experiences integrating play-based learning into practice, and their experiences differ, leading to various ways of integration. The findings demonstrate that play is an inseparable part of learning sessions and is applied in different phases of teaching and learning. As a sequel, teachers described their roles during the play-based learning process in diverse roles, such as guide, facilitator, observer, and active participant during the learning sessions.

Based on the findings, the model suggests that there is a mutual influence between Teacher Cognition and Integration of play-based learning. While the findings demonstrate how teachers' instructional choices are shaped by their understandings and beliefs, the model also shows the dynamic process where teachers' cognition is also influenced by their classroom practices. Therefore, the Teachers' Understanding and Integration Model of Play-Based Learning proposed the mutual informing between teacher cognition and integration of play-based learning.

Yet the new model also demonstrates that there are factors that influence the integration of play-based learning, which clearly shows that it does not proceed in isolation. While different

needs and behavior of children, inclusion-related barriers, and limited available resources are frequently mentioned as challenges that may constrain the integration, the supportive factors, such as parental and administrative support, availability of materials, and easy access to physical equipment and a suitable environment for learning sessions, foster the integration of play-based learning.

Overall, the mutual informing between teachers' beliefs, thoughts, and knowledge and integrations is proposed in the model; influential factors, both challenges and supportive, shape the way to integrate play-based learning in practice.

Summary

This chapter introduced the findings on teachers' perceptions of play-based learning and its integration in public kindergartens in Baku. The analyzed data present that teachers perceive play-based learning in different ways. While some participants believe that play-based learning is a learning way where children are active, engaged, and learn more easily, others showed understanding of it as a learning tool, and they listed a range of game names. These findings are the answers to the first research question. In addition, the chapter provided the findings on the integration of play-based learning in practice. Based on the data, four major categories emerged, which show the way of integration, teachers' role in integration, challenges and supporting conditions in the process.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSIONS

Discussion

In Chapter 4, I provided the findings of the study in detail, which covered the research questions: 1. How do public kindergarten teachers in Baku understand play-based learning? 2. How do public kindergarten teachers in Baku integrate play-based learning in classroom practices? Before starting to discuss the findings in detail, it is important to concisely recap the findings from the literature review. It could enable a clearer comparison of the findings. The following categories were organized in the literature review in Chapter 2:

- Teachers' Beliefs in Play-Based Learning
- Integration of Play-based learning

In addition to the existing literature review, this chapter also discusses the findings in relation to the theoretical lens of this study: Teacher Cognition Theory (Borg, 2003) and Sociocultural mediation of learning through play (Vygotsky, 1978).

Regarding teachers' understanding of play-based learning, the findings cannot be interpreted independently. They strongly align with the theoretical framework, Teacher Cognition Theory (Borg, 2003). As demonstrated in the proposed model of this study, the Teachers' Understanding and Integration Model of Play-Based Learning, teachers' understanding of play is influenced by their beliefs about various instructions for each child, and positivity. This aligns with Borg's (2003) theory, which emphasizes teachers as active thinkers and decision makers, and describes them as filters who adopt curriculum requirements through their own beliefs and knowledge.

In particular, findings on some teachers' emphasis on diverse learning styles such as auditory, kinesthetic, and different capacities, illustrate the reason for participants' definitions of play as an active, sensory form of learning rather than traditional instructions. Overall, these underlying

beliefs help explain the differences in teachers' understandings found in this study. Teachers' practical definitions do not simply come from the curriculum guidelines; they are formed through the interaction between teachers' own beliefs and their everyday classroom practice.

Regarding the first research question (How do public kindergarten teachers in Baku understand play-based learning?), the findings present that although teachers have different understandings of play-based learning, they all perceive it as an important approach in teaching and learning. Although several teachers saw play-based learning as a tool for smooth, easy learning sessions that improve children's engagement, interaction, and active participation, a smaller number of teachers named specific games when describing it. This means that teachers appreciate the value of play, but the depth of their perceptions varies. Their understandings range from a general pedagogical view to game-based interpretation. Overall, public kindergarten teachers defined play-based learning as a child-centered pedagogical tool. They further explained how children's learning happens through active involvement, sensory experiences, and physical engagement. While some teachers defined play-based learning as specific types of games, others stated that this approach is a dynamic process, in which children touch, see, and play, and all of them make children learn. They also highlighted how play-based learning is different than passive and traditional teaching. This definition aligns with the National Preschool Education Curriculum of Azerbaijan (MoSE, 2022). Although the curriculum highlighted play as the basis of pedagogical activity and the main driver for exploration and socialization, it presents the legal and theoretical framework for play as the cornerstone of development. However, the participants' definitions added practical insights by emphasizing other elements of the approach, such as teachers' roles, which indicated that children remain active in their own learning and the principles of child-centeredness (uşaqyönlümlük).

This interpretation of the findings of the first research question is similar to those in the literature review findings in Chapter 2. Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) also showed in their studies that teachers possess different and contradictory perceptions of play-based learning. Besides, Pyle and Danniels (2017) highlighted the diverse understanding of teachers about it, while some teachers see play as an isolated and less instructional activity. There is a similar pattern in this study that although most teachers unanimously highlighted the value of play-based learning, a smaller number viewed it as specific types of games or activities. It leads to the thought that teachers' beliefs and their classroom experiences shape how they perceive, instead of defining it within a pedagogical framework- a holistic framework where play is conceptualized as the central method that promotes active, sensory, and child-led cognitive growth. At the same time, the findings of this study indicate that, as some teachers simply define play-based learning as a "list of games" instead of viewing it as a broader pedagogical approach, this tendency suggests that for some public kindergarten teachers in Baku, play is a separate activity-based tool rather than a holistic learning process. This finding is also visible in Iakshina and Le-van's (2022) study, which stated "narrow" vs. "broad" understanding dichotomy. Teachers' limited pedagogical understanding leads to using play to achieve observable learning outcomes. As Borg's Teacher Cognition Theory (2003) is the main theory in this study, it explains why teachers have diverse understandings and perspectives about play: Borg (2003) provides an explanation for this diversity by explaining how teachers hold diverse understandings. Firstly, teachers' minds consist of their beliefs, experiences, and understanding, which are crucial, even though they can not be seen clearly. Secondly, the theory (Borg, 2003) indicates that teachers' previous educational experiences, such as the difference between Soviet-era and contemporary pedagogical approaches, influence how they understand new

curriculum requirements. Therefore, teachers do not understand and view things the same way. Thirdly, the theory emphasizes that teachers' cognition and practice are interconnected, as teachers experience different classroom realities, such as neurodivergent needs or resource levels, and consequently. Their ongoing experiential learning influences their beliefs in different ways. Finally, there is diversity because teachers are active thinkers. They develop their own ways of teaching to connect policy expectations with specific classroom realities. Since this theory (Borg, 2003) shows how teachers' personal and professional backgrounds influence their beliefs, one of the participants compared the approaches to children in the Soviet regime and the present and argued that it was inappropriate to expect children to be as passive as they used to be before. In particular, based on the findings of this study, public kindergarten teachers in Baku clearly reject the "traditional requirements" from the previous system. For example, expecting children to stay still for 20-minute intervals, teaching children from a distance through books or images, is accepted as a traditional requirement for kindergarten teachers in Baku. This practical change shows that Azerbaijani kindergarten teachers more intentionally distance themselves from traditional passive-learning models than the teachers in neighboring contexts, like Kazakhstan. Chukurova (2021) reported in her study that in Kazakhstan, teacher-led instruction is still prioritized over play-based approaches. It shows that besides teachers' beliefs, feelings, or thoughts, their professional practices and experiences shape their understandings and perceptions as well. The study suggests that teachers' beliefs, thoughts, and their classroom experiences can influence one another, as their classroom experiences can also change the way they think unconsciously or when they consciously reflect on their experiences.

Regarding the second research question (How do public kindergarten teachers in Baku integrate play-based learning in classroom practices?), the findings demonstrate that teachers

incorporated play in everyday activities and did not view it as a separate activity from learning. Play was integrated into different phases of the learning sessions: at the beginning, end, and throughout. None of the teachers described play as a break or free-time activity; instead, they frequently mentioned that play was facilitated for academic reasons and for children's development, such as language and social skills.

As presented in the data, in public kindergartens, teachers used different ways of integration according to their perceptions. The findings of the study align with the findings from the reviewed literature, as Pyle and Danniels (2017) noted that teachers' understanding of play-based learning shapes the way of integration into practice, such as free play, inquiry play, and so on. The other similarity that emerges between the findings in this study and the reviewed literature, play is embedded in academic learning sessions. Some participants of this study reported integrating play into mathematics and science; similarly, Aras and Merdin (2020) found that teachers deliver academic knowledge by incorporating play.

In addition, the data in this study showed that the roles of the teachers in integration play-based learning both differ and are similar. There is no single unanimous response about their roles, which also aligns with the findings in Bubikova-Moan et al.'s (2019) study. Teachers described their roles as facilitators, guides, scaffolders, and so on. In the findings of this study, teachers described many roles, but not as outsiders who stay out of the play entirely, which opposes the findings of Iakshina and Le-van (2022), who noted in their study that some Russian teachers also viewed their roles as outsiders. Additionally, according to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), it becomes easier to understand how teachers create a play-based learning environment to help children learn through interaction. As the theory highlights the importance of both cultural contexts and social interaction in learning, in this study, teachers stated diverse

roles in children's learning during play. They frequently explained their positions as co-participants and facilitators, and they emphasized that instead of putting distance between themselves and children while they learned in play, they were also inside the play and engaged with children together. These roles are primarily characterized by active interaction with children rather than simply observing them, and they demonstrate the alignment with the concept of guided participation and deliberate teacher involvement in supporting children's thinking. Moreover, by being "inside the play" and interacting alongside children, teachers do not watch children outside; they also become part of the activity. It also includes scaffolding, which means children who cannot do tasks independently, without help, are assisted by the teachers. This level of intentional participation in play shows that public kindergarten teachers in Baku turn play into a purposeful learning experience for children to help them develop their thinking.

The findings of this study also show the challenging factors that influence the integration of play-based learning into practice. Teachers reported diverse challenges, such as children's different characteristics, including behavioral issues and inclusivity, and limited availability of resources, that they face in practice in integration. Children's diverse characteristics align with the findings in Bubikov-Moan et al. (2019)'s study, which reported that children's lack of ability to play effectively and language barriers are seen as challenges for teachers in integrating play-based learning into practice. The limited availability of resources is a challenge for the teachers in this study, which aligns with the findings in the Kazakhstan context. Moreover, the other challenge the reviewed literature shows is parental pressure, which leads to difficulties in the application of play-based learning in practice. However, in this study, it is vice versa, as the participants of this study highlighted the parental support for the kindergartens. While some parents provided toys and resources, others even helped review the content and play at home,

which supports children's learning. Additionally, while findings from reviewed literature presented that teachers highlighted their difficulties about balancing learning and development standards with play-based learning and external pressure from the institutions and parents (Aras & Merdin, 2020; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Pyle & Danniels, 2017), according to the findings of this study, teachers do not mention that factor as a challenge in their integration practice. These findings present that not only do teachers' beliefs influence the way integration occurs, but also the conditions in which they work.

According to the findings, the study shows that successful play-based learning integration occurs through the availability of resources and appropriate classroom conditions, besides teachers' efforts. The proposed model of the study demonstrates them (parental and administrative support, resources, and physical environment) as influential factors in integrating successful play-based learning. Teachers frequently mentioned how resources helped them have easy, less stressful, and more effective play-based learning sessions, which aligns with the findings in the literature review (Chukurova, 2021) that also emphasized the importance of resources in play-based learning; however, Chukurova (2021) mentioned the lack of resources in the kindergartens in Kazakhstan.

In addition, based on the findings of this study, teachers also mentioned the pre-prepared materials, which helped them to have smooth and easy learning sessions. They reported that they usually created and prepared the materials beforehand. This finding does not align with any findings in the reviewed literature, which suggests a new finding in the local context.

In conclusion, this study explored teachers' perceptions and integration of play-based learning in public kindergartens in Baku. According to the findings, play-based learning is understood positively, and teachers value its importance; their perceptions vary in depth, though.

Additionally, teachers shared their experience of integrating play-based learning. The data show that teachers integrate it into daily activities in the classrooms, rather than treating it as an isolated activity.

As presented in Chapter 4, teachers also use play for different purposes. While some used it as a source of motivation, others used it to deliver knowledge. At the same time, findings about the roles of teachers and the challenging factors teachers face in integrating were also compared with the findings in this chapter. As a result, the findings and discussions showed that integration was not only influenced by teachers' beliefs, views, and experiences, but also by some factors, such as resources, children's characteristics, and the conditions of the classroom.

Additionally, based on the findings, a new model, the Teachers' Understanding and Integration Model of Play-Based Learning, was presented in Chapter 4, where the relationship between teachers' perceptions and classroom practices and influential factors to integration are shown in the model. The Teachers' Understanding and Integration Model of Play-Based Learning model shows that teachers' beliefs and experience influence their approaches to integrating play-based learning, and at the same time, their classroom experience shapes what they understand and perceive of play-based learning; in addition to this, challenging and supportive factors also determine the extent of applying it in practice.

Overall, this section presented the discussion of the findings. The limitations were already presented in one of the previous chapters. Finally, I showed the implications of this study for future studies and practices.

Implications

Implication for Research

As the data suggested and was described in *Teachers' Understanding and Integration Model of Play-Based Learning*, teachers have diverse understandings of play-based learning, from a broader explanation to narrow interpretation. Since this study explores teachers' perceptions of play-based learning in public kindergartens, future research could focus on the perceptions of teachers in private kindergartens, thereby expanding the study to two types of institutions. In addition to this, a comparison could also be made between the integration of play-based learning in public and private kindergartens and explore whether teachers from both institutions face similar challenges and have the same supportive factors.

Besides, as it was already mentioned in the limitation part of this study, the observation method and document analysis were not included in this study. Therefore, in future studies, combining interviews, observations, and document analysis could contribute to the literature by examining what teachers say versus what actually happens in classrooms.

While local articles (e.g., Jafarova & Nasibova, 2021; Mammadova, 2023; Sadigova, 2022) published in the Journal of Preschool between 2020 and 2024 were mostly theoretical, they did not show how teachers really thought and practiced play in their settings. By giving teachers a voice to share their perceptions, beliefs, and real classroom experiences, this study filled a gap where the perceptions of teachers about play-based learning and integration in classrooms had not been explored.

As it was presented in Chapter 4, I developed a new model that shows the relationship among teachers' cognition, integration of play-based learning, and challenging and supportive

conditions in public kindergarten. I suggest the researchers test the developed *Teachers' Understanding and Integration Model of Play-Based Learning* in future research.

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings of this study, several implications for practice emerge. As findings show that some teachers had a narrow understanding of play-based learning and named a list of games as play-based learning, training programs would help teachers have solid perceptions that reflect pedagogical reasoning, as a result, teachers would understand what play-based learning is and how play is part of learning, and design meaningful activities as well.

The other finding showed that teachers face challenges, such as limited resources and classroom conditions. Education Departments responsible for public kindergartens and administrators of kindergartens could improve classroom conditions and provide teachers with materials and resources to support effective learning.

Finally, teachers integrate play-based learning into how they interpret it on their own. The need for guidance emerges in this part. There might be a guidance book, training programs, and modelling that could help teachers integrate play-based learning successfully and effectively as well.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Consent Form

**Play-based Learning in Public Kindergartens in Azerbaijan: Teachers' Perceptions and
Integration into Practice**

CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN RESEARCH

Dear Participant: You are invited to participate in an interview, which is a part of the research study aimed at understanding how kindergarten teachers in Azerbaijan perceive and integrate play-based learning in classrooms. Your participation will be valuable for the knowledge creation of kindergarten teachers' understanding and integration of play-based learning. This study is titled "Play-based Learning in Public Kindergartens in Azerbaijan: Teachers' Perceptions and Integration into Practice" and is conducted by Zeynab Baylarova under the supervision of Dr. Jeyran Aghayeva. The interview will continue for about 45-60 minutes, and the length of the interview will depend on your responses.

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may decline to answer questions that you wish or may answer questions that you are comfortable with. Any personal information, such as your name and workplace, will not be included in data analysis, and you will be given a pseudonym instead. Your responses or details about the interview with you will not be shared with anyone else, including the principal of your workplace. First, your responses are analyzed, important and common ideas will be highlighted, and then they will be developed into themes. They will be included in a paper as part of a master's thesis study.

This study does not pose any risk for the participant, as all possible measures will be taken into consideration to protect the participant's identity. Pressure from the administration may cause unnecessary stress for participants to be a part of this study. However, considering participants' rights, involuntary action is not encouraged for this study. That is why you should know that your participation is entirely voluntary, and if you decide not to be part of it, your decision will not be shared with anyone else. However, you will gain opportunities in your voluntary participation, such as self-reflection and sharing your experiences and perspectives. After the interview, you will be appreciated for your time and contribution to the study.

Your name and workplace will not be included in the final version of the study. However, some distinguishing responses may be recognizable, while your confidentiality will be protected. Your choice to answer or to decline to answer some questions will not affect your professional role as a teacher. You will have the right to withdraw anytime you want as a participant from the study. Your personal information will absolutely be protected to the maximum extent permitted by law.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Dr. Jeyran Aghayeva, Assistant Professor, Ahmedbey Aghaoghlu str. 61, ADA University, by phone at (012) 437 32 35 or email at jaghayeva@ada.edu.az.

Thank you for participating!

I agree to participate in this study. In addition, by signing below, I agree to allow my responses to be audio-recorded for the research purposes of this study.

Signature _____

Date _____

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Introduction: The interview will start with a brief conversation with the participant. The researcher will greet the participant and introduce themselves by sharing personal background, such as being a master's student at ADA University.

Purpose: The researcher will explain the purpose of the study, which aims to explore how kindergarten teachers in Azerbaijan perceive play-based learning and integrate it into classrooms.

Procedures: The researcher will explain how the interview will be conducted, inform the participant that the researcher will ask open-ended questions of the participant, and the participant will be free to choose or decline to answer any questions. The interview will take about 45 minutes and will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. After collecting data, the identity of the participant will be masked, and the participant's name will be replaced with pseudonyms. The analyzed data will be included in the researcher's thesis. The researcher will share the findings with the participant.

Consent: The participant will be informed that participation is voluntary, introduced to the consent form to sign, and asked to verbally confirm that they are volunteers to participate in the interview. The researcher will remind the participants again that they are free to answer or decline to answer any questions they want, and their privacy will be protected by using pseudonyms. The participant will also be informed about the right to withdraw at any point they wish. The researcher will ask if they prefer any pseudonyms. If they do not want, the researcher will opt for pseudonyms for them.

Dialogue: The interview questions are given below:

1. Could you share your academic background?
2. Could you talk about your teaching experience in preschool education?
 - *What age group are you currently teaching?*
 - *What training or professional development have you received related to preschool education?*
3. What do you think is important for children's learning?
 - *Why do you think so?*
4. How would you describe your role as a preschool teacher in children's learning?
5. What strategies do you use to facilitate children's learning?
 - *Could you share the recent strategy you used in your classroom?*
6. I am exploring the perceptions of kindergarten teachers about play-based learning. How do you understand play-based learning in preschool education?

“I would like to share how I refer to play-based learning in my study. There is no single definition for this approach. So, it is not just one thing. By saying play-based learning, I mean using play to make children learn in the classroom. Both child-led free play and teacher-guided activities can be included in play-based learning. I would like to know how you understand and experience it in your practice. Therefore, there is no correct or incorrect answer.”

- Is there anything you would like to say before the next question?

7. Could you share how you integrate play into your classroom practice?
8. How do you plan it for the day?

9. Where do you see yourself when children are engaged with play/activity?
10. What challenges do you typically face when organizing activities in the classroom?
 - *How do you overcome these challenges?*
11. What factors support the use of play-based learning in your classrooms?
12. Is there anything you would like to add that I have not asked yet?

Conclusion: I will ask whether the participant has any questions and appreciates their participation.

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