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 truncated 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-Kinder to the return to in-person learning after the COVID-19 Pandemic (2022-2023 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 (2022-2023 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?

**Data Collection**

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

**Data Analysis**

- Inductive and deductive analysis (Miles, Huberman & 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 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.

### Key Term and Definition

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<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Early Childhood Education</td>
<td>New York State Education Department (2022), defines early childhood as &quot;three distinctive early childhood groups, pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and grades 1 through 2&quot;. 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.</td>
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<td>In-person Instruction</td>
<td>Any form of instructional interaction that occurs “in person” and in real time between teachers and students (Timmons, Cooper, Braund, &amp; Bozek, 2020).</td>
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<td>Non-structured Play</td>
<td>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 &amp; Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013).</td>
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<td>Remote Instruction</td>
<td>Classroom teachers and their students remained connected and engaged in the academic content while working from their homes (Timmons, Cooper, Braund, &amp; Bozek, 2020).</td>
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<td>Structured Play</td>
<td>This type of play is defined as a form play where an educator gives children a specific purpose, task or learning objective (Edwards &amp; Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013).</td>
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**Theoretical Framework: Theory of Play**

Skene, O’Farrelly, Byrne, Kirby, Stevens & Ramchand (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.