

Administrators' Perspective on Early Childhood Education Programming and Structured Play Having Been Through the COVID-19 Pandemic

Jennifer N. Hengen

Dissertation Chair: Tricia J. Stewart, Ph.D.

Dissertation Committee Members: Nicole G. DeRonck, Ph. D., Samanta Gati-Tisi, E. D.

Abstract and Introduction

This exploratory case study seeks to understand the perceptions of early childhood educators and the COVID-19 Pandemic. Since the Pandemic, early childhood educators and administrators have been trying to address learning and social skill deficits due to interrupted formal education. Could utilizing well designed structured play help to address both academic and social emotional implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Research Questions

In what ways had the COVID-19 Pandemic changed early childhood education?

R. Q. 1. What differences do administrators perceive in students attending Pre-Kindergarten with the return to in-person learning after the COVID-19 Pandemic (2022-202 school year) compared to students they had taught before the COVID-19 Pandemic?

R. Q. 2. What differences do administrators perceive in students attending Kindergarten with the return to in-person learning after the COVID-19 Pandemic (2022-202 school year) compared to students they had taught before the COVID-19 Pandemic?

R. Q. 3. What school-based changes have been enacted to support early childhood education with the return of in-person learning in the 2022-2023 school year, the time after the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Rationale

- The focus in education over the last two decades has been on student achievement. Ex. NCLB (No Child Left Behind) and ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act)
- Multiple sources of stressors –Global Competition- Country -Federal - State- County - District- Administration- Classroom
- NO time for play in the classroom because the priority is student achievement.
- COVID 19- Pandemic and the disruption to formal education
- Remote learning, pivotal teaching
- Return of In-Person Instruction
- New reality of students
- Does play have a role in early education programs? Can play be structured in a way to allow for exploratory learning?

Administrator

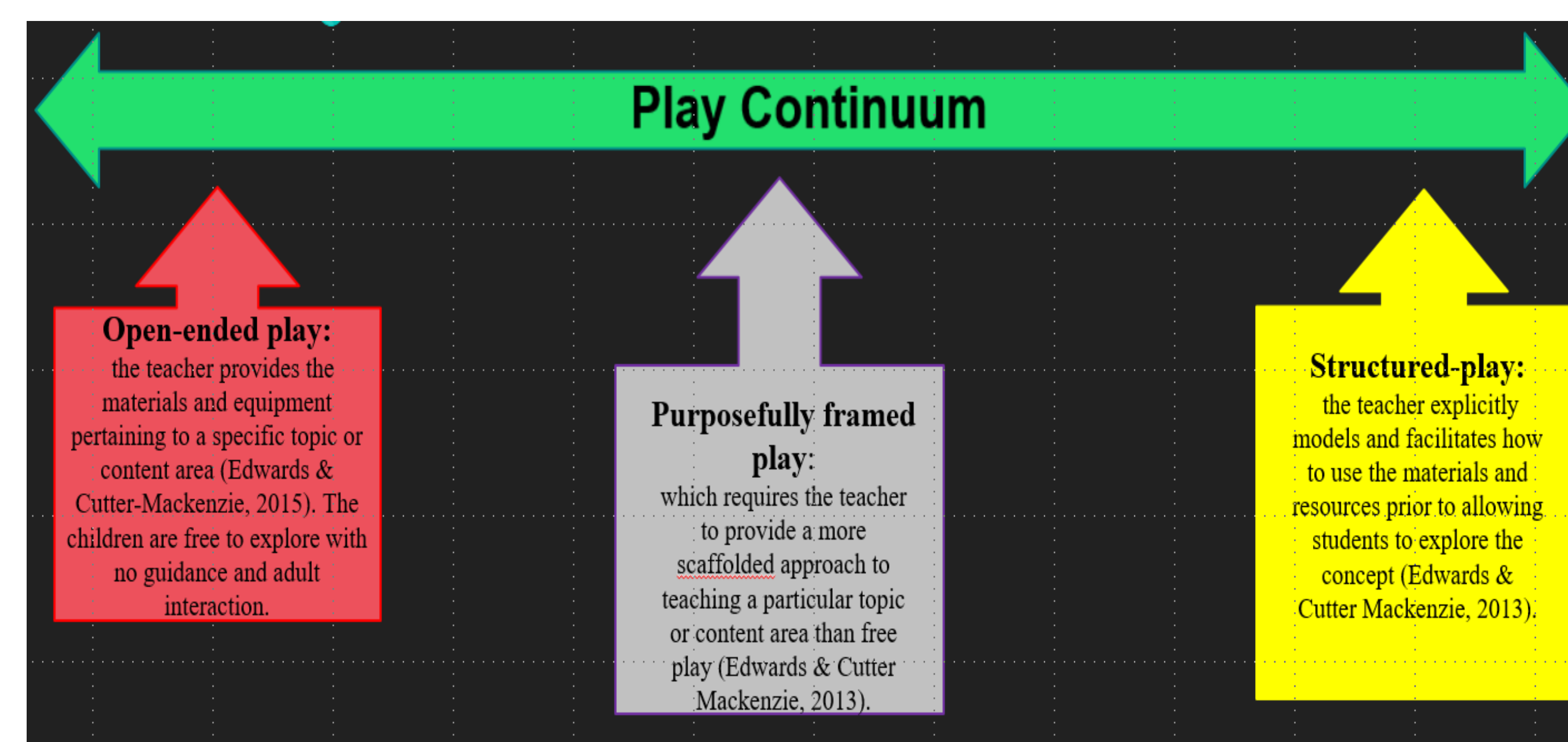
- The same characteristics will be expected of the building administrators (n= 8)
- Share-perspectives of structured play as an instructional practice and how it can be compared to the before and after the COVID - 19 Pandemic.

Key Term

Definition

Early Childhood Education	New York State Education Department (2022), defines early childhood as “three distinctive early childhood groups, pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and grades 1 through 2”. For the purpose of this study, the focus group of students will be Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten students, which range from the ages of 3 years old to 6 years old.
In-person Instruction	Any form of instructional interaction that occurs “in person” and in real time between teachers and students (Timmons, Cooper, Braund, & Bozek, 2020).
Non-structured Play	Identified as free play is defined as playing that allows children to engage with materials in ways that allow them to explore and construct their own conceptual understandings of the world (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013).
Remote Instruction	Classroom teachers and their students remained connected and engaged in the academic content while working from their homes (Timmons, Cooper, Braund, & Bozek, 2020).
Structured Play	This type of play is defined as a form play where an educator gives children a specific purpose, task or learning objective (Edwards & Cutter - Mackenzie, 2013)

Theoretical Framework: Theory of Play



Theory of Play

Skene, O 'Farrelly, Bryne, Kirby, Stevens & Ramchandi (2022) noted that this continuum consists of varying degrees of “child autonomy and adult guidance” and when these two constructs intersect with the appropriate levels of both “child autonomy and adult guidance,” play can be exploratory and meaningful for young children.

Case Study

- The purpose of this is not to evaluate or test a hypothesis, but rather to convey the “lived” experiences of individuals (Patton, 2002).
- Each Pre-Kindergarten, Kindergarten, and Administrator will represent its own case and criterion-based case selection will be implemented (Patton, 2015).

Limitations

- This study is limited in that only a single county in New York is selected for this exploratory study.
- Additionally, this is limited to public schools within a single state which has a high population of students who receive free and reduced lunches, are identified as needing special education supports, and are English language learners.
- This study is being conducted at the end of a 3 year Pandemic, which has lead to many educators and administrators to either retire, move to a different school district, or exit the education field all together. This will of course have an affect on the sample size of participants.

Data Collection

- Researcher generated semi-structured interview protocol (45-60 min)
- Existing documents
- Existing data
- Researcher journal

Data Analysis

- Inductive and deductive analysis (Miles, Hubberman & Saldana, 2019; Ratvich & Carl, 2016)
- Triangulation of data collection and review of researcher notes (Yazan, 2015)
- Checking and rechecking emerging theme (Miles & Hubberman, 1994)

Preliminary Findings

- Lots of administrative turnover since the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- Administrators feel the stress to increase test scores and increase student achievement, more so now after the pandemic.
- Administrators would like to see more opportunities for early childhood students to experience all forms of play, especially with the many social and emotional struggles noted since the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Discussion

- To gain a better understanding of play in early childhood programs, New York State considers Pre-k up to grade 2 to be part of early childhood. A future study should encompass these particular grades levels to fully understand how structured play can be an important instructional part of the day.
- With interviewing administrators, it was evident that professional development needs to be offered to school staff on the different forms of play and how they can be utilized effectively within the school day.