



Playful Learning as an Innovative Approach: A Review of the Literature on Teachers' Perspectives

Yenilikçi Bir Yaklaşım Olarak Oyun Yoluyla Öğrenme: Öğretmenlerin Bakış Açıklarına İlişkin Literatürün İncelenmesi

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Abstract

In recent years, playful learning has attracted attention of diverse education systems from all over the world. There is a great effort to disseminate playful learning in early childhood education. The aim of this study is to review and summarize international studies conducted between 2012-2022 on early childhood teachers' views on playful learning. With this purpose, 33 research studies from different educational contexts were investigated. The findings of the study showed that there is some differences in the conception of the relationship between play and learning between western and eastern countries. Also, early childhood teachers face many challenges while implementing playful learning. The findings of the study will be a guide for teachers, families and policy practitioners.

Keywords: Early childhood education, playful learning, teacher views, semi-systematic review.

Öz

Son yıllarda, oyun yoluyla öğrenme, dünyanın her yerinden farklı eğitim sistemlerinin dikkatini çekmektedir. Erken çocukluk eğitiminde oyun yoluyla öğrenmeyi yaygınlaştırmak için büyük bir çaba bulunmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, 2012-2022 yılları arasında okul öncesi öğretmenlerinin oyun yoluyla öğrenmeye ilişkin görüşlerini konu alan uluslararası araştırmaları incelemek ve özetlemektir. Bu amaçla farklı eğitim bağlamlarından 33 araştırma incelenmiştir. Yapılan araştırma sonucunda elde edilen bulgular, batı ve doğu ülkeleri arasında oyun ve öğrenme arasındaki ilişki anlayışında farklılıklar olduğunu göstermiştir. Ayrıca, pek çok çalışmada erken çocukluk öğretmenleri oyun yoluyla öğrenmeyi uygularken birçok zorlukla karşılaşmaktadır. Araştırmanın bulguları öğretmenler, aileler ve politika uygulayıcılar için bir rehber olacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Okul öncesi eğitim, oyun yoluyla öğrenme, öğretmen görüşleri, yarı sistematik derleme.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there is a great attention to bring back play into children's education by the reason of enhancing learning outcomes and supporting children's skills, needs, and feelings (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2008). Play, which is removed from education in order to respond to the expectations of high academic success, is actually the most effective learning strategy for young children (Nicolopoulou, 2010). If we separate play from education in early childhood period, this caused a teacher directed instruction which is not appropriate to the world of childhood (Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland, & Wollscheid, 2019; Hesterman 2018; Pyle & Daniels, 2017). The oldest definitions of early years education can provide us such characteristics like informal learning through play, child-centered learning, adult-child interactions, sensory explorations, and interactions with the environment (Piaget, 1962; Montessori &

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Claremont, 1969; Froebel, 1900; Vygotsky, 1933). All these characteristics have focused on children's own interactions and explorations through play. On the other hand, the expectations from teachers to prepare children for primary education and expectations from children for academic readiness turned play into a concept opposite to academic learning. Even worse, many scientific studies—including ones conducted in Turkey—continue to state that the setting in which children receive education should not just be a place for play but also for learning. Do these statements tell us that we cannot learn through play, or is academic learning more important than play? Either way, this perception is the opposite of playful learning.

An important feature of early childhood institutions is that they are governed by a curriculum as a guideline for teaching and learning. According to Wallerstedt and Pramling (2011), such guidelines create an inherent dilemma between “planned learning activities” and “free activities”. The time is referred as a free play is often unconnected with the planned activities and the rest of the children's day in the school. The distinction between play and learning is exactly why playful learning is against this idea (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Playful learning is a broad concept that includes many concepts like play, child's agency, learning, and enjoyment...etc. Playful learning is driven by children's interest, wonder and question through social interactions (Project Zero- PoP, 2022). Children have a chance to set their goals and discover real life problems together with their peers (Pyle, DeLuca, & Danniels, 2017). Various pedagogical practices such as project-based learning, and outdoor learning can incorporate with learning through play naturally. Playful learning is beneficial and appropriate learning strategy for students from all ages (Winthrop, Barton, & McGivney, 2018). Above all, playful learning promotes child-led learning process and provides more than one way for their own learning (Fung & Cheng, 2012; Howard, Miles, & Rees-Davies, 2012; Project Zero- PoP, 2016). Bringing play into schools help creating an environment where children can take risks, make mistakes, explore new ideas, and test their hypothesis. Moreover, both children and teachers feel enjoyment, wonder, and delight during learning process (Project Zero- PoP, 2016). Play provides endless possibility to teacher for differentiating their teaching and it helps them to move their practices away from the one-size-fits-all approach (Vogt et al., 2018). In brief, play and playful learning are intertwined concepts, and playful learning is the way of recognizing the value of play in promoting effective education.

A great deal of literature also focuses on early childhood teachers' understanding of learning through play (Aldhafeeri, Palaiologou, & Folorunsho, 2016; Barblett, Knaus, & Barratt-Pugh, 2016; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Sisson & Kroeger, 2017; Vu, Han, and Buell 2015). Studies conducted in various countries show that there is a need to understand the dichotomy of “free play” and “non-play” (Nicolopoulou, 2010). Because teachers' understandings and beliefs are one of the highly influential component to the quality of education, there is a great deal of interest in teachers' practice of learning through play. Many studies revealed that the role of teachers during children's learning along with their beliefs and practices have an impact on learning through play (Baker, 2015; Ranz-Smith 2007; Howard, Miles, & Rees-Davies, 2012; Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

Based on the Piaget's theory of Cognitive Development which suggests that children actively built up their knowledge and reasoning through their interactions with the environment, the current study believe that the best way to achieve this interaction is through play. The main purpose of this study is to review studies about teachers' understanding on play and learning that were conducted during the last 10 years. The term playful learning, which is frequently used throughout the study, is used to describe the play and learning pair. Concepts such as play-based learning, learning through play are also used instead of playful learning term often.

For the purpose of reviewing teachers' understanding of playful learning, this study involved 33 research article conducted with early childhood teachers' to reveal their understanding on the connection between play and learning. The guiding research question is as follows:

- What do the research studies conducted with early childhood teachers between 2012-2022 on playful learning from various nations indicate?

2. Method

The main purpose of the current study is to review the studies from all over the world be conducted with early childhood teachers on playful learning. A well-conducted literature review as a research method provides advanced knowledge on a particular topic (Webster & Watson, 2002). Thanks to the literature review, researchers can uncover areas in which more research is needed by summarizing and synthesizing many empirical research findings (Snyder, 2019). The design of the current study is to semi-systematic literature review which is one of the qualitative research design. Semi-systematic literature reviews are effective in synthesizing and showing the studies in a particular topic to inform practices and policies. With the purpose of developing a theoretical model, or creating a new research agenda, semi- systematic literature reviews are always effective (Snyder, 2019). The studies included in the current review are

conducted to investigate early childhood teachers' views, beliefs, or practices on the connection between children's play and learning.

2.1. Search strategy and selection of studies

All of the studies included in the literature review have been conducted to reveal early childhood teachers' views, beliefs, and practices on playful learning. The current study included studies conducted between 2012-2022. In this way, it is aimed to see what kind of perception teachers from different parts of the world have in learning through play in the last 10 years. The studies included in the review process are presented as a comprehensive summary of teacher data from all over the world (seen in the Table 2). The sample of the review is limited with the studies on early childhood teachers' views, beliefs, or practices on play and learning connection. Based on the definition of "early childhood education" (MoNE, 2013), the current study only focused on children between the ages of zero and six years old. As indicated in the Table 1, the current study limited the studies that published after 2012 and end up to 2022 while searching databases. Studies were considered relevant if they addressed ECE teachers' perceptions of playful learning or the connections between play and learning such as play's potential benefits. Studies that focused solely on either play or learning were excluded. While reviewing the studies, education (1) Google Scholar, (2) Resources Information Center (ERIC), and (3) the Web of Science (WoS) databases were searched.

Table 1
The criteria for the selection of studies

Publication interval	2012-2022
Type of publication	Research articles, review articles
Keywords for searching	Playful learning, early childhood education, teachers' views on learning through play, teachers' views on playful learning, teachers' practices on playful learning
Databases	Google Scholar, ERIC, WoS

As a result of the searches conducted based on the criteria, a total of 54 studies were reached. Some studies on detailed reviews of the content (no connection between play and learning) were excluded from the review process. As a result, 33 relevant studies conducted between 2012-2022 were included in the current review study.

Table 2
List of studies included in the literature review

Author and year	Method	Number of participants	Country
Aldhafeeri, Palaiologou, & Folorunsho, 2016	Survey	195 teachers	Kuwait
Baker, 2014	Interviews	12 teachers	Abu Dhabi
Baker, 2015	Interviews	10 teachers	Abu Dhabi
Baker & Ryan, 2021	Playful teacher research and documentation	21 teachers	Denmark
Barblett, Knaus, & Barratt-Pugh, 2016	Focus group interviews	200 teachers	Australia
Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland, & Wollscheid, 2019	Literature review	62 studies	Mixed-country
Buldu, 2022	Interviews	20 teachers	Turkey
Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013	Interviews	16 teachers	Australia
Fesseha & Pyle, 2016	Survey	69 teachers	Canada
Fung & Cheng, 2012	Interviews and observations	24 teachers	China
Gray & Ryan, 2016	Surveys, interviews and classroom observations	12 teachers	Ireland
Howard, Miles, & Rees-Davies, 2012	Interviews	12 teachers	UK
Kangas et al., 2017	Semi-structured interview	15 teachers	Finland and Germany
Khalil et al, 2022	Online survey and interviews	17 teachers	Palestine
Kroll, 2017	Interviews	5 teachers	USA
Leggett & Ford, 2013	Observations, and focus group interviews	6 teachers	Australia

Table 2. Continued

Author and year	Method	Number of participants	Country
Lynch, 2015	Social media review and interviews	3 teachers	Canada
McArdle, Grieshaber, & Sumsion, 2018	Mixed-method	500 teachers	Australia
Palaiologou, 2016	Survey and focus group interviews	184 teachers	UK, Luxemburg, Malta, Greece, and Kuwait
Pyle & Bigelow, 2015	Observations and interviews	3 teachers	Canada
Pyle & Danniels, 2017	Observations, field notes, video-recording and photograph, interviews	15 teachers	Canada
Pyle et al., 2020	Observation and video-recording	20 teachers	Canada
Pyle, Poliszczuk, & Danniels, 2018	Interviews and observations	12 teachers	Canada
Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018	Interviews	12 teachers	Canada
Sandseter, 2012	Interviews	10 teachers	Australia, Norway
Sisson & Kroeger, 2017	Interviews, observations,	5 teachers	USA
Saebbe & Samuelsson, 2017	Video-recording and interviews	2 teachers	Sweden
Tsai, 2015	Observations, interviews, and document analysis	1 teacher	Taiwan
Tsai, 2017	Interviews	11 teachers	Taiwan
Vogt et al., 2018	Quasi-experiment	35 teachers	Switzerland
Vong, 2012	Interviews	12 teachers	China
Vu, Han, & Buell, 2015	Observations and survey	5 teachers	USA
Wu, Faas, & Geiger, 2018	Video-recording and interview	37 teachers	China and German

3. Findings

In the findings part of the study, the studies included in the review process will be given in detail and the findings of the study will be explained. Thus, it was presented the findings of the studies conducted with early childhood teachers in the last year, to understand what they believe and what their attitudes are.

3.1. Teachers' views on playful learning and professional development

One of the studies conducted to examine the teachers' practices by Tsai (2015). The study explored participant teachers' timing and strategies for engaging children's play. The result of the study revealed that preschool teachers participated in the study usually intervene children's play. Strategies used in their teaching depend on teachers' educational philosophy, familiarity with the children. Tsai (2017) also investigated teachers' participation level in children's play. The result of study showed that preschool teachers acknowledge the importance of play for children's learning and development. Play, therefore, has a central role in preschool curriculum. However, the findings also showed that the teachers consider to give more attention to structured learning for observing and understanding the children's abilities, interests, and developmental stages. Another study was conducted by Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie (2013). The study conducted with Australian early childhood teachers to investigate how open-ended, modelled and purposefully framed play prompt teacher planning for children's learning about biodiversity. The finding of the study indicated that teaching strategies for purposefully framed play are most detailed, which includes discussion, sharing, demonstrating and explaining information about biodiversity. Gray and Ryan (2016) also conducted a multi-method approach to collect information about teachers' understanding on playful learning. The findings of the study showed that the majority of participated teachers value play, but they are still undecided about how play-based learning brings future success and what children exactly learn through play. Pyle and Danniels, (2017) also investigated teachers'

view on play-based learning. The findings of the study showed that there are two types of teachers. One sees play as an opposite of academic learning and has some concerns about not meeting academic demands. The other one sees play as an appropriate way of learning and allows children to engage with different types of play. To understand teachers' conception of play and learning pair, Fesseha and Pyle (2016) aimed to investigate 69 early childhood teachers' conceptions on play-based learning. For this purpose, they asked teachers to describe play and play-based learning based on their practices. Many of the participated teachers described play entirely separate from children's learning. Furthermore, nearly half of the participants indicated that the kindergarten implementations in Ontario do not fully integrate play-based learning as it is described in their curriculum. Another study was conducted by Khalil and her colleagues (2022) to investigate early childhood teachers' perspectives on play-based learning. The findings of the study revealed that teacher educators recognize the importance of learning through play, but their attempts for integrating play into learning process is affected by insufficient knowledge and skills in practical context. Vong (2012) also conducted a study to investigate play as a multi-modal manifestation in early childhood classroom in China. The findings of the study suggested that play as a concept has an influence on Chinese kindergarten teachers' ideas and practice, but the prevalent understanding is the traditional Chinese ideas of play and its relationship with learning. Similar with the studies conducted with early childhood teachers from different nations, Buldu (2022) also investigated Turkish early childhood teachers' views on playful learning. The findings of the study showed that playful learning is still uncover concept for early childhood teachers in Turkey. Although, the participant teachers value the importance of play for children's development, they are not aware how to integrate it to their teaching process.

Another attention grabbing issue is teachers' challenges on implementing playful learning. With this purpose, Pyle and her colleagues (2020) investigated teachers' challenges of integrating assessment practices with playful learning. The findings of the study suggested a comprehensive assessment framework for assessing children while playing. This assessment framework includes seven different paths (Academic learning goal–teacher-directed play-embedded assessment, Academic learning goal–guided play–embedded assessment, Academic learning goal–free play–withdrawal assessment, Developmental learning goal–free play–embedded assessment, Developmental assessment–free play–observational assessment, Academic and developmental learning goals, Teacher-directed play–embedded assessment, Academic and developmental learning goals–guided play–embedded assessment) based on children's learning goals. Baker (2014) also investigated teachers' views on play-based learning in kindergarten classes. The findings indicated that all of the participant teachers recognize the value of play for children's learning and development. However, they reported some challenges that negatively effects their play-based practices such as teacher time, and pressure of academic goals. Baker (2014) also conducted a study to investigate teachers' challenges on implementing play-based learning. The findings showed that teachers reported many challenges such as a desert climate for outdoor play, parental expectations, inadequate resources, workload, working with diversity and etc.

Vogt and her colleagues (2018) conducted an experimental research study with 35 early childhood teachers and their students. Teachers' views were investigated through interviews. The result of the study showed that the training participated teachers received was effective for them and that they would use play-based learning again in the coming years. The teachers also stated that thanks to play-based learning, mathematics has become interesting for children via games. Lynch (2015) conducted a research with kindergarten teachers on children's gendered play. The findings showed that dramatic play are for girls is most overarching discussion theme throughout the research. The teachers often reported that there is a connection between toys available in the classroom and children's preferences. The findings also suggest that unintentional teaching could help teachers on their play-based practices and more effective ways to promote gender equity in play-based classroom activities. Kroll (2017) investigated five early childhood teachers' practices regarding to the relationship between play and self-regulation. The findings of the study revealed that the participants design their teaching process purposefully and intentionally to support children's emotional, social and cognitive developments. Through this process, children have gained some skills such as how to learn, regulate their self, and take joy.

To investigate teachers' professional development on playful learning there are three important study reviewed. The first one conducted by Baker and Ryan (2021). The study investigated 21 early childhood teachers' professional development process by using playful participatory research. During one academic year, the participated teachers documented their own professional development processes on the playful learning approach they applied. The findings of the study showed that Playful Participatory Research is an effective professional development tool for teachers and positively affected teachers' attitude toward pedagogical documentation, self-perception and identity. Another study conducted by Sisson and Kroeger (2017). They worked with five early childhood teachers to investigate how their professional identities effect their pedagogical practice on learning through play by using dialogic analysis. The findings of the study showed that the relationship between teachers' personal histories, competing discourses within personal narratives, and teaching practice relates to teachers' development of their professional identities and the role of play in their work. The last study conducted by Vu and her colleagues (2015). The study investigated the effectiveness of in-

service training on teachers' belief and practices. The findings of the study highlighted the importance of appropriate training for changing teacher practices. The participant teachers' beliefs actually did not significantly change after training, but they began to interact more with the children during play.

3.2. Teachers' views on playful learning in digital environment

In the literature, there is a number of studies conducted on digital technology and playful learning (Kangas, 2010; Howard et al., 2012; Aldhafeeri et al., 2016). Designing playful learning opportunities embedded with novel tools and technologies help to increase students' interest and satisfaction (Kangas et al., 2017). For this purpose, Aldhafeeri, et al. (2016) conducted a study to investigate teachers' views, attitudes, and aptitudes on digital technologies both in their daily lives and the classroom practices. The result of the study showed that although 195 participants use digital technology competently in their daily lives, they have hesitations about reflecting it on their curriculum practices. Kangas and her colleagues (2017) also conducted a study with 15 early childhood teachers on designing playful learning environment with novel tools and digital technologies. The findings of the study showed that there is a strong connection between students' satisfaction and teacher engagement. As students' satisfaction with the new technological games offered increases, teachers' engagement increases. Last, Howard, Miles and Rees-Davies (2012) investigated early childhood teachers' implementations for integrating computer into classroom practices, children's engagement with activities implemented through computer, children's perception of computer as a playful tool. The result of the study showed that teachers feel confident while implementing activity with computer, and children perceive activities conducted with computer as play regardless of adult presence.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

The current study aimed to review empirical studies that have investigated early childhood teachers' views on playful learning in last 10 years. 33 research studies from countries including China, the United States, the United Kingdom, Finland, Denmark, Canada, Norway, Sweden, Taiwan, Turkey, etc. were included in the current literature review to understand how playful learning reshaped our thinking in education.

The findings presented in this study clearly indicated that playful learning is an attention grabbing and innovative learning strategy for early childhood education. Western countries like, Norway, Germany, the United Kingdom, Finland, Canada, Australia are the leading countries in planning learning process through play in early childhood education. Beyond knowing what this concept is, teachers working in western schools are looking for new ways to enrich their practices (Wu, 2014). These studies also showed that these western early childhood school settings provide numerous examples of the various issues relating to the use of play-based pedagogies in their existing early childhood curriculum.

On the other hand, studies conducted in eastern school settings illustrates a set of oppositions. Playful learning is not covered completely by the early childhood teachers working in the countries including Turkey, Ahu Dhabi, Kuwait. Although the participant teachers are all aware of the importance of play for children's development in general, they are not sure how to integrate play into their teaching process. studies also showed that the conception of free play and non-play academic processes are distinctively separated from each other in teachers' mind (Buldu, 2022; Wu et al., 2018). Similarly, in Wu (2014)'s study conducted in Hong Kong and German kindergarten settings, while Chinese teachers separate learning activities and play times in Hong Kong kindergartens, free play is a prior learning activity for German kindergartens. In Vu and her colleagues' study (2015) from the United States setting, playful learning is not a new concept for the teachers. Participated teachers are often conscious about the value of play for children's developmental process. However, limited number of early childhood teachers are aware of the role of play in supporting children's social and academic developments (Vu et al., 2015).

Some of the studies reported that teachers often face a number of challenges while implementing playful learning strategy such as lack of expertise, knowledge, and materials to support playful environment, class sizes (Baker, 2015; Lynch, 2014). However, the most prevalent challenges among all is the lack of time (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Fesseha & Pyle 2016). According to Baker (2014), in Abu Dhabi setting, the socio and cultural context of countries, parents' traditional beliefs about the nature and purposes of education, not well-trained teachers for early childhood education, and the lack of children's prior experiences for learning through play are major challenges that strongly influence the conception of teachers and parents' playful learning. As a result of all these challenges, almost all of the studies indicated that academic learning is becoming increasingly dominant and children are moving away from the appropriate learning environment where they can support their skills, meet their need and have fun while learning. Despite all of these, playful learning suggests that children can play with idea and knowledge while they learn. This process helps children become more reflective practitioners by facilitating the process of knowledge production

(Rice, 2009). According to Pramling-Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008), play and learning are intertwined together firmly into a children's daily life. However, play is seen as a break from learning. In contrast of this, children continue to learn through play when taking a break outside of the classroom.

This study has provided an important implications related to playful learning in early childhood education. The findings of the studies included in the review process are valuable for understanding the importance of playful pedagogies. The education systems that do not embrace play and learning pedagogies should be attentive to observe exemplary cases from all over the world. The change in education systems will not be easy, but the most basic step to start this change can start with the teacher training at universities. "Play course" offered in teacher education programs should be integrated with learning and play pedagogies. If we look at the oldest definition of early childhood education, it is easy to see that the most appropriate way for children to learn is play (Froebel, 1900).

In the national curriculum implemented in western countries, free play and academic learning are not separated from each other. As a matter of fact that children learn through their play actions. Another step in spreading of playful learning understanding could be possible by raising the awareness of families and school administrators about the importance of playful learning. It is also recommended that researchers where learning through play is not common in their countries should reach more teachers and conduct more research on this subject with both teachers and families.

5. Ethical Consent of Research

Ethical permission with IRB22-1304 protocol number of this research was obtained from Harvard University-Human Research Protection Program on December 20, 2022.

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