



PLAY-INTEGRATED TEACHING AND LEARNING IN BENEFICIARY SCHOOLS OF THE RIGHT TO PLAY LEARNING THROUGH PLAY PROJECT IN THE SAVELIGU DISTRICT OF NORTHERN GHANA

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Abstract:

This study examined kindergarten (KG) teachers' implementation of play-integrated teaching and learning in beneficiary schools of the Right To Play (RTP) learning through play initiative in the Saveligu District of Northern Ghana. An intrinsic case study design was adopted. Thirty KG1&2 teachers were purposively selected and willingly took part in this study. Semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations were used to collect data. The data were manually coded, summarised, and analysed using a deductive thematic approach to qualitative data analysis. The study identified three groups of teachers with three different ideologies and practices. They all admitted that play was an avenue for children to have fun, learn, and develop holistically. However, they approached play-integrated teaching and learning differently. While some discouraged the practice, others encouraged it partially and some other teachers embraced it fully. These disparities in teachers' views and practices of play-integrated teaching and learning revealed some infrastructural and curricular deficits in Ghanaian KG education. The study recommended that the Ghana Education Service (GES) should address the infrastructural deficit identified in most KGs in the Saveligu District and invest more in play-integrated teaching and learning. Also, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NaCCA) should revise the current KG curriculum to include explicit instructions on the use of play-integrated pedagogies in KG.

Keywords: play-integrated teaching and learning, play-based learning, learning through play, kindergarten education

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1. Introduction

Play refers to various activities children engage in for fun anywhere they find themselves. It is a child-created and self-directed activity that children of all ages engage in and they do it freely. It is a physical and social activity that results in character formation, personality development, and social skills learning (Pyle & DeLuca, 2017). *“Children of all ages, abilities, and sexes adore playing. Play is part of children’s nature and they engage in it anytime and anywhere they find themselves. When playing, children engage in all kinds of activities that make them feel creative, curious, pained, funny, crazy, unsafe, sad, happy, lost, free, dull, and lively at the same. Adults sometimes get worried, especially when play gets crazier, somehow unsafe, and things seem to get out of hand; with someone angered and another crying. Nonetheless, children have the right to play and must be allowed to do so with or without adults’ supervision”* (Soma, 2022, p.6).

Through free play, children experience learning naturally. They do not need adults’ directions or interference which is constraining, artificial, and sometimes counterproductive. They create their own games, set their own rules, and achieve their own goals. Contrary to adults’ thinking, a lot of skills are learnt or developed during free or child-directed play. This is something that seems missing in direct instruction (Toub, Rajan, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2016).

Play used to be seen as a “non-subject” activity and the “opposite of work”. Over the years, this narrow view of play discouraged many researchers from researching the concept. They felt it was not a “serious topic” worthy to be investigated. However, in recent times, the concept of play has gained a lot of attention in academia and many studies have come up to support the use of play in education (Bateson, 2014, p.99). Several research findings have suggested that pre-primary or kindergarten education must move away from direct instruction to play-based instruction. This is because, play-based learning is believed to *“provide children with an opportunity to explore, discover and innovate with the teacher retaining the role of a facilitator”* (Lungu & Matafwali, 2020, p.357). Adults’ involvement in children’s play activities comes in the form of guided play or teacher-directed play where children are directed or compelled by their teachers to play in a certain manner and with some selected materials and players. They engaged children in these playful activities to teach them specific academic skills or concepts. Even the environment and the pace of activities are selected or intentionally designed to satisfy a purpose (Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland & Wollscheid, 2019).

Guided play is a teacher-initiated play activity that is purposively designed to achieve a specific learning outcome. It is called guided play or play-based learning because it is a blend of play and learning that allows children to experience both play and learning at the same time but in a more structured manner. As such, it satisfies both the parental call for direct instruction and the pedagogical recommendation of engaging children in more play activities in Early Grade education (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). In guided play, learning does not occur naturally yet, it is achieved faster and more efficiently than in direct instruction. It is planned and featured in a play activity designed

by the teacher who decides how and when the activity is played and how learning is achieved and measured (Toub et al., 2016).

Play is not good only for children, adolescents and adults equally derive enormous cognitive, physical, and socioemotional benefits from play. Play does not only entertain, but it also strengthens social bonds, affects the mind and the soul positively and it is healthy for the body. Higher learning institutions are now integrating play into their instructional approaches (Leather, Harper & Obee, 2021). This is because the best way to arouse and sustain children's and even adults' interest in learning complex academic concepts is to put them in a form of indoor and outdoor games. This increases learners' attention span. Also, it makes learning less boring, more enjoyable, and more memorable. More importantly, it helps teachers easily achieve their instructional objectives. It is the best approach for teaching and learning in Kindergarten (Abdulai, 2014). The new Ghanaian standard-based curriculum expects KG teachers to "*Employ a variety of play-based pedagogical instruction including discovery, participatory, integrated and inquiry-based that encourages learners' participation*" (Ministry of Education, 2020, p.12).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Kindergarten (KG) Teachers' Perceptions of Play-based Pedagogies

Teachers' implementation of play-based instruction depends largely on their knowledge and understanding of play itself as well as their perceptions about play and learning. Whether they perceive any connection between the two (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018). Despite decades of research supporting the importance of play in education, many adults still hold on to the traditional view of play. They still see play and learning as two dichotomous activities (Leather et al., 2021). Most adults see playing as an unserious activity as opposed to working. An activity people do for the fun of it. A role-play kind of activity where people do not act real but pretend or assume different roles to satisfy the purpose of the game or play activity. It is a childish behaviour and as such, it is different from adults' behaviour (Bateson, 2014).

Teachers have divergent views about the use of play in school. While some think play is a nonacademic activity that helps children to develop solely personal and social competencies. Others believe that through play children acquire crucial life skills and social values that help them to successfully learn academic concepts (Bubikova-Moan et al, 2019). Even among teachers who support play-based approaches to teaching and learning, some are still doubtful about its actual implementation in the classroom view the current curricular demands, time constraints, and poor educational and play infrastructure in many schools (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). More so, some hold the view that teachers must not involve themselves in children's play. Children should be allowed to play freely and learn whenever they want to. Others believe that teachers must coordinate children's play activities to achieve their instructional goals while still promoting children's personal and socio-emotional development alongside (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

2.2 Importance of Play in Kindergarten Education

In recent times, play has gained a lot of acceptance in Early Grade Education. Many studies revealed that, aside from improving children's physical and socioemotional well-being, play promotes discovery, collaborative, creative, and lifelong learning. It gives children the opportunity to free their minds, release stress, and learn while having a lot of fun (Karuppiah, 2022). For instance, children learn languages more efficiently during play. This suggests that using play-based approaches in teaching language and literacy is likely to produce impressive results (Bubikova-Moan et al, 2019). *“Play is nature’s training for life. It gives children the opportunities to explore the social, material, and imaginary worlds around them and experience the diverse feelings, connections, and reactions that make up these worlds. These are the many experiences that form the memories of our childhood and shape our adult personalities. Through play, children develop the right behavioural pattern, acquire language and develop a variety of intellectual, societal, and socioemotional skills”* (Soma, 2022, p.6). Play is a sign of good health. It develops children’s imaginative and innovative thinking. It is a recreational and instructive endeavour that helps children to acquire new experiences, and develop teamwork and problem-solving skills (Bateson, 2014). It helps children to explore the physical and social environments of the school, socialise and adapt to their new environment. It promotes the development of a variety of skills and prepares children for more exciting learning experiences in school (Ali & Mahamod, 2015).

Play is not only child-directed, it can also be teacher-directed play. Play can help the classroom teacher to execute his daily instructional plans more effectively and enjoyably. Teachers can integrate play into various learning activities to improve children's understanding of academic concepts (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Play-based learning or *“Guided play maintains most traditional elements of play, especially the enjoyable and engaging nature, and the child’s own agency, but adds a focus on the extrinsic goal of developing children’s skills and knowledge”* (Toub et al., 2016, p.121). The successful implementation of play-based learning depends on the ingenuity of the classroom teacher who is expected to innovatively incorporate a learning concept into a developmentally appropriate play activity and guide learners to discover the learning concept by engaging in the playful activity (Lungu & Matafwali, 2020).

2.3 Barriers to the Use of Play in KG Education

Most KG teachers have an appreciable understanding of the use of play in teaching and learning. Nevertheless, the overcrowded nature of most public KGs in Ghana and the unavailability of play equipment make it difficult for teachers to use play for instructional purposes (Yenpad, 2021). For instance, the unavailability of play equipment and inadequate instructional time prevent teachers from using play-based approaches in the teaching and learning of language and literacy (Ali & Mahamod, 2015). In addition to the unavailability of developmentally appropriate play materials, the Early Grade curriculum does not provide adequate guiding principles for the implementation of play-based instruction. More so, Teachers’ workload does not allow them to prioritise play-based instruction over direct instruction (Lungu & Matafwali, 2020).

Also, parents expect their children to be engaged in more academic work and less play. This expectation in itself is a barrier to the use of play-based instruction in most Ghanaian KG (Yenpad, 2021). Pressure mounts on teachers not only from parents but also from other teachers and the curricular expectations to prioritise academic work over play. This has reduced the use of play-based instruction in many schools (Dako-Gyeke, 2013). Most teachers find it difficult to engage learners in an integrated play and learning kind of activities that satisfy both the grade-level curricular mandate and the need for play in early-grade education (Pyle & DeLuca, 2017).

Furthermore, play-based instruction is time-consuming. A lot of time is required for its preparation and implementation. If it is not well-planned, it can result in unnecessary noise making which can defeat its original purpose. All school activities are time bonded: The school curriculum is planned such that, sometimes the teacher cannot afford to spend much time on play for fear of lagging behind or not being able to cover the prescribed curricular content in a timely manner (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). Moreover, assessing children's learning during play-based instruction is quite a problematic process. The challenges for most teachers have to do with the choices of the assessment tool, the time of assessment, and the specific learning skills to be assessed at a particular point in time. Teachers' perceptions and understanding of play and play-based instruction are the underlying factors dealing with these challenges in assessing play-based learning (Pyle & DeLuca, 2017).

3. Statement of the Problem

The importance of play in early childhood education (ECE) cannot be overemphasised. However, many scholars globally have noticed with a lot of regret that nowadays, many parents do not support the use of play in preschoolers' education. They hold the erroneous view that play distracts learning. Therefore, they prefer that their children learn instead of playing in school. This unfortunate situation has discouraged many ECE teachers from using play in teaching and learning (Karuppiah, 2022). Most parents acknowledge the importance of play in children's holistic development but they are afraid that teachers may not be able to use it to promote effective learning of literacy and numeracy in school. Consequently, they prefer that teaching and learning at kindergarten should be more academic-oriented (Lungu & Matafwali, 2020). Parents' fear is justified because many teachers lack the conceptual and pedagogical knowledge to blend play and learning in a single activity to ensure that the curricular expectations in terms of learning are met while the recommended play for early grade learners is implemented (Pyle & DeLuca, 2017).

Again, some teachers believe that play and learning should not be associated. They argue that the two cannot occur simultaneously without one impeding the other (Bubikova-Moan et al, 2019). In Ghana, most KG children do not experience play-based learning in school not only because of their teachers' and parents' misconceptions about play; but also because of the overcrowded nature of most public KGs, and the

unavailability of play equipment in school (Yenpad, 2021). It is against this background that this study examined how KG teachers from beneficiary schools of the RTP learning through play project in the Saveligu District used play-integrated teaching and learning in their lessons.

3.1 Research Questions

The study strived to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are the KG teachers' perceptions about the use of play in KG education?
- 2) What are the play activities KG teachers engage their children in? and,
- 3) What are the barriers to play-integrated instruction in public KGs in the Saveligu District?

3.2 Context of the Study

Right To Play (RTP) is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) working with the GES, National Teaching Council (NTC), and the NaCCA since 2001. Its main aim is to improve the quality of education and address issues of Gender equality and child rights in Ghana. It is actively engaged in the Greater Accra, Volta, Northern, and Upper East regions of Ghana. It was one of the *"key technical partners in the development of Ghana's early childhood education policy and kindergarten curriculum, and subsequently supported the development of the kindergarten in-service training framework"* (Right To Play Ghana, 2020, p.1)

In the past five years, RTP has invested a lot in learning through play in Ghanaian basic schools. The RTP learning through play project aimed at improving the quality of education for thousands of children in three out of the four (4) regions it operates, Greater Accra, Volta, and Northern regions. To achieve this aim, the project equipped teachers, headteachers, and GES district officers with pedagogical knowledge to integrate play into teaching and learning in their schools.

The project was executed under three groups of schools namely: direct, indirect, and Ghana Accountability for Learning Outcomes Project (GALOP) schools. The schools received different types of support and training. The direct schools received direct support from RTP in terms of play and Learning Resources (PLR), training, and capacity building for teachers in play-based pedagogies at the KG and primary schools. In indirect and GALOP schools, district support teams (DSTs) made up of selected district officers from the GES were trained in play-based pedagogies and had the mandate to train teachers in their various districts. Deprived and underperforming schools in various districts were the targets of this project. In the Saveligu District, there were ten (10) indirect, fifteen (15) GALOP, and fifteen (15) direct beneficiary schools. In February 2021, the RTP in partnership with the University of Cape Coast (UCC) embarked on a series of data collection exercises in order to evaluate the RTP learning through play project. This became known as the Partners in Play Project (P3), Ghana Baseline survey. Fifteen (15) control schools were added in each district at the project evaluating stage.

4. Methods

This study is an intrinsic case study of teachers' implementation of play-based learning in schools that benefited from Right to Play (RTP) learning through the play initiative in the Saveligu District of the Northern Region, Ghana. Intrinsic Case Study Design as defined by Creswell (2013) is a type of qualitative research in which the researcher focuses on a real-life issue (the case) as the primary purpose of his inquiry. It is an in-depth study that seeks to examine and describe the case within its natural boundaries (Creswell, 2013b). It is a suitable methodological approach for social sciences researchers to explore complex phenomena in their real contexts and appreciate them holistically (Bhatta, 2018).

4.1 Participants

Thirty (30) Kindergartens one and two (KG 1&2) teachers from the fifteen (15) direct beneficiary schools of the RTP learning through play project were purposively selected for this study. This was because they possess the characteristics of interest in this study; and as such, they fully satisfy the purpose of this study (Creswell, 2013b). Table 1 shows the professional qualifications and years in service of participants (teachers) in this study.

Table 1: Participants' bio-data

Category	Female (N=7)	Male (N=17)	Total
Qualification			
Cert A	0	1	1
Diploma in basic education	8	11	19
B.ED. basic education	4	6	10
Year in service			
1-2	2	3	5
3-5	6	9	15
6-8	2	4	6
9-11	0	4	4

4.2 Data Collection Instruments

As suggested by Yin (2009), non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data for this case study. This provided the study with multiple sources of data to examine and validly conclude the case (Hollweck, 2016), the use of play-integrated teaching and learning in KG 1&2 in the fifteen beneficiary schools of the RTP learning through play project in the Saveligu District of the Northern Region of Ghana.

An interview guide and an observation protocol were developed for the purpose of this study. To ensure validity and reliability, the two instruments were peer-reviewed and the final versions were pilot-tested.

4.3 Data Collection Procedure

This data collection is part of a series of research undertaken by RTP and its partners to evaluate their interventions in the various district including the learning through play project after some years of implementation. As such, prior to this data collection exercise that began in February 2021, permissions were sought from the Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service. Regional and District Directors of Education, Circuit Supervisors (now known as School Improvement Support Officers – SISO), Heads of school, and teachers were directly working with RTP to ensure the successful implementation of the learning through play project and its evaluation thereafter. So, we had the maximum collaboration of all the teachers concerned in the study. We began the data collection process with lesson observations which lasted for two weeks and followed up with semi-structured interview sessions with each of the thirty (30) teachers from the fifteen beneficiary schools of the RTP learning through play project in the Saveligu District of the Northern Region of Ghana. In each KG class, we spent 60 minutes observing and recording teachers' instructional practices. The observation focused on teachers' use of play-integrated teaching and learning in their daily lessons. Immediately after the observation exercise, we interviewed the teacher to gather more detailed data about his/her instructional choices to complement the observation data. Each interview session lasted 30 to 45 minutes. To ensure anonymity, teachers were labeled T1 up to T30 in the order of our meetings with them. This means that the first teacher we met was labeled T1, followed by the second teacher (T2), and in that order, up to the last teacher (T30).

4.4 Data Analysis

Narratives of the case generated from the observation field notes and the transcripts of the interview records were coded manually, summarised, and analysed using the deductive thematic approach as recommended by Yin (2104) as cited in Hollweck (2016). In qualitative data analysis, "a code is a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes and thus attributes interpreted meaning to each datum for later purposes of pattern detection, categorization, theory building, and other analytic processes. It is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña, 2013, p.2). This allowed the researchers to identify common themes in the data set and align them to the research objectives in order to describe the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2013b), the case (teachers' instructional practices vis-à-vis play-based approaches to teaching and learning in KG). The analysed data were organised and presented in a narrative form for systematic discussion.

5. Results and Discussion

The data were presented and analysed according to the research questions and the findings emanating from the analysis were discussed accordingly.

5.1 What are Teachers' Perceptions about the Use of Play in KG Education?

The interview data revealed that all thirty teachers in this study acknowledged the importance of play in children's lives. They were of the view that all children especially kindergarten (KG) children love playing a lot and must be allowed to do so. They all agreed that play promotes children's physical, cognitive, and socioemotional discoveries. However, when it comes to the use of play in education, the teachers had divergent views. The first group of teachers (14 in number) felt that no serious learning can occur during play. They saw it as distracting academic work. For these teachers, to meet the grade level curricular expectations, teachers must engage learners in exclusive instruction inside and outside the classroom. They alleged that, sometimes, teachers must allow children to play and learn by themselves; that is play-based learning. Therefore, whenever teachers are involved with children inside or outside the classroom, they term it as instruction-based learning and feel it must be devoid of any kind of play or game. Expressing his views on this issue, this was what a teacher said: *"Playing and learning hardly go together. For me, learning first and playing later. When we are learning, we don't play"*. In the same vein, another teacher remarked *"If you engage them always in playful activities, they will not see the difference between play and academic learning. They won't take instruction seriously. They will always want to play"*. Teacher 7 had similarly, he opined *"How can children play outside and be made to play inside again? At least, when they are in the class, let them stop playing and focus on subjects learning. This way their attention will not be divided"*. Analyzing these teachers' views, it can be inferred that close to half of the teachers strongly opposed the use of play in the classroom. They viewed play as more suitable for outdoor activities and purposely for fun, socioemotional and motor development, and cognitive discoveries. For this first group of teachers, there is a difference between play-based learning and instruction-based learning. This means that this group of teachers one-sidedly supported free play and categorically discouraged play-based instruction. For them, what we call play-based learning or play-integrated teaching and learning is nothing else than adults' interference in children's play. Adults' interference violates children's right to play freely and learn naturally. It denies them the opportunity to experience another dimension of learning which sets the foundation for more advanced learning in the classroom. These findings are consistent with the observation made by Pyle and Danniels (2017). They observed that many teachers acknowledged that play could be an avenue for children to acquire a lot of social, emotional, and motor skills and make some cognitive discoveries. Yet, its distractive nature makes it less suitable for pure academic learning. They hold the view that teachers must not be involved in children's play. Children should be allowed to play freely and learn whenever they want to. These findings also confirm the assertion made by Pyle, Prioletta, and Poliszczuk (2018) that teachers' implementation of play-integrated teaching and learning depends largely on their knowledge and understanding of play itself as well as their perceptions about the use of play in education. Whether they perceive any connection between the two.

Further analysis of this first group of teachers' submissions suggests that they perceived that there are two avenues through which children learn: play and instruction.

In their view, the difference between the two is that one is spontaneous (natural and child-initiated) and the other one is deliberate (planned and adult-initiated). Therefore, both must separately be encouraged in order to maximise learning. They viewed play and instruction as the two sides of a coin. Only one side is portrayed at a time such that, whenever one side is up (seen), the other one is down (hidden). However, they all contribute to the children's holistic development. What children learn through play, sets the foundation for further learning in school through instruction. This means that the socioemotional and motor skills children acquire as well as all the cognitive discoveries they make during free play become what some educationists refer to as learners' relevant previous knowledge (RPK or background knowledge) upon which teachers will build their teachings and lead the children to subjects or academic knowledge discoveries and lifelong learning. These findings concord with the argument made by Fesseha and Pyle (2016) that even though teachers acknowledged the importance of play in children's learning, many of them are still pessimistic about its actual implementation in the classroom. They do not support the use of play during instruction but encourage play after instructional hours.

Sill, on teachers' Perceptions about the use of play in KG education, the second group of teachers (10 in number) believed that only a few academic concepts can be taught through play. For them, KG teachers should not blindly try to always use play-based instruction. They argued that the use of play-based instruction depends largely on three key things: (1) the concepts to be taught; (2) the nature of the classroom; and (3) the nature of learners in the classroom. Explaining his understanding of these concepts, teacher 1 (T1) asserted: *"There are a lot of concepts that cannot be taught well using play. For instance, children need direct and proper instruction in literacy to be able to read and write. It will not be advisable to introduce play here; not until they are well-grounded in basic literacy concepts. Also, our classrooms are less spacious, overcrowded, and lack the needed learning and play resources. So, it is difficult to use play-based learning. In addition, some of the children are not good academically. So, you need to take your time and teach them properly for them to understand some of the things."*

Similar to other teachers in this group, T5 opined *"Play can come in only when learning concepts have been well taught through direct instruction. By then, games can be used to reinforce the learnt skills"*. In the same vein, T14 remarked *"I always make sure I teach them extensively before I will integrate play in my subsequent lessons on the same topic to let my children practice small"*. Analyzing these teachers' arguments, it can be deduced that one-third of the teachers in this study saw that play-integrated teaching and learning was never the first choice when it comes to teaching children new concepts. They saw play as a supporting instructional strategy and used it only after successful instructions to help learners commit learnt concepts into memory and reinforce the acquired skills. For this second group of teachers, learning new concepts demands some level of concentration and seriousness; so, the introduction of play alongside teaching these concepts may be distractive. Contrary to the first group, these teachers supported the integration of play into teaching and learning but after successful instructions and under certain conditions.

One of these conditions is that the subject and the topic to be treated must be suitable for play-integrated learning. They saw play-integrated lessons to be more appropriate for the teaching and learning of practically oriented subjects like Mathematics that require that the children interact with concrete materials. The second condition according to these teachers is that the classroom should be convenient enough for children to engage in such an activity. That is, a spacious classroom equipped with a variety of developmentally appropriate play and learning resources. The third and last condition for integrating play into teaching and learning according to one-third of teachers in this study is that the children should be developmentally ready to benefit from the intended play-integrated activity. They believed most children above five years have the cognitive abilities to identify the expected learning concepts implanted in the playful activity. However, in their view, children under five years (usually in KG1) are likely to find it difficult to dissociate the playful activity from the expected learning outcome. As such, this second group of teachers discourages the use of play-integrated instruction in KG1 because the focus on play will prevent the teacher from achieving the grade-level curriculum objectives. These findings agree with the observations made by Yenpad (2021). She observed that most KG teachers have an appreciable understanding of the use of play in teaching and learning. Nevertheless, the overcrowded nature of most public KGs in Ghana and the unavailability of play equipment make it difficult for teachers to use play for instructional purposes. Also, these findings accord with the assertion made by Lungu and Matafwali (2020) that aside from the unavailability of developmentally appropriate play materials, the Early Grade curriculum does not provide adequate guiding principles for the implementation of play-based instruction. Consequently, teachers do not prioritise play-based instruction over direct instruction.

Furthermore, another group of teachers (6 in number) perceived the use of play in kindergarten (KG) education as the best approach to teaching. For this third group of teachers, all learning concepts can be taught through play. Teachers only need to prepare in advance. They argued that play-based instruction requires a lot of planning to produce the desired or expected outcome. The planning process must take into consideration learners' needs and the existing conditions in the classroom or school. Sharing her views on this matter, one of the teachers (T2) noted: *"When it is well planned, play-based instruction can be easy to use and very effective. This really depends largely on the teacher's knowledge, ingenuity, and willingness. Because children like playing, when the learning concept is integrated into a game or play, they are always enthused and participate a lot. Even the slow ones become very active in the classroom."*

The view of T4 was not different from T2, these were his words: *"For me, no matter the subject, I always engage my children in purposive play. They think that they are just playing but they are learning alongside. I will let them play a game and after that, I will guide them to identify the learnt skills in the game. Once that is achieved, then, I will base my teaching on that understanding and will engage them more in similar activities until the concepts are well-grounded in their minds."*

Buttressing this point, T30 affirmed, *"Teaching and learning at KG must be play-integrated. Teachers must not compromise on that"*. All these divergent views expressed by these three (3) groups of teachers reflected in their implementations of play-based learning in their various classrooms. Analyzing the views of these teachers, one can argue that in line with the recommendation made by Pyle and Danniels (2017), some teachers coordinated children's play activities to achieve their instructional goals while still promoting children's personal and socioemotional development alongside. This was the case with the third group of teachers in this study who made a constant effort to integrate play into their daily teaching and learning activities. Contrary to the first and second groups, these teachers supported the use of play in education without any reservation whatsoever. This means that they saw play-integrated teaching and learning as the ultimate instructional approach for their kindergarten (KG) children. For them, learning must always be fun and play-integrated approaches should be the preferred strategies for both indoor and outdoor teaching and learning activities. Like all the other teachers, they acknowledged that play-integrated approaches can be challenging, especially when there are no or insufficient play and learning resources. However, for them, this challenge should not prevent KG teachers from adopting play-integrated approaches to teaching and learning. This explains why most of them in the absence of conventional play equipment were seen improvising and adapting available play and learning resources to achieve their instructional objectives.

5.2 What are the Play Activities KG Teachers Engage their Children in?

It was observed that they engaged their children in some outdoor games, mostly Ghanaian local games such as pilolo, oware, ampe, and foreign games such as ludo, mary-goes-round, and football. These games were usually played during break times. Except for football which was once a while directed by the teachers; all the other games took place without teachers' supervision. The first group of teachers who perceived learning and play to be dichotomous was not favourable to the use of play for instructional purposes. They prioritised instruction over play. As such, they never observed using play in their various classes. The second group of teachers believed that play-integrated teaching and learning were not suitable for all subjects, classes, and learners. Therefore, they were very selective in their use of play in education. They were observed using play-integrated teaching and learning only in Numeracy (Mathematics). For instance, in three different schools, we observed some of these teachers engaging children in a ludo game to reinforce the concept of addition in Numeracy. In other instances, we observed some of them using oware games in the classroom during Numeracy lessons. Reflecting on the views of teachers in this group, T14 explained: *"We usually spend about two (2) weeks to teach a concept at KG. So, after two weeks of exclusive instruction, we introduce play to deepen learners' understanding of the concepts taught"*. The view of T22 accorded with the rest, he said: *"We used to play only under certain satisfied conditions and when the concepts to be taught warranted it. Play is a practical activity. It is less*

suitable for teaching most concepts under Literacy, and Our World & Our People. But, it can easily be used in Numeracy."

The third group of teachers who perceived play-integrated teaching and learning as the best approach in KG tried as much as possible to use play in every lesson regardless of the subjects. It was observed that the six (6) teachers in this group engaged their KG children in play-integrated teaching and learning activities before, during, and after lessons. Mostly, immediately after the starter (usually an engaging song or some guided physical movements), these teachers engaged children in some playful activities. There were simple purposive games that were designed by teachers to introduce new lessons or reinforce already taught concepts. The teachers adapted and modified some of the local or known games (ludo, oware, pilolo, and ampe) to suit a particular subject and purpose. In some instances, they created new games for different instructional purposes and improvised play and learning resources to achieve their lesson objectives. Games that came at the beginning of lessons were mostly used to introduce new concepts. At the end of such games, the teachers asked children questions and guided them to identify the concepts behind the various games. Explaining the motive behind some of these games, teacher 15 (T15) like many other teachers argued *"Play-integrated teaching and learning increase learners' participation in learning activities and understanding of new concepts. After a successful activity, we explain the learning concepts directly to the learners and follow it with another game session. The games played at the middle and end of the lessons usually help to reinforce the concepts taught earlier."*

Also, it was observed in some instances that the games teachers engaged learners in before, during, or after the lesson had no link with the concept being taught or reinforced. Analyzing teachers' approaches to play-integrated instruction, one can say that the teachers' perceptions about play in education determined their choices of play activities and their implementation of play-based instruction in their classes. This explains the low-level teachers' engagement in their children's play activities. Except in a few instances, most of the games observed were played after instruction hours (during break or at closing). Teachers had other preoccupations; and so, the children engaged in these activities by themselves. These findings confirm the assertion made by Pyle and DeLuca (2017) that most teachers find it difficult to engage learners in an integrated play and learning kind of activities that satisfy both the grade-level curricular mandate and the need for play in early grade education. The teachers' perceptions and implementations of play and education in this study revealed the challenges associated with play-integrated teaching and learning in the twelve schools under investigation in this study.

5.3 What are the Barriers to Play-Integrated Instruction in Public KGs in the Saveligu District?

All teachers in this study identified inadequate play and learning resources and time as the major barriers to the implementation of play-based learning in their schools. They lamented that most schools in the Saveligu district, especially at the KGs have a serious

infrastructural deficit. We also observed with some teachers in seven different schools that there were some KG classes with no single desk for children to sit and learn. In five other schools, the tables and chairs available were worriedly inadequate and some children were seated on the bare floor. In the remaining three schools, the KG1&2 children were combined and studied under trees. The teachers explained that the infrastructural challenges in their schools had taken a toll on the quality of education and made it difficult for them to use play-based learning in their classes. The teachers also lamented that play-integrated teaching and learning are time-consuming. Meanwhile, they have just a few hours a day for teaching and learning. Additionally, it was observed in all the twelve schools that effective teaching and learning begin usually around 9:00 AM. At 10:30 AM, children go for a break and come back to class after 11:00 AM. At 12:30 AM, the KGs are done for the day. Expressing his views on this issue, teacher 8 (T8) complained: *“Play-based learning is the ideal approach for KG but where are the resources for its implementation in our classrooms? In my class, for instance, there are no tables and chairs for the children to even sit and learn. I have only one ludo and one skip-rope for play-related activities. So, you can now understand what I am talking about.”*

T1 also had a similar complaint, he said: *“They want us to always use play when teaching these children. But where is the time self? If I should always spend time playing games in my class, when and how will I achieve my termly plan for that class? Let’s be realistic here. Again, I have only one set of cards and puzzles in my class and there is only one football for the whole school. My children are many too; so, imagine the challenge I will be facing if I’m to use this single material for game-related activities in my class.”*

Buttressing this point, T5 observed, *“You can see for yourself, in my class I have only counters, nothing else. So, you see why I cannot use play-based learning in my class”*. Similarly, T13 revealed *“play-integrated teaching and learning is practically impossible in government schools. Public schools have a lot of infrastructural and logistics problems. An analysis of these teachers’ submissions suggests that play-integrated instruction is a luxury that most public KGs in the Saveligu District cannot afford. This is because most of the schools in the district did not have common tables and chairs in sufficient quantity for learners’ usage. Most teachers struggled to get the basic resources needed for their daily instructional business. Also, KG teachers had practically four hours of serious learning daily and could not afford within this limited time to engage children in a variety of play and academic activities in the various subject areas. They were afraid that they might be unable to achieve their weekly or termly curricular plans and instructional goals for the academic year. These findings are in par with the argument made by Ali and Mahamod (2015) that the unavailability of play equipment and inadequate instructional time prevent teachers from using play-based approaches in teaching and learning.*

Furthermore, with regard to the challenges or barriers to play-integrated instruction, some teachers explained that even though some of the games required that learners be grouped but more often, they grouped them because the play and learning resources were seriously inadequate vis-à-vis the number of children per class. Most teachers revealed that whenever their classes are full (all learners present), they find it

difficult and sometimes impossible to move around or in between the children's desks to monitor their work because the classrooms are not spacious enough and over-populated. Elaborating on this issue, Teacher 18 (T18) lamented "*Hmmm, it's really a problem. You look at how the children are overcrowded in this small space. How can we use play to learn in this classroom?*" Supporting this view, T25 opined: "*I have close to fifty children in this class. Look at how small the classroom is. There are some activities that I cannot do here; I will be compelled to go out when I am supposed to be in class. And sometimes, when I send them out, their attention gets divided because of motor riders always crossing the school.*"

Additionally, T11 remarked: "*We said basic education is free and compulsory; and so, even when the class is full, the school cannot deny parents admission. Here we are, quantity at the expense of quality. With these numbers, good educational practices such as play-based instruction and others become very difficult. In addition to the large enrolments, other serious problems confront most government schools and compromise the quality of education.*"

Analyzing these teachers' submissions, one can contend that regardless of their ideologies and application of play-integrated approaches to teaching and learning, most KG teachers have an appreciable understanding of the use of play in education. However, as observed by Yenpad (2021), the overcrowded nature of most public KGs and the unavailability of play and learning equipment make it difficult for teachers to use play for instructional purposes.

Moreover, a few teachers complained that the KG curriculum document does not state clearly what is expected of teachers in terms of play-integrated teaching and learning. They alleged that the pedagogical approach is not clearly explained in the Ghanaian standard-based KG curriculum document. On this issue, Teacher 28 (T28) observed: "*There is no guide for teachers as to what play activity to use for what subject or topic, what time should be allocated to the activity, and what resources should be used for it. This makes it difficult for us to use play-based approaches in our daily teaching and learning activities.*"

In the same vein, T16 contended, "*The curriculum is expected to be a guide. However, in this case, there is no such guide to help teachers effectively implement the play-based instructional approaches as suggested in the KG curriculum document*". Buttressing this point, T3 argued, "*Teachers are expected to use play-based learning in KG. The curriculum only mentions that but does not tell us how to use it*". Similarly, T20 observed "*KG teachers must adopt play-based approaches to teaching and learning. It is easier said than done. What is the curriculum really saying? How is it done? The curriculum is silence on that*". Analyzing these teachers' views, one can establish that most teachers in this study had inadequate skills in implementing play-based education and needed guidance to do so. However, the KG standard-based curriculum which is expected to be a guide document said little about how to integrate play in instructional activities. Out of frustration, many teachers have become hostile to play-based instruction. These findings agree with the report filed by Lungu and Matafwali (2020). They reported that in addition to the unavailability of developmentally appropriate play materials, the KG curriculum does not provide teachers with adequate guidelines to effectively integrate play into their daily teaching

and learning activities. More so, Teachers' workload does not allow them to prioritise play-based instruction over direct instruction.

6. Recommendations

The Ghana Education Service (GES) should address the infrastructural deficit identified in most KGs in the Saveligu District and invest heavily in play-integrated pedagogies to improve the equality of KG Education in Ghana.

Also, the GES should ensure that teachers posted at the KG are professionally trained in Early Childhood Education. This will equally improve the quality of education in Ghanaian KGs.

Again, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NaCCA) should revise the Ghanaian standard-based KG curriculum to include explicit instructions on the use of play-integrated pedagogies in KG. This will guide KG teachers to effectively use play in their daily teaching and learning activities. It will also harmonise the pedagogical practices among KG teachers in Ghana.

Moreover, KG teachers need to demonstrate more professional commitment in the discharge of their duties. They should remind themselves at all times that children learn best by doing. Therefore, no meaningful learning can be taken without the use of teaching and learning resources (TLRs). They should be able to adapt and improvise play and TLRs using locally available materials to improve their learners' learning experience.

7. Conclusion

In sum, valuable contact hours were lost because teachers spent hours trying to force learners to understand abstract symbols and confusing concepts instead of using play-integrated teaching and learning. The failure of curriculum planners to clearly define play-integrated teaching and learning approaches in the Ghanaian standard-based curriculum explains the disparities in KG teachers' ideologies, attitudes, and implementation of play-integrated teaching and learning in this study. Without admitting it, many teachers hid behind this curricular deficit to justify their ignorance or neglect of best practices in Early Childhood Education (ECE). Mostly their actual practices in their various classrooms were informed by personal dispositions rather than professional and pedagogical requirements. Meanwhile, all of them were professional teachers and the majority had more than two years of teaching experience. Additionally, most of them had received some training from Right To Play (RTP) in play-based pedagogies twice in their professional lives. Sadly, the study observed with Bateson (2014) that teachers capitalised on the challenges which were real to deny learners in the twelve schools the opportunities to develop their imaginative and innovative thinking, acquire new experiences, shape their personalities, and develop teamwork and problem-solving skills through play-integrated teaching and learning. It is worth noting that, except for two, all the teachers in this study were not professionally trained in Early

Childhood Education. They were Basic Education certificate holders (mostly Diploma holders). This suggests that most teachers were not qualified to teach in KG. This explains why they engaged learners mostly in outdoor games without supervision in the majority of the schools we visited. This means that teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward play in KG Education were in themselves major barriers to the effective integration of play in teaching and learning in the schools. It was a fundamental problem that was rooted in teachers' professional training. Certainly, per their training majority of them were ignorant of the best pedagogical practices in Early Childhood Education.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

We do not have any conflict of interest.

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