

**Support for Play in State Kindergartens in Nur-Sultan:  
Early Childhood Educators' Perspectives**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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In  
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Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education

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12 November 2020

Dear Sogdiana Chukurova,

The changes recommended by the reviewer have been addressed and the proposed study entitled "Support for play in state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan: early childhood educators' perspectives", now complies with all of the requirements of Nazarbayev University.

You may proceed with contacting your preferred research site and commencing your participant recruitment strategy.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Anna Cohen Miller'.

Dr Anna CohenMiller

On behalf of Zumrad Kataeva  
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### **Abstract**

There is a vast amount of research on the importance of play for children's development. Nevertheless, there is some evidence showing that dismissing play in early childhood education and school settings is becoming an international trend. The main purpose of this research was to understand how, according to early childhood educators, play is supported in the state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan. Within this larger purpose, there were six research sub-questions exploring how meaningful play experiences can be supported through the freedom and flexibility of early childhood educators in their decision-making, their beliefs about play and learning, the play environment, various types of play, the perceived role of the educator and opportunities provided for play. This was a mixed methods research where the main research tools included an anonymous online survey and semi-structured interviews with nine participants. Overall, the research demonstrated that although the majority of educators understood the value and importance of play, they still prioritized academic learning, which sometimes took the form of organized play. The integrated findings of quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews revealed that there was less support for free play, children's choice and initiative than for teacher-led structured activities. Furthermore, the data also suggests that educators have a limited understanding of the potential of free and guided play, as well as their role in supporting these types of play. Moreover, limitations in time and materials also affected both educators' practices and the quality of children's play.

The results of this study suggest three primary recommendations for policy and practice including: (a) providing educators with theoretical and practical training on play and play-based pedagogy; (b) revising the National Standard to highlight the importance of play and allow educators more flexibility; and (c) raising the status of early childhood educators.



*Keywords:* play, importance of play, decline of play, types of play, play-based pedagogy, early childhood education, educators' perspectives, theories of play, Vygotsky, mixed methods research, state kindergartens, Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan

### **Абстракт**

Балалардың дамуы үшін ойынның маңыздылығы туралы көптеген зерттеулер бар. Алайда, мектепке дейінгі және мектептегі ойыннан бас тарту халықаралық тенденцияға айналып бара жатқандығы туралы бірнеше дәлел бар. Бұл зерттеудің басты мақсаты - мектепке дейінгі тәрбиешілердің ойынша, ойын Қазақстанның Нұр-Сұлтан қаласындағы мемлекеттік балабақшаларда қалай қолдау табатынын түсіну болды. Осы кең мақсат шеңберінде ойынға келесі факторлар қалай қолдау көрсететіндігі туралы алты сұрақ қойылды: мектепке дейінгі тәрбиешілердің күнделікті іс-әрекетке қатысты шешімдер қабылдаудағы еркіндігі мен икемділігі, олардың ойын туралы түсініктері және оның оқумен байланысы, ойын ортасы, ойынның түрлері, мұғалімнің рөлі және ойынға берілген мүмкіндіктер. Бұл зерттеуде аралас әдістер қолданылды, олардың негізгі зерттеу құралдары анонимді онлайн-сауалнама және тоғыз қатысушымен жартылай құрылымды сұхбат болды. Жалпы алғанда, зерттеу барысында анықталғаны, тәрбиешілердің көпшілігі ойынның құндылығы мен маңыздылығын түсінгенімен, кейде ұйымдастырылған ойын түрінде болатын, академиялық оқытуға басымдық береді. Кешенді сауалнама мен сұхбат нәтижелері балалардың еркін ойыны, таңдауы мен бастамашылығы тәрбиеші ұйымдастырған құрылымдық іс-шараларға қарағанда аз қолдау алатындығын көрсетті. Сонымен қатар, дәлелдемелер тәрбиешілердің еркін және басшылыққа алынатын ойынның әлеуеті және олардың ойынның осы түрлерін қолдаудағы рөлі туралы шектеулі түсінікке ие екендігін көрсетеді. Сонымен қатар,

уақыт пен ресурстардың шектеулілігі мұғалімнің тәжірибесіне де, балалардың ойын сапасына да әсер етеді.

Зерттеудің нәтижелері ерте балалық шақтағы білім беру саясаты мен тәжірибесі үшін үш негізгі ұсыныстар ұсынады, оның ішінде: (а) тәрбиешілерге ойын және ойын тәсілдері бойынша теориялық және практикалық нұсқаулар беру; (ә) ойынның маңыздылығын атап көрсету және мұғалімдерге икемділік беру мақсатында мектепке дейінгі білім берудің мемлекеттік стандартын қайта қарау; және (б) мектепке дейінгі педагогтардың мәртебесін көтеру.

*Түйінді сөздер:* ойын, ойынның маңыздылығы, ойынның төмендеуі, ойын түрлері, ойын педагогикасы, мектепке дейінгі тәрбие, мұғалімдердің пікірлері, ойын теориялары, Выготский, аралас зерттеу әдістері, мемлекеттік балабақшалар, Нұр-Сұлтан, Қазақстан

### **Абстракт**

Существует огромное количество исследований, посвященных важности игры для развития детей. Тем не менее, есть некоторые доказательства того, что отказ от игры на уровне дошкольного и школьного образования становится международной тенденцией. Главная цель данного исследования заключалась в том, чтобы понять, как, по мнению педагогов дошкольного образования, поддерживается игра в государственных детских садах города Нур-Султан, Казахстан. В рамках данной обширной цели было шесть вопросов, изучающих, каким образом игра поддерживается следующими факторами: свободой и гибкостью педагогов дошкольного образования в их решениях касательно ежедневной деятельности, их представлениями об игре и ее взаимосвязи с обучением, игровой средой, различными видами игр, ролью педагога и возможностями, предоставляемыми для

игры. Данное исследование использовало смешанные методы, в котором основными инструментами исследования были анонимный онлайн-опрос и полуструктурированные интервью с девятью участниками. В целом, исследование показало, что, хотя большинство педагогов понимали ценность и важность игры, они по-прежнему уделяли приоритетное внимание академическому обучению, которое иногда принимало форму организованной игры. Интегрированные результаты опроса и интервью показали, что свободная игра, выбор и инициатива детей получают меньшую поддержку, чем структурированная деятельность, организуемая педагогом. Кроме того, данные также свидетельствуют о том, что преподаватели имеют ограниченное понимание потенциала свободной и введомой игры, а также их роли в поддержке этих видов игр. Более того, ограничения во времени и ресурсах также влияют как на практику преподавателей, так и на качество детской игры. Результаты этого исследования предлагают три основных рекомендации для политики и практики дошкольного образования, включая: (а) предоставление педагогам теоретического и практического обучения по игре и игровым подходам; (б) пересмотр государственного стандарта дошкольного образования для того, чтобы подчеркнуть важность игры и предоставить педагогам больше гибкости; и (в) повышение статуса педагогов дошкольного образования.

*Ключевые слова:* игра, важность игры, упадок игры, виды игры, игровая педагогика, дошкольное образование, мнения педагогов, государственные детские сады, теории об игре, Выготский, смешанные методы исследования, Нур-Султан, Казахстан

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This Master's Thesis will discuss the support for play in state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, from the perspectives of early childhood educators. The introductory chapter sets the context for the research study by providing some background information, as well as the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the study, and thesis outline.

### **Background Information**

This section will provide some background information on the general context of early childhood education in Kazakhstan as well the researcher's personal experience and interest in the topic under discussion.

#### ***Early Childhood Education Context in Kazakhstan***

Early childhood education plays an important role not only in an individual's development, but also in that of entire countries. In this paper, the term early childhood education (ECE) is used "to refer to the discipline that concerns the care, development and learning of young children" from birth to six or seven years (UNESCO, 2005, p.5). Heckman (2011) argues that if the most disadvantaged children are provided with early childhood education and care, greater social and economic equity occur, resulting in smaller achievement gaps between the rich and the poor, less need for special education, healthier ways of living, decreased crime rates, and lower social costs in general (p. 32). Furthermore, Heckman's latest research shows that "high quality birth-to-five programs for disadvantaged children can deliver a 13% per year return on investment—a rate substantially higher than the 7-10% return previously established for preschool programs serving 3- to 4-year-olds" (Garcia et al., 2016, as cited in Heckman, 2017, para 1). Heckman's research analyzes a broad range of life outcomes, such as IQ, income, schooling, crime, health, and the raise of a mother's earnings

after going back to work after a leave of absence due to childcare (Garcia et al., 2016, as cited in Heckman, 2017, para. 3). The United Nations Development Programme supplemented the Human Development Index sub-factor “education” with the “gross enrollment in early childhood education” coefficient, which also indicates the political significance of early childhood education (MES RK, 2016, p. 6).

Kazakhstan has also recognized the importance of early childhood education. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the economic crisis that occurred negatively affected the universal free-of-charge ECE enjoyed during the Soviet era (IAC, 2017). As a result, the network of ECE organizations decreased eight times from 8,743 in 1991 to 1,089 by 2000 (IAC, 2017, p. 92). By the 2000s, the economic situation in Kazakhstan improved, and the development of the ECE sub-sector became a priority for the government, leading to several policy initiatives in this sub-sector, one of which was the Balapan programme (IAC, 2017, p. 96). The ambitious goal of providing one hundred percent access to all children aged three to six to ECE organizations was set for 2019, rapidly expanding its network to the highest number in the country’s history – 9410 in 2016 (IAC, 2017, p. 92). However, such rapid expansion may have negatively influenced the quality of the provided ECE (Ayubaeva et al., 2013).

Both educational and non-educational factors have affected the implementation of the reforms. For example, a growing birth rate has meant that the government could not keep up with the pace of increasing demand: thus, the problem of access remained unresolved (OECD, 2017). One of the more recent surveys on the opinions of parents regarding ECE (Sange, 2016) found that 51% of parents responded that all of their children older than three years old attended kindergarten or another ECE organization; 18% responded that not all of their children did; the children of 31% did not attend any ECE organization (p. 219). Among the possible reasons were the following: “no money to pay for the ECE ” (14.7%), “on the waiting list”

(11.3%), “no spots in kindergartens” (7.3%), “no ECE organization in their neighborhood” (11.2%) (Sange, 2016, p. 219). Moreover, 26.9% of the parents whose children did not attend an ECE organization thought that there was no need to attend a kindergarten (they had a relative or a babysitter who looked after the child); 1.1% said that there were no conditions for their special needs child; 2.3% said that they did not trust the ECE organizations and considered that they provided very low quality services (Sange, 2016, p. 219-220). The data in this research confirms that even by 2016, reforms in ECE in Kazakhstan did not bring about the desirable outcomes of solving the problems of access, equity and quality of ECE.

Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) have been actively developed in the ECE sector. The number of private ECE organisations subsidized by the government grew by 655 units from 898 units in 2013 to 1,553 units in 2015 (IAC, 2017, p. 150). According to the mechanism of the PPPs, the government provides the private ECE organizations with subsidies per child within the state mandatory standard (IAC, 2017, p. 150), which lowers actual tuition fees for parents. In state kindergartens, parents pay only for food (MES RK, 2010), as well as for extra-curricular activities. At first glance, both businesses and parents seem to come out as winners here, and the state can also meet its goals as outlined in policy documents and following expectations of international standards. On the other hand, the ECE is provided for children, and their interests should be the priority, but do they always benefit from the PPP initiative?

In 2015, to expand the ECE network as fast as possible, the government lessened the strict regulations regarding some sanitary and architectural standards, which allowed businesses to open development centers and kindergartens in non-standard buildings, for example, on the first floors of apartment blocks in private houses or even in apartments (IAC, 2017, p. 121). As a result, on the one hand, the Balapan programme provided incentives to entrepreneurs to induce them to open small and medium businesses and provide ECE services

for children. Nevertheless, this also resulted in the low quality of private ECE organizations. Furthermore, due to relaxed inspection procedures and a lack of licensing processes (NUGSE, 2014, p. 19), there has been an increase in kindergartens and mini-centers opened by business-oriented people with no educational background, and whose main purpose seems to be earning money rather than providing quality services for children. This is an example of good intentions that included the goal of creating an effective developing environment for children (IAC, 2017, p. 122) resulting in unintended, and opposite, outcomes. Apart from the low quality of the infrastructure, what seems to be an even bigger concern is the low qualification, and sometimes even its absence, of the teaching and caring staff. The use of video surveillance in many kindergartens has found a shocking number of cases when children were mistreated and abused by teachers, which prompted the government to react and install video cameras in all kindergartens to protect the children (Zakon.kz, 2018). However, one could argue that it would be more important to cure the root of the problem, not its symptoms, in other words, the quality of ECE should start with highly qualified staff, which would then eliminate the need for protective video surveillance.

Another important point about the quality of early childhood education concerns the staff to child ratio. Research has proven that staff to child ratios are even more significant than the size of the group to provide for the quality development of children (OECD, 2017, p. 71). According to Pianta et al. (2009, as cited in OECD, 2017) optimal staff to child ratios extend the opportunities for continuing and meaningful interactions (p. 71); therefore, it is more likely that children will enjoy a higher quality education process and produce better developmental outcomes. “Research has found that children perform better in cognitive (mathematics and science) and linguistic (language, reading and word recognition) assessments when ratios are lower” (Huntsman, 2008; Love et al., 2003; Sylva et al., 2004, as cited in OECD, 2017, p. 71).

Finally, caregivers and teachers also benefit from better working conditions if they have fewer children to educate and take care of, because they can provide more attention to various development areas (NICHD, 1996; Pianta et al., 2009; Rao et al., 2003, as cited in OECD, 2017, p. 71). In comparison to OECD countries, where two-year old children enjoy the average ratio of 1:7, and older children, 1:18, Kazakhstani ratios are very high and not favorable for children, nor for the staff (OECD, 2017, p. 71), which can negatively affect the quality of ECE.

The second issue, that of high staff turnover, is also one of the factors that “jeopardizes the quality of care provided to children” (Manlove & Guzell, 1997, p. 145). There is evidence from research that “in programs with higher staff turnover rates children are more aggressive with peers, more withdrawn, and spend more time unoccupied” (Manlove & Guzell, 1997, p. 145). The reasons for both a shortage and high turnover of teachers, apart from personal circumstances, go back to the problems of unfavorable working conditions, low salaries and the low status of ECE teachers in Kazakhstan (OECD, 2017, p. 9). In 2015, some measures were taken to increase the salary of teachers, however, the salary of an ECE teacher (KZT 61,031 = USD 178) remains low and is only 49% of the average salary in the country (KZT 126,021 = USD 368) (IAC 2015, p. 37). Furthermore, there was a significant difference of “44% between the salary of a primary school teacher (KZT 89,937 = USD 342) and that of a preschool teacher, while in OECD countries this indicator is only 9% (preschool teacher salary at USD 3,150, primary school teacher salary at USD 3,437)” (IAC 2015, p. 37).

As a result, equity and the quality of ECE were affected by various educational and non-educational factors, such as the Soviet mentality, for example, where the perception of children with disabilities and special educational needs led to the tendency to separate rather than to include them, and to educate them in special institutions, separately from mainstream schools (NUGSE, 2014). Furthermore, the low qualification and low salaries of teachers; the



Public-Private Partnership (PPP) initiative and other factors mentioned above, have also resulted in low quality services in ECE.

***Positionality – Personal Experience and Interest at Play***

Before becoming a mother, I obtained a qualification in the field of education management and was working at the Center of Educational Programmes of the Autonomous Educational Organization “Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools”. However, after having my first child, I became very interested in ECE and child development, in general.

As a parent of two young children, I have encountered the aforementioned problems with the provision of ECE as well as its quality. Apart from the low qualification of teachers, unfavorable child-adult ratios and high staff turnover, one of the problems that I found especially serious was the academization of the early childhood curriculum and the lack of play. My interest in play started growing when I was looking for a half-day development center for my two-year-old daughter. I would register for a “trial day” so that I could observe and understand each center’s approach to children. What I discovered, surprised me to some extent. In one of the centers, a young teacher wanted a group of two-year-olds to sit still and watch her show them the numbers from 1 to 100 on a line on the wall. Then she gave them cards with days of the week printed on them and wanted the children to repeat after her, and that was an activity for two-year-old children! They could not sit still and kept walking around the room, and the teacher struggled to keep their attention and repeatedly asked them to sit down and repeat after her. There was only a 10-minute break for them to play.

We left the center after that break. Another center had 30-minute “lessons” where two-year-old children were mostly expected to sit at their desks, as they would do in a traditional Soviet and post-Soviet school, where direct teacher-led instruction was predominant. Although

there was more playful learning in that center, for example, the teacher used stacking toys to talk about different sizes and used stories to encourage children to get involved in arts and crafts; nevertheless, as an observer, it seemed to me that the children were being rushed through their activities. In that second center, they had a 15-minute break for free unstructured play, and when my daughter had just gotten into playing, she was pulled back to the “lesson”. For these reasons, our experience in that center was also limited to the trial day. Finally, after a long search, I found if not the ideal place, at least a better option for us – a development center which also had 30-minute lessons, but which were more playful and age-appropriate with finger play and puppets, many active games, music, arts and crafts, and 30-minute breaks for the children to play freely in the spacious playroom.

This personal experience motivated me to pursue the topic of play further. After my second child turned six months old, I decided to apply to a master’s programme at Nazarbayev University to research the topic of play in the context of early childhood education.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In recent decades, our world has changed significantly. The technological revolution and trends that it has brought, such as informatization, computerization, and globalization, have affected our lives in various ways. One of the ways it has affected children is that many of them play less and in different ways than children did two or three decades ago (Gray, 2011; Singer et al., 2009). There is some evidence that dismissing play in ECE and school settings is becoming an international trend (Miller & Almon, 2009). This is not surprising considering the competition between different countries for the best results in various academic tests, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and others. Pasi Sahlberg says that many countries “were infected by GERM (global

educational reform movement that promotes competition, choice, testing and privatization) in the 1990s” (Sahlberg, 2013, para. 8). He also notes that in many countries, these tests become important influences on educational reforms and policy, in general. Nevertheless, early academization brought by the national standards of ECE or by pressure from parents may lead to less play in kindergarten, and this may inhibit children’s healthy and wholesome development. Over the past 60 years, the time children spend playing with each other has decreased, especially time spent in active, free play, unstructured and led by children (Hewes, 2014, as cited in McCain, 2020, p.18). Over the same period of time, doctors, teachers and others have reported increased challenges to young children’s and adolescents’ well-being (Garvis & Pendergast, 2017; Yogman et al., 2018, as cited in McCain, 2020, p.18). “Rates of obesity, anxiety and behavior challenges have increased. Screen time, structured activities and less time outdoors reduce the opportunity for children to engage in play with each other” (McCain, 2020, p. 18).

It becomes apparent from this quote that academic competition and technological changes could change our children’s reality. However, it has been proven by research in education, psychology, and medicine that play is essential for children’s healthy physical, intellectual, social and emotional development (Ginsburg, 2007; Panksepp, 2007; Pellegrini, 2009; Russ & Schafer, 2006). Furthermore, play often has a therapeutic effect on children, especially those with special needs. For example, the use of play therapy with autistic children has shown improvements in their relationships and social interactions (Lindsay et al., 2017). For these reasons, play has become a “hot topic” today and is actively researched.

There is a considerable amount of research that has explored educators’ perspectives and beliefs about play and its role in ECE, relying on various theories and using different terms. In general, however, there is a prevailing recognition that educators’ beliefs, along with

professional development and pre-service training, influence their teaching practice (Fang 1996; Hegde & Cassidy 2009; Hegde et al. 2014; Vorkapic & Katic 2015 as cited in Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important to understand the perspectives of early childhood educators regarding play in the state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan since these would directly affect their daily practices, and hence, children's lives.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of this research is to understand how play is supported in the state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, according to the early childhood educators in their daily practice. This was mixed methods research with an anonymous online survey and semi-structured interviews used as the main research tools. It is important to hear the voices of early childhood educators regarding their perspectives on play and their support for play because they are the main stakeholders, after parents, in providing both education and care for the children. Besides, their perceptions and beliefs will directly affect their daily practice, hence, children's lives. Furthermore, before attempting to bring changes and reforms into the system, policymakers need to hear the voices of the practitioners working within this system.

### **Research Questions**

The main question in this research was: "How is play supported in state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan from the perspectives of early childhood educators?" The research sub-questions that helped answer the primary research question were the following:

1. How much freedom and flexibility do educators have in their teaching practices?
2. How do educators view play and its relation to learning?
3. How does the kindergarten environment provide for play?
4. What types of play are present in the kindergarten environment?
5. What is the educator's role in supporting play and learning through play?

6. What opportunities for play are provided?

### **Significance of the Study**

Despite the importance of ECE (Heckman, 2011), to date, there appear to be very few studies that have investigated ECE outside of Western contexts. In May 2020, at the meeting of the National Council of Public Trust, the government was instructed by the President of Kazakhstan to develop a comprehensive model of early childhood development:

The early development system of our children also does not meet international standards. We must actively develop preschool education, ensure the continuity of programs with the school (Zonakz, 2020, para. 2).

As a result, several projects were initiated by the government, such as Change Managers (within the El Umiti project), where specialists in the field were gathered together to brainstorm, be trained in change management and suggest long-term solutions. Therefore, this recognition of necessary changes and the aspiration to conform to international standards in terms of the quality of early childhood education provides a strong rationale for more research to be conducted in this field. This particular research helps fill the gap in the literature about developmentally appropriate education as it specifically focuses on the role of play and its relationship to learning within post-Soviet Kazakhstan.

According to various research, play is essential for the healthy development of children (Ginsburg, 2007; Miller & Almon, 2009; Panksepp, 2007; Pellegrini, 2009). Since many children spend their time in ECE organizations, these environments must provide an appropriate environment for the development of children. It is also important for policymakers to hear the voices of practitioners, who deal with children daily, to better understand the place of play in their daily practice and children's lives.

Furthermore, the data obtained as a result of this study can contribute to public policy in the field of ECE in Kazakhstan, serve as a basis for continuing to improve training and professional development of early childhood educators, and inform other nations that are similar to Kazakhstan in some way.

Finally, this topic is significant because it may have implications, not only for the development of children, but also for the future of the country as a whole: Heckman (2011) states that one dollar invested in early childhood education of a high quality brings a 7% to 10% per annum return on investment (p. 32) and that birth-to-five programs of high quality for children from vulnerable population can produce a 13% per year return on investment (Garcia et al., 2016, as cited in Heckman, 2017, para 1). Heckman's research, which analyzed a broad range of life outcomes, such as IQ, income, schooling, crime, health, and the raise of a mother's earnings after going back to work due to childcare, demonstrates that high quality ECE programs have a positive impact not only on the economy of the country, but also on the general well-being of its citizens (Garcia et al., 2016, as cited in Heckman, 2017). Therefore, it is important to improve the quality of the ECE with the help of research in this field.

### **Definition of Terms**

This section will provide definitions of the key terms that were used in this study by the researcher.

“Play” is understood as a “spontaneous, voluntary, pleasurable, and flexible activity involving a combination of body, object, symbol use, and relationships. In contrast to games, play behavior is more disorganized, and is typically done for its own sake (i.e., the process is more important than any goals or end points)” (Tremblay et al., 2013, para. 1).

“Free play refers to activity that is freely chosen and directed by the participants and undertaken for its own sake, not consciously pursued to achieve ends that are distinct from the activity itself” (Gray, 2011, p. 444). Therefore, computer games, adult-led and board games are not included under the category of free play for the sake of this study.

“Kindergarten” in the context of Kazakhstan is a full day early childhood organization for children from two to six years old. There are both state and private kindergartens.

“State kindergarten” is an early childhood organization in which services are provided by the government. These are free of charge; however, parents are expected to pay for the provision of food (around 20,000 KZT=50 USD per month). Places in such kindergartens are usually limited and allocated on a first-come, first-served basis, for children who live in proximity.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has provided some background information on the context of the study, both in terms of the historical situation of early childhood education in Kazakhstan, as well as the researcher’s personal experience and interest in this topic. The chapter also stated the problem of the decline of play as well as the global trend in the academization of early childhood education, and how this research could help bring about an understanding of the situation in Kazakhstan by exploring the support for play provided in the state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan as seen by early childhood educators. Finally, the chapter discussed the significance of the study, which will not only fill the gap in the literature about developmentally appropriate education as specifically focused on the role of play and its relationship to learning within the context of post-Soviet Kazakhstan, but will also potentially improve policies and practices within the country.

**Thesis Outline**

This master's thesis comprises several chapters. This introduction chapter has provided some background information on the context of the study. It is followed by the literature review chapter, which outlines the theoretical framework and research on play, its value, and its decline in the modern world. The methodology chapter outlines the main research questions of this study and describes the research design, sample population, data collection methods, and ethical considerations. Then the chapter on the findings describes the main data obtained as a result of the study as well as some analysis of the data. In the discussion and conclusion chapters, the major findings are analyzed and discussed further, and recommendations for practice, policy and further research are also provided.



## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature on play in early childhood education (ECE) settings. This chapter comprises three sub-topics that are closely related to the research question: “How is play supported by early childhood educators in state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan?” Since there are many different types of play, various definitions and understandings of play also abound. For the sake of this study, play will be defined as a “spontaneous, voluntary, pleasurable, and flexible activity involving a combination of body, object, symbol use, and relationships. In contrast to games, play behavior is more disorganized, and is typically done for its own sake (i.e., the process is more important than any goals or end points)” (Tremblay et al., 2013, para. 1).

After a review of the theories and concepts of play, the first section of this chapter focuses on the importance of ECE. The second section discusses play in general and specifically in the context of ECE. Finally, the last section discusses research studies on educators’ perceptions of play-based learning in various contexts, including one study conducted in Kazakhstan.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The purpose of this section is to explore relevant theories relating to play and ECE. Just as there are many definitions of play, there are also many theories of play. This literature review will briefly discuss the two key theories of play: developmental theories of play and post-developmental theories of play.

#### ***Developmental Theories of Play***

Developmental theories of play suggest that infants and toddlers undergo certain stages of play as they develop. Perhaps the most prominent child development theorist who has influenced the developmental theories of play was the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget.

According to Piaget, play advances child's development due to "the tension between assimilation and accommodation" (Fleer, 2013, p. 109).

He [Piaget] argued that play is an almost complete assimilation, with no attempt of adaptation to the outer reality. A child playing "planes" with a rectangular piece of e.g. wood usually pays no attention to a certain structural design needed for mastering gravity or making use of air pressure. The child simply assimilates the piece of wood into the existing plane scheme. Contrary to this almost pure assimilation is imitation, or a child's serious attempt to achieve adaptation with the outer reality. A house in the neighborhood caught fire during a school class. Two days later, children were playing with cubes. Their "house" caught fire, and children started playing the roles of firemen and victims in the house on fire. By simulating this situation during their play, children made serious attempts of accommodation to the reality they experienced two days earlier (Rudan, 2013, p. 1386).

Furthermore, Piaget suggests that play is the "assimilation of reality to the ego" (Fleer, 2013, p. 109). Play is also seen by Piaget as pleasurable, unstructured and conflict-free. However, in real life, children have the choice to resist, to comply or to negotiate as regards the norms and rules in their family or society. While playing, children can solve the problem of tension between societal norms and the wishes that they can invent in various scenarios, and thus recompense their ego via play; therefore, according to Piaget, play is always dominated by the child's ego (Fleer, 2013).

Within Piaget's famous stages of development by age, play has an important place. From birth to two years of age, during the sensory-motor stage, the child is mostly engaged in practice play that includes repetitive actions that occur both with and without objects. During the preoperational stage, at the ages between two and seven, the child is capable of symbolic play, where objects can symbolize other objects that are not present, and where players can pretend to be someone they are not. From seven to twelve, during the concrete operational stage, play mostly involves games with rules and at least two players, such as sporting games, card games and board games (Fleer, 2013). This last form of play is closely linked to another strand of Piaget's work – the development of moral reasoning in games, when “players shift from primitive forms of egoism (what is in this situation for me?) to moral realism (rules must be obeyed) to understanding that rules are based on mutual consent (to be modified and improved as participants determine)” (Henricks, 2020, p. 126).

The major criticism of the developmental theories of play is that children follow certain stages of play without taking into account the individual differences, cultures, time and circumstances they live in, in other words, for being universal and static (Roopnarine, 2012). These views of play contrast with the post-developmental theories of play that will be discussed below.

### ***Post-Developmental Theories of Play***

As opposed to developmental views of a child's development that are based on the models of play according to certain stages of development, post-developmental theories differ in that they imply that “play complexity builds in relation to the specific types of play activity children experience”, and not their age (Fleer, 2013, p. 113). Among post-developmental theories, there are cultural-historical view of play as well as critical and feminist post-structuralist models of play.

**Cultural-Historical Model of Play.** The cultural-historical theory argues that play is learned in families and ECE settings rather than being something that arises naturally within the child. Among the well-known representatives of the cultural-historical understanding of play are Elkonin (2005a) and Vygotsky (2016). Four main concepts underpin the cultural-historical view of play: a) in play, children create imaginary situations; b) in play, the meaning of objects and actions are changed; c) in play, children can move in and out of imaginary situations – from the pretend world to the real one and back; d) in play, both collective and individual imagining can occur (Fleer, 2013, p. 77).

Elkonin (2005a) explained that play emerges as a form of activity through which children learn the skills that are necessary to help the family and to make a living later in life (e.g. cooking, fishing, hunting, planting crops). Children are often observed to be imitating and playing the role of a mother, a doctor, a teacher and other people they encounter in their lives. By role-playing their experiences, children learn about the world around them and about the roles that people have in society (Elkonin, 2005). When children play with one another or by themselves, they often create imaginary situations and give new meanings to objects; thus, a banana becomes a telephone, and a block becomes a burning house. When children change the real meaning of the object to the meaning that the child imparts to it, “imagination becomes a conscious act on the part of the child” (Fleer, 2013, p. 83), and development in play occurs since according to Vygotsky (1987), imagination “is a necessary, integral aspect of realistic thinking” (p. 349). Later, children also invent the rules that will guide their play, and the focus is shifted from the role-play to the rules. Hence, a cultural-historical model of play demonstrates advancement in play via child’s involvement in increasingly sophisticated forms of play (Fleer, 2013, p. 84).

Vygotsky (1966) also argues that the environment is the source of a child's development and that through play children, explore the relationship between the real and the imagined worlds they create, where imagination “can lead a person either toward or away from reality” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 37). Play researchers have found that children can signal when they are in play and when they are out of it by using a special language – metacommunication (Bateson, 1972). While playing, children use various ways to communicate to their partner that “this is play” (Bateson, 1972, p. 183), or vice versa, to signal that something is outside of play and in the real world.

This leads to the fourth concept of the cultural-historical theory of play – that of “collective imagining” which occurs when children play together, and change the meaning of objects and actions and move away from reality. On the other hand, when children are engaged in the same play-script of role-play and try to make sense of the rules and roles in a society, meaning is constructed for the “individual”, and thus individual imagining occurs. This attempt to understand reality with the help of role-play, and moving away from reality through substituting objects in play, can be thought of as a movement between “individual imagining” and “collective imagining” (Fleer, 2013, p. 86).

The concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), introduced by Vygotsky, refers to the difference between a child's “actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving” and the child's “potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). According to Vygotsky, play creates the zone of proximal development for the child:

Is it possible to suppose that a child's behavior is always guided by meaning, that a preschooler's behavior is so arid that he [sic] never behaves with candy as he wants to, simply because he thinks he should behave otherwise? This kind of subordination to rules is quite impossible in life, but in play it does become possible; thus, play creates the zone of proximal development of the child. In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself (Vygostky, 2016, p. 18).

Thus, in the cultural-historical view, play is socially constructed and reflects the cultural and social environments of children. Therefore, the role of adults and peers becomes crucial in children's play. Hence, this study will help us to understand how play is supported in one of the social and cultural environments, that of early childhood education settings.

**Critical and Feminist Post-Structuralist Theories of Play.** Critical and feminist post-structuralist theories of play hold that play is not at all natural and fun, but rather that it is social in terms of children absorbing and imitating their environment and reflecting the social status quo in their play, and this status quo can be unfavorable to some players. Post-structuralist concepts offer early childhood educators a new lens for seeing race, gender, sexuality, class and other issues related to social justice.

In their book "The Trouble with Play" the authors, Grieshaber and McArdle, present an alternative view on play and argue that in their play, children frequently imitate the power relationships that they observe in their communities, and these are often not innocent and fun for all players, and can be cruel and even violent at times (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2011). They also raise the point that early childhood educators need to be aware that play can be unfair and inequitable, to understand the concept of fair play and what it means to play fair, to know how

unfair play can be identified and what could be done about it, and how to teach children to play fairly (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2011, p. 109). To provide an example of how play can seem to be fun, but not actually be fun, Grieshaber and McArdle (2011) provide a vignette of Lulu who wanted to take part in the Cinderella game that the other children were playing. The teacher intervened, and Lulu was allowed into the game. It appeared that all children were enjoying the game; however, later teacher found out that children allocated the roles of prince, princess and fairy godmother to themselves and the role of “the piece of paper that was in front of the fireplace, collecting cinders” (2011, p. 28) to Lulu. Here, the question arises: What should educators do – intervene to restore social justice or let the children play as they wish?

On the other hand, as a criticism of this theory, Ailwood (2010) argues that a post-structuralist view is a disciplinary one, and that because of its “surveillance and managing of conduct” (2010, p. 216), the approach itself represents a form of power and control: “I suggest that a “post-structuralist challenge” is to remember that ... we are in and of our systems, and the relationships we build are always regulatory – even as we hope that they may be liberatory” (p. 219).

Therefore, it can be concluded that play can also be a complicated and contradictory issue at times, for example, where one needs to balance justice on the one hand and power relations on the other. Although this study is based on the cultural-historical theory, it is still useful to be aware of the alternative view of play.

### **The Importance of Early Childhood Education**

The application of these and other various theories in practice often happens in the context of early childhood education. ECE plays an important role not only in an individual’s development, but also in that of whole countries. In this literature review, the term early

childhood education (ECE) “concerns the care, development and learning of young children” from birth to six or seven years (UNESCO, 2005, p. 5). Professor Heckman’s latest research showed that birth-to-five programs of high quality for vulnerable children can bring a 13% per year return on investment – a rate significantly higher than the 7-10% return that was previously established for preschool programs involving 3- to 4-year-olds (Garcia et al., 2016, as cited in Heckman, 2017, para. 1). Heckman and his colleagues’ research came to such a conclusion after analyzing a broad range of life outcomes, such as IQ, income, schooling, crime, health, and the raise of a mother’s earnings after going back to work after a period of leave due to childcare” (Garcia et al., 2016, as cited in Heckman, 2017, para. 3). Heckman, in his earlier work, (2011) also argues that if the most disadvantaged children are provided with early childhood education and care, greater social and economic equity occur, resulting in smaller achievement gaps, less need for special education, healthier ways of living, decreased crime rates, and lower social costs in general (p. 32). The UNDP supplemented the Human Development Index sub-factor “Education” with the “Gross enrollment in early childhood education” coefficient, which also indicates the political significance of ECE (MES RK, 2016, p. 62). Children that attend kindergarten, are more successful both at school and in life, in general (Kozganbayeva & Talipbay, 2016).

Longitudinal studies such as The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project (Schweinhart et al., 2005) and the Carolina Abecedarian Project (Campbell et al., 2012) are often cited as they are well known for their presentation of the astonishing results that a high quality ECE can bring.

### ***The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project***

The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project (Schweinhart et al., 2005) began in 1962 as a research study seeking to understand whether “access to high-quality education could have a



positive impact on preschool children and the communities where they live” (Highscope, 2020, para. 1). The 123 low-income preschool children at risk of failing in school were randomly divided into two groups: one group that at ages three and four took part in a high quality preschool program based on High/Scope’s approach of active learning, and a comparison group that did not receive any preschool education (Schweinhart et al., 2005). The findings of the study showed that

At age 40, the participants who experienced the preschool program had fewer teenage pregnancies, were more likely to have graduated from high school, were more likely to hold a job and have higher earnings, committed fewer crimes, and owned their own home and a car. As the longest-running longitudinal study in early education, the Perry Study continues to prove that investing in high-quality early education yields positive results for children and families (Highscope, 2020, para. 3).

Furthermore, there was also a study that compared the curriculum of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project with a traditional Nursery School and a Direct Instruction model - The High/Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison study (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997). The High/Scope model suggested teachers set up the daily routines and the environment in such a way that children were actively engaged in their learning through planning, doing and reviewing their activities both as individuals and as part of a small or a whole-class group (Schweinhart et al., 2005). The traditional Nursery School model implied the importance of children’s self-initiated play and responsive teachers in an environment that was loosely structured and socially supportive (Schweinhart et al., 2005). In the Direct Instruction model, teachers followed a script, directly teaching children academic skills and rewarding them for correct answers to the questions (Schweinhart et al., 2005). Up until age 10, the study found that children who were involved in the Direct Instruction model showed on average higher IQ

results than those involved in the traditional Nursery School model. However, long-term results showed that those who attended the High/Scope and the traditional Nursery School program were later involved in fewer felony arrests, required fewer years of special education for emotional impairment, and demonstrated higher levels of schooling than the children who attended the Direct Instruction programme: “Tightly scripted teacher-directed instruction, touted by some as the surest path to school readiness, seems to purchase a temporary improvement in academic performance at the cost of a missed opportunity for long-term improvement in social behavior” (Schweinhart et al., 2005, p. 11).

### ***The Carolina Abecedarian Project***

The Carolina Abecedarian Project (Campbell et al., 2012) has become associated with “positive, long-term effects of high-quality early care and education, particularly with regard to the power of early intervention to surmount some of the disadvantages of poverty” (The Carolina Abecedarian Project, 2020, para. 2). In this study, infants born between 1972 and 1977 were randomly assigned to either the experimental group with the early educational intervention or the control group. The experimental group children received full-time, high-quality education from infancy to age five that involved an individual approach of play-based learning. These educational “games”, integrated into the day, concentrated on children’s social, emotional, and cognitive development, giving particular emphasis to language development. The follow-up studies that monitored children's progress over time at ages 12, 15, 21, 30, and 35, found that through to age 15, I.Q. scores for the children from the experimental group were higher than those of the control group. They were also more likely to hold a bachelor’s degree and a job at the age of 30 (Campbell et al., 2012). At age 35, the experimental group showed better health outcomes, specifically, lower rates of prehypertension in their mid-30s than those in the control group, “significantly lower risk of experiencing ‘total’ Coronary Heart Disease

(CHD), defined as both stable and unstable angina, myocardial infarction, or CHD death, within the next 10 years” (Campbell et al., 2014, p. 5) The findings continue to demonstrate that significant, long-lasting benefits are correlated with ECE of a high quality (The Carolina Abecedarian project, 2020).

Indeed, both of these longitudinal studies demonstrate that high-quality early childhood education is associated with a balanced age-appropriate play-based approach for teaching and learning. Furthermore, this long-term research showed that ECE can have a great impact on the well-being of both individuals and a society as a whole. One of the important elements in good quality ECE is the presence of play. That is why this study seeks to understand this situation in the state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan. The next section will look at the importance of play, types of play, and its decline.

### **Play in Early Childhood**

This section will discuss the importance of play, especially in the early years, for children’s development, various categories and types of play, as well as the decline of play.

#### ***Importance of Play***

In the last couple of decades, there has been some advancements in the understanding of how play positively affects children’s learning and development in many ways – cognitively, socially, and emotionally. It has been found that on a neurological level, play is motivational and is associated with the release of the neurotransmitter dopamine, which improves the performance and efficiency of the brain areas that are responsible for the regulation of working memory, attention, mental flexibility and stress levels (Liu et al., 2017). There is also compelling evidence of the influence of play on children’s mental health in studies of play therapies applied to children with special educational needs, for example, autism (Lindsay et al., 2017). Children without special needs also process their experiences, both positive and

negative, through play. Furthermore, there is evidence that play enables the development of important skills and attitudes in children, the lack of which may lead to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and even suicide in adolescents and adults (Gray, 2011). Finally, social skills and emotional intelligence are becoming increasingly important in the times of Artificial Intelligence (AI), where soft skills remain a competitive advantage of humans and still cannot be replaced by robots. Children learn to regulate their emotions and collaborate when they play (Gray, 2011; Whitebread, 2018). Therefore, letting children play positively affects their cognitive, social, and emotional development. That is why this study seeks to understand how much support there is for play in the state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan from the perspective of early childhood educators.

### *Types of Play*

As it was mentioned earlier, play has various forms and types. Miller & Almon (2009) identified twelve key broad types of play (pp.53-54):

1. Large-motor play involves running, climbing, sliding and other movement types developing balance, coordination and “a sense of one’s body in the space around it” (p. 53).
2. Small-motor play such as play with small objects, including beads, puzzles and others, which enhance dexterity.
3. Mastery play, when a child performs the same action repeatedly until it is mastered, like tying bows, or standing “on a balance beam to become a circus performer” (p. 53).
4. Rules-based play, when rules are created and negotiated in play, adapted to each different play situation.

5. Construction play, involving assembling bridges, houses, stairs, and other constructions is a type of play requiring competence and creativity.
6. Make-believe play incorporates many other play types, which usually involves a rich use of language, problem-solving, and imagination, frequently beginning with “Let’s pretend...”.
7. Symbolic play occurs when children take any object and turn it into the toy or prop they need in their play with the help of imagination.
8. Language play involves mastery by playing with words, rhymes, verses, and songs they create or change, which includes storytelling and dramatization.
9. Playing with the arts involves using handy materials “to draw, model, create music, perform puppet shows, and so on, to express their feelings and ideas” (p. 54).
10. Sensory play involves playing with water, sand, mud, dirt, and other materials with various smells, textures, tastes and sounds that develop the five senses.
11. Rough-and-tumble play, often observed in the animal world, where “animals know how to play roughly without injury by rounding their body gestures and not aiming for dominance; children can be helped to do the same” (p.54).
12. Risk-taking play, which extends children’s competences and helps them “master challenging environments. They usually know how far they can go without hurting themselves” (p.54). Unfortunately, the majority of playgrounds nowadays are designed to be as safe as possible, giving children fewer opportunities to test their boundaries and to analyze risks.

These types of play are frequently intertwined with rich play scenarios, and children have a range of play forms that they use. Arguably, an early childhood organization that values play would provide support to all these types of play. This study will focus on nine types of

play and will exclude the large-motor, risk-taking and rough-and-tumble play as these often take place during physical education lessons or outdoors.

All of these types of play, however, can be chosen by the child provided there is choice. Play, where a child can choose what and who to play with as well as how to play, is referred to in this study as free play.

### ***Free Play***

Free play encompasses these and many other types of play. During free play, children initiate and lead the direction of the activity, while educators do not directly intervene in or dominate the child's involvement (Einarsdottir, 1998). In self-initiated and self-directed play, children both learn something new and can show their learning. Research on how children learn shows that they learn best when they are given some agency to play a role in their own learning (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2015). Free play, or self-directed play, is vitally important for children's exploration of the world as well as their understanding of their interests and preferences (Yogman et al., 2018).

In a wide-scale longitudinal research of childcare in England (Sylva et al., 2004), it was found that settings characterized as "excellent" showed evidence of free play for a substantial part of the day, with educators helping to enhance children's thoughts through meaningful interactions, such as asking open-ended questions, modeling, and formative feedback from adults taking part in play (Karlsen & Lekhal, 2019). This guidance is also referred to as scaffolding, which suggests the "sustained shared thinking" (Wall et al., 2015, p.5) and building on existing abilities. These interactions lead to a child's learning because adults assist children in using and understanding concepts that are beyond their current abilities by demonstrating an awareness of the interests and needs of individual children and lending individualized support (Early et al., 2010). For example, educators could help

children extend their ideas or link their actions to real world experiences (Karlsen & Lekhal, 2019). The idea of the active involvement of both children and educators is important here since participants should be actively sharing their thinking processes for children's learning to occur (Wall et al., 2015).

Moyles (1989) suggests a three-phased cycle of play – a combination of free and guided play – for a child's optimal learning:

Through free, exploratory play, children learn something about situations, people, attitudes and responses, materials, properties, textures, structures, visual, auditory and kinesthetic attributes, dependent upon the play activity. Through directed play, they are proposed another dimension and a further range of possibilities extending to a relative mastery within that area or activity. Through subsequent extended free play activities children are likely to be able to enhance, enrich and manifest learning (p. 20)

There is a lot of research that suggests that exploratory free play is beneficial for a child's further success at school. For example, in one study, it was found that "the quality of LEGO play at the age of three and four years of age predicted mathematical achievement in high school" (Wolfgang et al., 2010, as cited in Whitebread, 2018, p.238). In another study, Barker et al. (2014) reported that the six–seven-year-old children who spent more time doing less-structured activities in their daily lives, such as solitary or group free play, social outings, excursions and visiting zoos and museums, had a "higher cognitive self-regulation in school" (as cited in Whitebread, 2018, p. 238).

There is also evidence demonstrating that free play activities develop language and literacy. For example, there were observational studies that explored speech discourse (Cloran,

2005) and discovered the use of commands, directives, and requests in children's pretend play. In socio-dramatic play, playing various roles generally requires communication between play companions (Nicolopoulou et al., 2006), which also develops children's language skills. Research on the relationship between literacy practices and school readiness found that a higher-rate of literacy-related play at the age of four predicted language and reading readiness (Bergen & Mauer, 2000, as cited in Docken, 2017) and the more time three-year-olds spent talking to their peers the bigger was the size of their vocabulary by the time they reached kindergarten in the USA (Dickinson & Moreton, 1991, as cited in Docken, 2017).

Therefore, free play is very important for children's wholesome development, especially when it is supported by adults around them. This study will help us understand if and how free play is supported by early childhood educators in state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan.

### ***Guided Play***

The guided play concept, also referred to as playful learning, has two main elements: the educator and the environment. For example, play may be guided by the way the materials are arranged in the classroom and by activities leading to certain discoveries, as well as by the educator's intentional interactions where one "watches for opportunities to interact with children during naturally occurring 'teachable moments,' when the child is poised to learn new concepts" (Gordon, 2012, p. 84). The educator's role as a facilitator or co-creator of learning through the experiences of play is crucial within a pedagogy of playful learning (Fisher et al., 2010; Miller & Almon, 2009). It is considered to be a developmentally appropriate practice to provide daily opportunities for both free play and guided play experiences in early childhood education settings (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).



Guided play retains the child agency, such that the child initiates the play, but it occurs either in a setting that an adult carefully constructs with a learning goal in mind (e.g., a children's museum exhibit or a Montessori task) or in an environment where adults supplement the child-led exploration with questions or comments that subtly guide the child toward a goal. (Yogman et al., 2018, p. 4).

Learning, which occurs during play, in contrast to rote learning involving memorization and repetition, and with other didactic learning approaches where the educator structures and directs activities, challenges the dichotomy between play and learning (Gordon, 2012). This study will also lead to an understanding of how much guided play or playful learning is present in state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan.

### ***Decline of Play***

Nevertheless, recent evidence also suggests that over the last 60 years, play has declined, especially the unstructured free play led by children (McCain, 2020). Several factors have influenced the decline of play; among them are informatization and computerization. Children play outdoors less with each other, although this is where a lot of free play usually occurs, and this is what is enjoyed the most by children (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003). Parents are less willing to let their children play outside alone because media coverage of child abuse and child predators is very high. There are also concerns about safety issues related to vehicles in the street. The influence of TV and computer games is also significant – today's children often prefer to stay indoors in the company of a television or video game rather than interact with their peers outside their homes, which in turn has influenced the rate of obesity and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) rates (Gray, 2011).

Another possible reason for the decline of play is the globalization of education. Because of global competitiveness, there is a tendency towards the academization of the

curriculum, starting from early childhood. In addition, an emphasis on high stakes assessment has led to “more instructional teaching approaches and ‘teaching to the test’, with playful learning seen as unaffordable and inefficient” (Whitebread, 2018, p. 238). Furthermore, there is more pressure for children to be involved in extracurricular activities, which has resulted in the over-scheduling hypothesis (OSH) defined as excessive participation in organized activities in educational settings resulting in poor or negative developmental outcomes (Mahoney et al., 2006). In other words, because of overwhelmingly busy schedules, children do not have time for free play. However, one study found that OSH was not valid when it came to organized sporting activities: they found that there was a positive relationship between participation in organized physical and sporting activities and free active play (Cairney et al., 2018). This indicates the importance of research being conducted on play and the issues related to it.

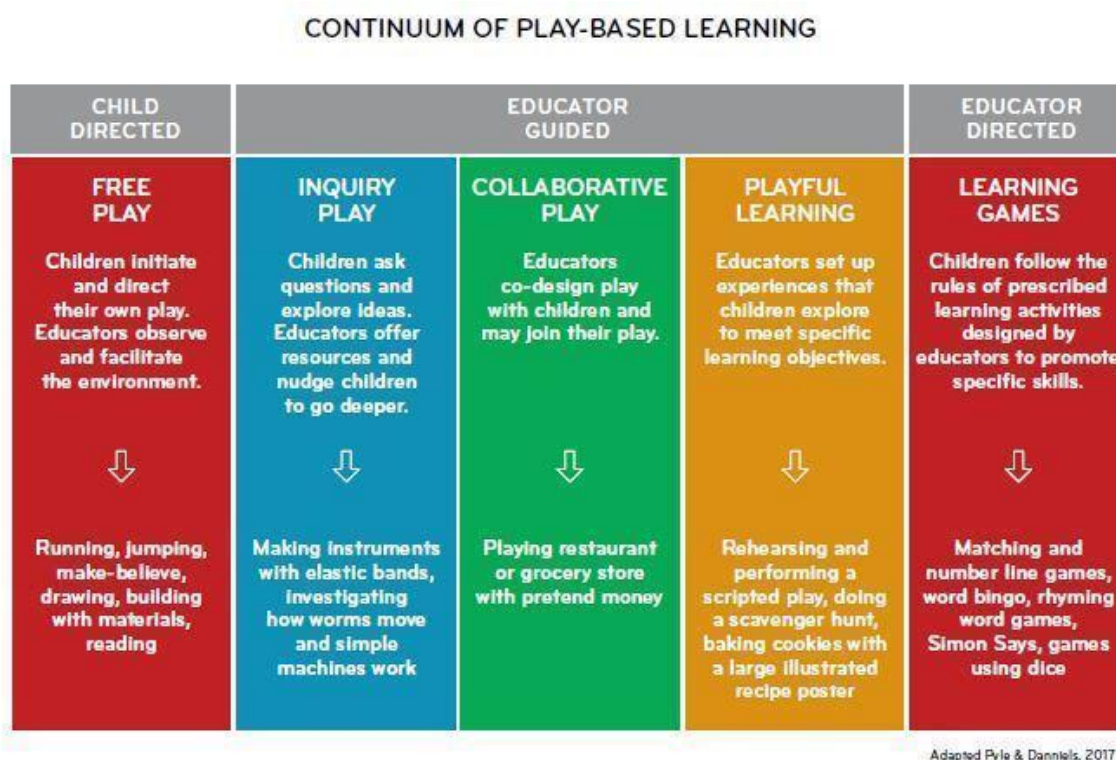
Furthermore, there are additional criticisms of the current lamentation about the decline of play. Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2018), for example, argue that there is a lacuna in the current research on new emerging playful spaces both in educational and other spaces, such as childcare and extra-curricular clubs, as well as in leisure centers and community halls. Therefore, it is important to conduct further research to understand whether play has declined, or has simply changed its forms and locations. Is there enough support for play in early education settings?

Answering these questions would promote the further understanding of the place play holds in the early childhood education context. When attending ECE organizations, children learn social skills while playing with each other, develop their imagination while playing freely and learn new facts and skills during teacher-led activities.

According to Pyle and Danniels (2017), play in ECE settings can be subdivided into five categories, ranging from free child-led play to a structured educator-led play and include

“free play, inquiry play, collaborative play, playful learning, and learning games” (as cited in McCain, 2020, p. 19). Figure 1 below provides some examples of these.

**Figure 1.** *Continuum of Play-based Learning developed by Pyle and Daniels (2017)*



How many of these kinds of play are present in ECE settings and what the balance is between them depends a lot on early childhood educators' beliefs about play and learning, which in turn often inform their practices. Therefore, this study seeks to understand the situation of play in state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan from the perspectives of the early childhood educators.

### **Educators' Perceptions of Play in the Context of Early Childhood Education**

There is a considerable body of research that has explored educators' perspectives and beliefs about play and its role in ECE, making use of various theories and different terminology. Generally, there is a prevailing recognition that the beliefs of educators, along with their professional development and pre-service training, influence their teaching practices (Vorkapic

& Katic 2015; Hegde and Cassidy 2009; Hegde et al. 2014; Fang 1996 as cited in Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Some studies investigated educators' perspectives on the value of play and its relationship to and potential support for learning in the classroom (DeVries, 2001; Drucker et al., 2007).

Although numerous research studies demonstrated both short-term and long-term positive results of play-based learning, some studies show that the use of play for learning in kindergartens is limited (Miller & Almon, 2009). One of the main explanations for this is the dichotomized understanding of play and learning, where play is considered as a break from learning (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Gordon (2012) suggests that structured teacher-led instruction meets the expectations of policymakers and parents who do not consider playful learning to be consistent with the learning activities that they expect children to have. Therefore, even when teachers claim that they value play and know about its benefits, they may find it challenging to implement their beliefs into their daily teaching practices (Lynch, 2015). Lynch's (2015) study found that educators at kindergarten felt pressured by other educators, administration, and policies to focus on academic objectives, which led them to limit play.

Furthermore, in a systematic review of 62 studies of ECE teachers' beliefs about play-based learning (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019) have found that these differed depending on the cultural context. Their review discusses three regional clusters – (Northern) European countries, English-speaking countries and Asian countries. They found that European countries were focused on a social pedagogy and holistic view of learning, where play was an important part of learning, whereas in the UK and Asian cultures, there was more emphasis on the preparation of school and primary school curricula with more formal instruction. Furthermore, in some non-Western cultures, play and learning were seen as “two down-right incompatible concepts” (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019, p. 785). However, there were some beliefs that were

independent of cultural context and thus universal across different countries. For example, in one comparative study, teachers from Japan, the US and Sweden linked play to the development of social skills (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010).

Another varying belief related to play and learning in the ECE context is linked to the role of adults in play-based learning and the balance between adult-led and child-led play activities. A systematic review of 62 studies of ECE teachers' beliefs about play-based learning (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019) found that in English-speaking and Asian countries, adult-led activities dominated, whereas child-led and child-initiated play with no adult intervention was prominent in Germany, for example (Wu et al., 2018; Wu 2014). Nevertheless, across all three clusters, there were also studies where there was a balance of adult-child cooperation.

As far as the implementation of play-based learning is concerned, a meta-synthesis study found that there were six categories of challenges and obstacles that educators are faced with: "(a) policy mandates and curricular concerns; (b) parental attitudes and beliefs; (c) teacher education and qualifications; (d) collegiate peer pressure; (e) structural challenges; (d) children's characteristics" (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019, p. 787). Across different cultures, teachers commented most often on policy mandates and curricular concerns, and these were variously linked to the rest of the issues. For example, in the studies conducted in Asia, educators reported that it was challenging for them to implement play-based pedagogy within a ECE culture with an established, "direct instructional focus on academic learning" (e.g. Baker 2014b, 2015; Cheng 2001; Wu 2014; as cited in Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019, p. 787). Among other challenges identified in the Asian contexts were administrative duties, such as filling out forms that become an obstacle in implementing play pedagogies. One of the recommendations highlighted by the meta-synthesis review was the professional development of educators: "Traditional views of learning as well as limited knowledge and comprehension of play theory

were among factors practitioners listed as limiting opportunities for a viable play-based enactment” (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019, p. 792). These challenges seem to describe well the situation in ECE in Kazakhstan, as seen from one of the studies described in the next section. While early childhood education policy and practice have been studied, this study seeks to shed more light on the situation in state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan with regards to support provided for play.

### **Early Childhood Education Research in Kazakhstan**

Research in the field of ECE in Kazakhstan is limited to very few studies. One of them is a study on early childhood education policy and practices conducted in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan (Needham et al., 2018), found that although the content of the National Standard for Preschool Education in Kazakhstan had been updated in 2012, the approaches in ECE settings remain very much Soviet-like with “the unconscious continuance of past ideologies into new practices” (p. 442) and the researchers concluded that “pedagogical ideas shaped in a Soviet colonial past seem to resist more play-based kindergarten practices developed in other cultural contexts” (p. 432). The updated National Standard for Preschool Education of 2012 suggested more active learning and play, including unstructured and free play, which aligned with best international practices; however, in reality, the majority of kindergartens still practice adult-led, subject-based pedagogy:

While the stated aims of the standards documentation, practitioners, policy makers and trainers suggested a commitment to emerging social changes in attitudes to childhood and child-focused pedagogy, the interviews and observations also suggested the stickiness of existing pedagogical practices. The participation of children in activities was evident in the classroom sessions observed, but with the exception of one of the preschools, the children were always observed participating in

whole class activity in the indoor classroom environments: free play was observed in the kindergartens' outdoor environments (Needham et al., 2018, p. 439).

This study seeks to understand whether the situation has changed since 2018, and to narrow down the focus to specifically concentrate on play and the support provided for play by early childhood educators.

### **Conclusion**

This literature review has analyzed key theories and concepts, as well as reviewed research highlighting the importance of play in ECE. It also discussed various research on play in general and specifically in the context of ECE, as well as some studies of the perceptions of educators regarding play-based learning in various contexts, including one study in Kazakhstan. In conclusion, this literature review provided arguments about the crucial role of play in early childhood in general, and in the context of ECE settings in particular, suggesting that understanding how play is supported in state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan may help to shed light to important issues of children's development and well-being. The next chapter will discuss the methodology of this research.

## **Chapter 3: Research Design**

### **Introduction**

This research study sought to understand how play was supported in the state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, as seen by early childhood educators. This chapter describes the research design and methods. It also includes a description of the site, participants, data collection instruments and procedures, data analysis procedures, as well as ethical considerations, such as anonymity and confidentiality procedures, and risks and benefits of the research.

### **Research Design and Methods**

This study used an explanatory cross-sectional sequential mixed methods design, which consisted of first collecting quantitative data (that provide a general picture of the research problem) and then collecting qualitative data to help explain or elaborate on the quantitative results, which will refine and extend the general picture (Creswell, 2014, p. 572). Quantitative data were collected via an online survey and qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This research design aligned with the research questions as a way to understand the general picture regarding the support for play in the state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan, but also to explore the deeper explanations from individual practitioners to clarify the broader picture.

In the field of educational research, both quantitative and qualitative methods have been used to understand play and playful learning. In this study, for example, conducting a quantitative survey was necessary to see the situation in general, but also to identify potential candidates for further qualitative study. As Creswell (2013) noted:

We conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored.

This exploration is needed, in turn, because of a need to study a group or population,



identify variables which cannot be easily measured, or hear silenced voices ... We also conduct qualitative research because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue. (pp. 47-48)

Thus, qualitative research is one of the tools that helps to explore and understand in depth the issues that cannot be easily measured and hear the voices that are not often heard. Therefore, a qualitative approach is also appropriate for the exploration of complex situations where individuals can offer their perspectives. In this research, a qualitative approach was used since the study focused on early childhood educators' perceptions of play and learning and their support for play in a natural setting—the state kindergarten.

This study adapted Docken's (2017) doctoral study where a multiple case study approach was used to understand the support of play in US kindergartens. However, apart from a survey and face-to-face interviews, Docken's study (2017) also included classroom observations, which could not be replicated due to both time constraints and the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in early childhood education (ECE) organisations.

### **Data Collection Instruments and Procedures**

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. The quantitative data were collected via an online survey on Qualtrics and the qualitative data was collected via nine semi-structured interviews. Docken's (2017) dissertation served as a guide for both the survey and interview questions used for this study. These questions were applicable to this research as they focused on educators' support for play in their daily practice. Some questions were adapted because of cultural differences in the context. For, example, kindergarten in the USA is only one year before school whereas in Kazakhstan it lasts from two to six years of age (See Appendix D for the online survey and Appendix E for semi-

structured interview questions). First, quantitative data collection will be discussed, followed by the discussion of qualitative data collection.

### *Quantitative Data Collection Instruments and Procedures*

The quantitative data collection started after the approval of the Ethical Board Review by the Graduate School of Education, in November, 2020. A formal letter was prepared by the researcher and sent from Nazarbayev University on behalf of the researcher by email to the Department of Education of Nur-Sultan with a request for them to circulate the attached recruitment letter about the research among all the state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan. The recruitment letter sent by the Department of Education to educators included a request for participants to fill out an anonymous online survey (see Appendix B for the recruitment letter), accompanied by the hyperlink and a QR-code, provided for the convenience of the participants to proceed to the online survey.

Considering that educators were very busy, the researcher included an incentive to increase their motivation to participate in the survey. The incentive was mentioned both in the teacher recruitment letter and in the informed consent before the start of the survey. Those who participated in the survey were entered for a chance to win 6 gift certificates of 5000 KZT (or approximately 12 USD). Those who wanted to participate in the raffle had to enter their mobile phone number. The deadline for the survey completion was also provided, as well as the date, time and the Instagram account where the live raffle would take place.

The survey included a final question on whether or not the participants who considered that they provided a high level of support for play wanted to participate in follow-up interviews. The participants provided their contact information only in the case they wished to be interviewed. The informed consent at the beginning of the survey also contained

the contact information of the researcher in case the survey participants wanted to proceed with individual interviews.

### ***Qualitative Data Collection Instruments and Procedures***

This section will provide an overview of qualitative data collection, more details will be discussed in the further sub-sections.

Nine educators, who worked at state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan were interviewed. Docken's study (2017), adapted by this research, also had nine teachers interviewed. If identified as someone interested in interview participation, the researcher contacted that person to discuss a date and time to conduct an interview – online via Zoom, or in a convenient location as agreed between the researcher and interviewee. Those who were interviewed, were entered for a chance to win access to an online course about play paid by the researcher.

### **Participants, Site and Sampling**

#### ***Survey Participants, Site and Sampling***

The survey was web-based and conducted on the Qualtrics platform. At the time when the study was conducted, there were 95 state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan, according to the Department of Education (Department of Education of Nur-Sultan, 2019). The total number of early childhood teachers in Nur-Sultan was 4480 (Committee on Statistics, 2019), although the exact number of educators in state kindergartens was unclear. Purposeful sampling was used to target the maximum number of educators in state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan. A letter was sent to the Department of Education of Nur-Sultan with a request to circulate the teacher recruitment letter with the survey link among the state kindergartens (see Appendix A). The teacher recruitment letter (see Appendix B) contained a brief description of the research purpose, criteria for participation, ethics, risks and researcher's contact information.

The survey contained a final question about the participants' willingness to take part in follow-up interviews. If they agreed, they were asked to leave their contact information.

### ***Interview Site, Participants and Sampling***

Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted, both online (via Zoom) and in convenient locations, as agreed between the researcher and interviewees.

Participants were identified and recruited according to the research purpose and research question (Leavy, 2017). Purposeful sampling was used, which suggests that seeking out the best cases for the research produces the best data and “information-rich cases” (Patton, 2015, p. 264). Therefore, the criteria for interview participation were the following: 1) be employed 2) have at least two years of work experience in kindergarten and 3) have a perceived high level of support for play. The last criteria also make this sampling homogeneous – when cases are sought out because they share a common characteristic (Patton, 2015), in this case – a high level of support for play.

The interviews took place in December, 2020. After collecting data from nine educators using semi-structured interviews, the data collection was finished by the end of December, 2020. The interviews were audio-recorded with a dictaphone and Easy Voice Recorder application on the smartphone after permission from the interviewee was obtained. The informed consents were signed in person before the start of the face-to-face interviews. Before the online interviews, the informed consents were sent via WhatsApp chat, the participants signed the forms, took a picture and returned them to the researcher also via WhatsApp chat. During the interviews, notes were taken alongside the audio recording. All the participants agreed to be recorded after reading the informed consent. The recordings were transcribed in January, 2021.

## **Data Analysis Procedures**

This section will first present the survey data analysis procedures, and then the interview data analysis procedures.

### ***Survey Data Analysis Procedures***

Survey responses were analyzed with the use of descriptive statistical results presented by Qualtrics software. The survey data was moved into tables, organized by survey questions, into a separate appendix (See Appendix F). The responses to open-ended survey questions were categorized into themes, and the relevant responses were translated to be used as quotes in the Data Analysis and Findings. The responses to key questions on the survey about the use of play (Appendix D) were considered by the researcher to identify participants for the follow-up interviews. Participants who were supportive of play in their responses and who provided their contact details, were selected for further interviews.

### ***Interview Data Analysis Procedures***

According to Leavy (2017), the general phases related to qualitative data analysis and interpretation include (a) data preparation and organization; (b) initial immersion; (c) coding; (d) categorizing and theming; and (e) interpretation (p.150). The researcher followed these steps in a non-linear way, because it was rather a recursive process where all the phases were intertwined. First, the data was prepared and organized: interviews were transcribed and sorted by the interview question on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. It can be said that while inputting data into the table, the initial immersion into the data was happening already. After the table was completed, reading through all the data, helped the researcher to be completely immersed into it. While reviewing the data, the researcher was taking notes on the thoughts and ideas that were emerging, as well as understanding what should be highlighted and what should be left for further research.

Then, the interview data were analyzed to find the recurring themes and categories and coded based upon open, axial, and thematic coding aligned with Corbin and Strauss (2008). In vivo coding was used to maintain participants' language (Leavy, 2017). This use of coding seemed best to suit the research purpose, which was to understand early childhood educators' perspectives on how play is supported in the state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan. Once coded, the larger themes were identified that had larger meaning behind a group of codes and memos taken to help in further analysis (Saldaña, 2014).

Finally, at the stage of interpretation, various types of triangulation were considered, such as data triangulation (comparing with the survey data) and theoretical triangulation (comparing different theories of play), and discussed in the final chapters of the thesis.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This section will discuss ethical considerations of the study, including anonymity and confidentiality procedures, potential risks and benefits of the research.

#### ***Anonymity and Confidentiality Procedures***

The online survey was anonymous unless the person chose to participate in an interview or to enter their phone number for the raffle. Otherwise, no contact information was collected. The Qualtrics survey also allowed for an option of not collecting IP addresses or location data (Qualtrics, 2020).

As for the participants who took part in the interviews, their names were kept confidential, and pseudonyms only known by the researcher were assigned to each participant. The pseudonyms and original data were kept separate to not allow an association between the data sets and protect the identities of participants (Creswell, 2014). Identifying information such as names of kindergartens were removed to ensure the confidentiality of

participants. Any information potentially identifying teachers or kindergartens, not directly relevant to answering the research questions, was removed.

### ***Risks of the Research***

There were minimal risks to the research. There was a small chance for psychological harm as survey or interview questions could cause stress, embarrassment or challenging memories. There were also some risks related to the breach of confidentiality – both on digital platforms that can be hacked and in public spaces where the interviews took place. These risks were mentioned in the informed consent form.

To minimize risks, the online survey was anonymous, unless the person chose to participate in an interview and/or provide their mobile phone number to participate in the raffle. The survey allowed participants to skip questions that they may have felt uncomfortable answering, and some survey questions were indeed skipped by the respondents. In the interviews, participants were reminded that they could stop the interview at any time. Likewise, in being cognizant of potential stressors, the researcher attempted to create a relaxed environment in the interview, ensuring active listening and eye contact (Leavy, 2017), and initially asking questions to develop a level of trust and reminding participants that they could skip any questions they would like.

Informed consent was provided as the first step of the survey and the interview. Pseudonyms were used to provide confidentiality. All the data was stored on a password-protected computer with all the identifying information to be destroyed after one year.

### ***Benefits of the Research***

Taking part in the survey and the interviews can be seen as beneficial for the participants, as they were provided with a chance to reflect on their beliefs and practices

regarding play. The results of the study may encourage further research as well as have implications for early childhood educators' training or professional development curricula and other policy decisions supporting the importance of play.

### **Conclusion**

To date, there are very few studies that have investigated ECE in Kazakhstan, and there is no research on support for play in the state kindergartens in the country. This research would make an initial contribution to the much-needed area of educational research. It is important to hear early childhood educators' voices and understand their support for play that may influence their daily practice, and thus affect children's lives.

This chapter described the research design and methods. It also included a description of the site, participants, data collection instruments and procedures, data analysis procedures, as well as ethical considerations, such as anonymity and confidentiality procedures, risks and benefits of the research. The next chapter will provide an analysis of the data and findings.



## **Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will present the findings from the data analysis from both the online survey and semi-structured interviews that sought to understand how play was supported in state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan from the perspectives of early childhood educators. The sub-questions of the main research question explored educators' freedom and flexibility in their teaching practices, their beliefs about play and learning, the role of the educator in play, the play environment, types of play, and opportunities provided for play.

This chapter will first present the analysis of the survey data and then the analysis of the interview data, and will illustrate how these data can be triangulated against each other, as well as against selected theories mentioned in the literature review chapter.

### **Survey and Interview Sample and Demographics**

This section will present information on survey and interview sample and demographics.

#### ***Survey Sample***

The survey was shared with all 95 state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan. The overall number of early childhood educators in Nur-Sultan was 4480 in 2019; however, the exact number of educators in state kindergartens was unclear.

There were 116 responses that were provided in the online survey, and although this is a relatively low response rate, the survey was used as a filter to identify potential interviewees and not for generalizing the survey results to a larger population. However, the survey still provided some useful insights into the research question of how play was

supported in the state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan from the perspectives of early childhood educators.

The quantitative data collected from the online survey was analyzed with the Qualtrics software's descriptive statistics. The survey data was analyzed and reported upon according to the five attributes of support for play aligned to the research sub-questions on: (a) teacher beliefs about play and learning; (b) opportunities for play; (c) the play environment; (d) types of play; (e) the educator's role in play.

### ***Survey Demographics***

In the online survey, out of 116 respondents, five chose "No" to the informed consent; therefore, 111 responses were counted. Out of these 111 respondents, 104 answered the question about their gender as being female. There were 107 responses about the respondents' age, with almost 70% of respondents being aged from 26 to 45 years (Table 1, Appendix F). All but eight educators responded to the question about their level of education, with the vast majority having a BA (n=77); no respondent held a PhD or an equivalent (Table 2, Appendix F). Overall, the vast majority of educators had a qualification in ECE or its equivalent (n=85 out of 107). More than a third of the respondents had fewer than five years of work experience, with 12% of the educators with over 20 years (n=13) (see Table 3, Appendix F for more details).

### ***Interview Sample***

Since the online survey was used as a filter to identify potential interview participants, there were three main criteria according to which the candidates were selected: (a) the first criteria was their willingness to participate in the interview; (b) the second criteria was their perceived high level of support for play as indicated by their responses to the key questions in the online survey; (c) the third criteria was having at least two years of work experience in

kindergarten. The responses to key questions about play as well as the open-ended questions on the survey about the use of play (Appendix D) were considered by the researcher to identify participants for the interviews.

### ***Interview Demographics***

All educators interviewed identified as female. Two interviews were conducted in Kazakh, and seven interviews were conducted in Russian. Additionally, two interviews were conducted online, and seven interviews were conducted face-to-face. Table 4 (Appendix F) provides some information on the interview participants' demographics. The educators were divided into generalists, meaning that they work with children all day, and specialists, meaning that they lead some subjects such as music, English or mathematics. Some generalists also combined their work with methodological work, meaning that they provided methodological support to other educators. Several teachers had had some previous work experience at school, from primary to high school.

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

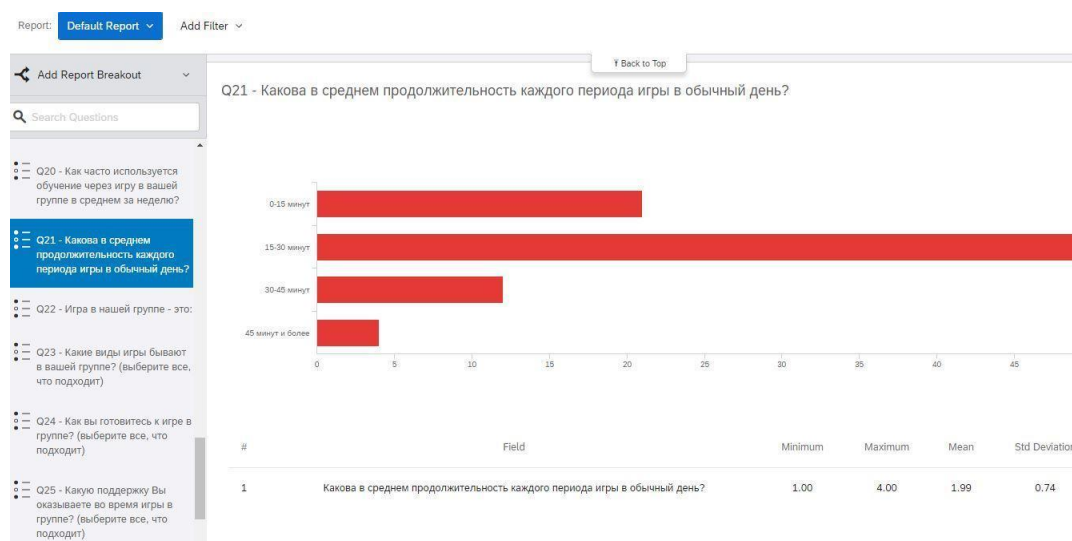
This section will first describe the survey and the interview data analysis procedures, followed by integrated findings from the quantitative and qualitative data, organized by the six research sub-questions.

#### ***Survey Data Analysis Procedures***

The survey responses were analyzed with the use of descriptive statistics results presented by Qualtrics software (see Figure 2). The data was moved into tables and organized by survey questions into a separate appendix (See Appendix F). The responses to open-ended survey questions were categorized into themes, and the relevant responses were translated in order to be used as quotes in the data analysis and findings chapter. The responses to key questions about the use of play in the survey (Appendix D) were considered by the researcher

to identify participants for the follow-up interviews. Those participants who demonstrated high support for play in their responses, especially the open-ended ones, were selected for further interviews.

**Figure 2. Qualtrics Data Analysis**



### ***Interview Data Analysis Procedures***

According to Leavy (2017), the general phases related to qualitative data analysis and interpretation include (a) data preparation and organization; (b) initial immersion; (c) coding; (d) categorizing and theming; and (e) interpretation (p.150). The researcher followed these steps in a nonconsecutive way, because it was rather a recursive process where all the phases were intertwined. First, the data was prepared and organized: interviews were transcribed and sorted by the interview question on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet (see Figure 3). It can be said that while inputting data into the table, the initial immersion into the data was happening already. After the table was completed, reading through all the data, helped the researcher to be completely immersed into it. While reviewing the data, the researcher was taking notes on the thoughts and ideas that were emerging, as well as understanding what should be highlighted and what should be left for further research.

Then, the interview data was analyzed in order to find the recurring themes and categories, and coded based upon open, axial, and thematic coding aligned with Corbin and Strauss (2008). In vivo coding was used to maintain the participants' language (Leavy, 2017). This use of coding seemed to suit the research purpose, which was to understand early childhood educators' perspectives on how play is supported in the state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan, best. Once coded, the larger themes were identified; these had a larger meaning behind a group of codes and memos taken to help in their further analysis (Saldaña, 2014).

Finally, at the stage of interpretation, various types of triangulation were considered, such as data triangulation (comparing with the survey data) and theoretical triangulation (comparing different theories of play), and discussed in the final chapters of the thesis.

**Figure 3. Coded Data Analysis**

	A	B	C	D
1		Ed1	Ed2	Ed3
1	Сколько времени вы работаете в нынешнем детском саду?	1. 3 месяца работает в данном саду. До этого работала в частном саду, который закрылся во время пандемии, а до	В нынешнем саду я работаю с 2013 года, то есть уже 7 лет, опыт в дошколе 7 лет, до этого я работала в школе	общий стаж - 8 лет, 4 года в этом саду
2	5. Что, по Вашему мнению, думают об игре в детском саду родители?	я хочу сказать, что современные родители очень много игр уделяют внимание. Играм и игрушкам, потому что игрушки - это атрибуты игры, и сейчас современные дети у них все есть. у них какие-то роботы, вот маленькие дети тоже рассказывают "у меня есть такой робот, у меня есть танк-то машинки" развивающие, то ли на пульте, и вот именно не просто так, что они ездят, а она может скорость увеличивать, может поворачиваться налево, направо, это тоже идет обучение.... Я хочу сказать, что да, сейчас многие родители нацелены на то, чтобы ребенок больше знал и имел какой-то багаж знаний, который бы пригодился им к школе, чтобы он был успешным в школе. и я хочу сказать, что ребенок, который играет, он самое главное, обучающие и воспитательные навыки осваивает и это то же самое пригодится ему во взрослой жизни. Я	родители... думаю, я у них ничего не спрашивала... но они любят, когда они играют не просто играют, а они любят, когда они играют в сюжетно-ролевые игры, я знаю, когда мы играем в доктора, спасателя, еще кого-нибудь, передаваем, у нас же есть свои костюмы, свой есть уголок где-нибудь игры... Вот когда мы фотографии отправляем, они очень радуются, потом вот эти развивающие игры, бывает, некоторые родители, которые сами предлагают "Может, вам что-то принести из дома"... Бывает же, что родители многие покупают "Вот у нас есть такая-то игра, мы хотим поделиться с другими детьми", почему бы и нет... До обеда у нас занятия же по стандарту, а после обеда у нас идут развивающие моменты, творчеством занимаемся, в игры играем...	Ну я думаю, что для родителей игра - это просто, они думают, что свободная игра, ну что самостоятельно они сами идут, играют, общаются... они не в курсе, что через игру мы развиваем детей. Не каждый родитель, подойдет например, и поинтересуется... Сейчас еще родители, я думаю, чересчур щепетильные... ну например, когда... это можно увидеть везде... когда родители запрещают ребенку что-то потрогать, куда-то пойти, самостоятельно выполнить что-то, даже одеться. И у ребенка появляется какой-то страх, появляется неуверенность в себе. И прийдя в детский сад, он сильно отличается, например, по детям видно, кто свободно себя ведет, и какой ребенок скован. Даже игры когда мы даем, это все влияет на ребенка
7	6. Что, по Вашему мнению, думает об игре в детском саду администрация?	я думаю, что они думают так же, потому что они тоже педагоги, что это основной вид деятельности....-то есть поддерживают? -Да-Да-Да	Администрация, поскольку они все педагоги такие же как и мы, я думаю, они всегда солидарны, в первую очередь они сами заинтересованы, потому что рейтинг сада, развитие ребенка, вот эти все моменты, мониторинги, качество знаний, это все идет в первую очередь к ним, это все можно достичь с помощью чего? с помощью того, что если у тебя есть на руках хорошие игры, кабинеты такие, развивающие, то почему бы и нет, они рады наоборот, они как бы солидарны, понимают, что игры - это самое важное, что... для ребенка	Администрация вообще поддерживает воспитателей и материально, и морально, дает какую-то помощь методическую воспитателям. То есть воспитатель свободно может обратиться как к методисту, так и к заведующей, с просьбой чего-либо.
8	7. Какова, на Ваш взгляд, роль игры в детском саду?	первостепенная. Все наши занятия, например, и игровая деятельность... приходят в гости в младших группах, приходит сюрпризный момент, например, игрушка, кукла Айсулу, (жалостливо) она плачет, ей холодно зимой, давайте ей поможем, то есть игровые моменты, да, мы поддерживаем, это как игра для него... Он же не поймет	роль игры - идет как обучающая, развивающая, скорее всего, думаю, метод, способ	А об игре что думают? То есть как относятся к игре? Они очень хорошо относятся к игре. Когда игры применяют на занятиях, они и учат, и говорят постоянно на собраниях о том, что занятие должно пройти интересно, занятие должно пройти через игру, чтобы ребенок не заметил, они же маленькие еще, что он и в старшем возрасте ребенка, ну в дошкольном возрасте. Роль игры очень важна, это и в младшем возрасте, и в старшем возрасте ребенка, ну в дошкольном возрасте. В чем заключается роль игры именно в детском саду?

### **Findings from Quantitative Data**

The survey data suggested that overall, educators believed in the importance and value of play, both in general and in relationship to children's learning. However, the survey

also revealed that when it came to choosing between academic activities, such as filling in worksheets or learning numbers, for example, half of the educators did not prioritize play. Furthermore, another important finding was that the majority of educators did not consider free play as an appropriate method of instruction for children from birth to Grade 3, and they also seemed to be unaware of how children's learning could be assessed during free and other types of play. In most cases, the duration and frequency of playtime were limited to 15-30 minutes four or more times a week. The types of play mostly present in the kindergarten and the role of the educator also suggested that there was more organized play and less free play. Finally, there was also some data indicating that resources and materials for play were limited.

### ***Findings from Qualitative Data***

The interview data provided more details and confirmed some of the data that was discovered in the survey. For example, the fact that academic lessons and activities, sometimes in the form of organized play, were prioritized over free play, which mostly took place when all the lessons and extra-curricular activities were over, and was often outdoors, weather permitting. Furthermore, educators who let children play freely were perceived as less responsible or inexperienced. It has also become clear that educators were not sure of how free and guided play could be used in their daily teaching practices, and many of them said they would be pleased to have more practical training on play-based teaching and learning. Furthermore, the understanding of the educators regarding their role in free or guided play was also limited to the supervision of the children in case of a conflict, or to playing with those children who "did not know how to play".

### ***Integrated Findings***

The data from the survey and interviews was synthesized according to six research sub-question. These synthesized findings suggest that there is plenty of support for organized play in the state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan, but less support for free play as well as for the choice and initiative of children. Furthermore, integrated data also revealed that educators have a limited understanding of the potential of free and guided play, as well as their role in support of these types of play. Despite the educators' beliefs about the importance of play for children's development, it seems that subject-based traditional methods of direct instruction still prevail in the state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan.

### ***Data Organization and Presentation***

In the subsequent sections, the data was organized and presented in order to answer the main research question: "How is play supported in the state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan?" The survey and data findings were integrated and categorized by the following six research sub-questions:

1. How much freedom and flexibility do educators have in their teaching practices?
2. How do educators view play and its relation to learning?
3. How does the kindergarten environment provide for play?
4. What types of play are present in the kindergarten environment?
5. What is educators' role in supporting play and learning through play?
6. What opportunities for play are provided?

Some research sub-questions had several themes; therefore, those sub-questions were divided into several sub-sections with separate headings. For example, answering the first research sub-question about the perceived freedom and flexibility in educators' teaching practices involved the following themes: (a) content of the national standard; (b) methods and process; (c) resources and materials; (d) room design. Answering the second research sub-

question about educators' beliefs about play and learning through play required dividing the data into six themes: (a) associations with the word "play"; (b) definition of play; (c) educators' beliefs about play; (d) parents' opinions about play; (e) administration's support of play; (f) use of play for learning. Answering the third research sub-question about the play environment did not include any sub-sections since classroom observations were not possible due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Answering research sub-question number four about the types of play in the classroom included one sub-section: types of play missing/lacking. In the answer to the fifth research sub-question about the educator's role in play, no sub-sections were necessary. Answering the final research sub-question about provided opportunities for play required dividing the data into the following themes: (a) frequency and duration of playtime; (b) children's initiative and choice; (c) opinions about free play; and (d) outdoor play.

During the survey and interviews, the researcher discovered some additional unexpected data related to the research question and sub-questions, and that data was reflected in a separate section, consisting of the following themes: (a) kindergarten "direction"; (b) Kazakh language resources; (c) training needs; and (d) performances.

The first research sub-question concerned the extent to which educators felt free and flexible in their daily practices in relation to content, methods, resources and room design.

#### ***Answering Research Sub-question 1: Perceived Concerns with Freedom and Flexibility***

One of the first important questions to understand educators' perceptions of play revolved around the amount of freedom and flexibility that educators had in terms of planning and organizing their daily activities, their classroom space, and their time during the



day. The first theme in answering this research sub-question concerned the flexibility related to the use of content of the curriculum

**Content of the Curriculum.** Except for one educator, all the interviewees said that they followed the National Standard of Preschool Education. Most of them also acknowledged that there were broad themes, sub-themes and goals that they had to follow and achieve according to the standard, but they agreed that they had a fair amount of freedom and flexibility as well as opportunities to express their creativity:

Of course, there are no templates, there is a program, an educational program, but everything else comes from the teacher's creativity. We use the standard as the base, and select visual materials depending on our own creativity, our invention, so that it would be interesting... (Educator 1).

According to the National Standard of Preschool Education, there are five areas, which include Health, Communication, Arts, Cognition, Society. These serve not only as the basis of the content, but also as a guide for organizing zones in the classroom.

The majority of the educators mentioned broad cross-curricular themes that are given by the Department of Education for the educators to collectively choose the themes that they consider would be interesting to children. Some educators mentioned that they met before the start of the academic year to choose the cross-curricular themes for the entire year as a prospective plan. For example, if the cross-curricular theme is “kindergarten”, it may last up to one month, and each week has its own sub-theme, such as “kindergarten staff”, “toys in kindergarten”, “kindergarten building”, “kindergarten friends” and others. Some educators mentioned that they could choose these themes themselves; others said that the weekly sub-themes were also determined at the beginning of the year. Then educators could decide how

this sub-theme could be reflected in their daily activities in each area, for example, with the sub-theme “toys in Kindergarten”, in Mathematics, children would count toys, in Communication and Language, they would listen to a story about toys, in Arts and Crafts, they would make a toy, so that this sub-theme and the wider theme are discovered by children from various perspectives.

Only one specialist (music teacher) said that she was not satisfied with the content of the standard, and considered it inflexible because the programme specifies songs that children are to sing. She expressed her wish to be able to choose the songs according to her professional taste and children’s interests. In addition, the educator mentioned that there were certain “teacher guidebooks announced at the citywide pedagogical council as the ones against which the teachers’ activities would be checked”, and the teacher had to explain to the monitoring representative if these were not followed and why. This presence of monitoring and control from the external bodies suggests that educators’ freedom and flexibility is limited, and some of them openly admitted that they were not happy with that.

Overall, despite the fact that the majority of interviewed educators felt they had enough freedom and flexibility as far as the content of the curriculum was concerned, there were some educators who felt that their freedom was limited. The next theme was related to freedom and flexibility in teaching methods and process.

**Methods and Process.** In terms of teaching methods and process, educators differed in what they expressed regarding this. There were four educators who said that they had lessons by subject according to the standard, like at school, which would last from seven to thirty minutes, depending on the age of children. This suggests that although all the interviewees were selected as those who provided high support for play, not all of them

always used play as a tool for learning, preferring traditional direct instruction with some elements of didactic games. The educator who had the group of two-year-olds said that during their lessons, she would mostly demonstrate and describe something to the children. In addition, some educators said they would like to have more practical training in play-based teaching and learn to understand better how play can be incorporated into their lessons.

Two educators explained that apart from the lessons according to the standard, they organized additional didactic games to support children's learning. For example, one of the educators (Educator 5) created a training manual for the ECE teachers that suggested the creative use of colorful marbles, sujok balls and anti-stress toys with tiny grains, all of which she named as "unconventional methods" that develop children's fine motor skills, logic and contribute to their well-being.

These findings suggest that all interviewed educators have subject-based lessons that are supposed to lead children towards certain goals outlined in the National Standard. Some educators mentioned that they tried to teach these lessons through organized play; however, there were also those who said that they would like to have more training on how to incorporate play into their lessons.

The next theme presents some data on educators' freedom and flexibility in terms of resources and materials use.

**Resources and Materials.** The majority of the interviewed educators agreed that they were free to choose their own materials; however, some educators had materials provided by the administration. For example, Educator 3 said that the administration provided the materials for them to display in the room, which already does not suggest much choice or flexibility. However, others said that they had to look for the resources and materials

themselves, and this was not always a positive experience. For instance, Educator 4 mentioned that she had to prepare didactic materials for 25 children, and sometimes when she did not have enough time for that, she would organize the children into groups of four or five, and let them share, although it was preferable for each child to have their own. Therefore, she said that it would be useful if there were more materials available from her kindergarten administration.

Other educators said that there was so much variety of resources on the Internet, that the only things they needed was time, a printer and a laminator. There was also a mention of borrowing materials from other educators, and that “if the educator has worked for a long time, he would have materials” (Educator 8). The educator from the “ecological” kindergarten (see sub-section “kindergarten direction” below for explanation) also said that their materials had to be “updated” more often because they were mostly natural, such as leaves, for example. The only music teacher, who was interviewed, said that she did not have the resources that she needed, such as musical instruments and musical equipment such as a music center and a microphone.

Overall, there seems to be sufficient freedom and flexibility in the use of resources and materials, with some educators accepting these from the administration. However, in some cases, there seems to be concerns about the lack of materials and resources to choose from, leading to educators modifying their teaching activities or to putting a lot of effort into seeking or producing these resources themselves

The next theme explored the extent to which educators were free and have the flexibility to set up and decorate their classroom.

**Room Design.** As far as room design was concerned, there seemed to be some flexibility and freedom within a certain framework. Several educators said that their classroom had to reflect the five learning areas from the National Standard – Health, Communication, Arts, Cognition, and Society. Others just mentioned some zones, frequently mentioning play zone and study zone, which may suggest the dichotomy of work and play being present in some classrooms. For example, Educator 6 said that they had five zones – study zone, play zone, art zone, language zone and health zone, and she could set them up or decorate them as she wished, as well as add other zones if she decided so. She also mentioned that they held contests for the best room decoration among educators, in which they would also involve children, and were rewarded with certificates of achievement.

Overall, there seems to be a certain degree of freedom and flexibility in choosing the design and set up of the classroom, however, these are also limited by the National Standard framework.

**Summary of Answering Research Sub-Question 1.** To sum up, the findings on the first question about flexibility and freedom in terms of making decisions in their daily activities demonstrate that there is a framework set by the national standard, whereby the majority of educators, except for one, felt they had a certain amount of freedom and flexibility to exercise their creativity. This is an important point in understanding how play is supported by early childhood educators, because educators feeling limited in any such decisions may directly affect their support for play in their daily practices.

The next research sub-question looked at educators' beliefs about play and learning.

***Answering Research Sub-question 2: Educators' Beliefs about Play and Learning***

Answering the second research sub-question about educators' beliefs about play and learning through play required dividing the data into six themes: (a) associations with the word "play"; (b) definition of play; (c) educators' beliefs about play; (d) parents' opinions about play; (e) administration's support of play; (f) use of play for learning.

**Associations with the Word "Play".** When asked what was the first thing that came to mind when the early childhood educators heard the word "play", there was a wide range of answers. For each interviewee play had different associations. Educator 1 said:

Well, we live by play... I've been working in kindergarten for so many years - 31 years, and play is the main activity of children, and children develop only in play.

Children do not understand another language, so only in play we can explain to them easily... (Educator 1)

However, it should be noted that educators talked more about organized play, rather than free play. Educator 2 said that when she heard the word "play" she instantly thought of intellectual games, possibly because she has been specializing in them for the last few years ("Intellectum" board games). Educator 3 said that before she became a practitioner, she used to think of play as free play only. Now she associates play with development and learning, with playful learning activities coming to mind first upon hearing the word "play". Similarly, Educator 8 voiced her first associations as "freedom of thought, activity", however, she continued right away: "but at the same time, since I am a teacher, I think more of didactic play, that is, we learn by playing, not just play ... So, I think more of learning, development...".

Interestingly, it seems the first associations that came to mind to the interviewees were emotional – childhood, children, freedom, joy, interest, and relaxation. However, with

some of the educators, it seemed that their adult teacher logic intervened with these first thoughts, as if they were reminding themselves that they were educators and should associate play with structured activities and learning. The next theme integrated educators' definition of play.

**Definition of Play.** When asked to define play, more than half of the interviewed educators defined it as the main activity of children, and therefore some of them tried to use play as much as possible because it was easier for children to understand and learn through play. Educator 2 defined play as “an interesting tool for development” that no child would refuse. Two educators (3 and 5) added to their definition of play an element of revelation and disclosure by saying that it is often by watching children play that one can find out about the real child because in play, a child's talents and interests become apparent. For example, Educator 5, who had a group of two-year-olds, mentioned that sometimes a child labeled as “shy”, could become very different when at play. She also said that children needed more freedom:

In play, the child opens up, I think, when you give a little freedom to the child... For example, in our kindergarten, when children draw, we have certain rules – we sit down at the table, here's a piece of paper. No freedom. It would be great if we could provide a wall where children could draw and paint, so that children could express their mood, if there was a wall that could be easily cleaned... (Educator 5).

Despite the fact that Educator 6 defined play as “children's work”, there seemed to be no dichotomy between play and work, rather she seemed to be agreeing that play is what children do:

Play is a creative activity that develops both children and adults, and it never stops...

In childhood, it is play, and in adulthood, play turns into work, this is the definition of play I can give... For some reason, I connect play with future work, the child will work just as she played, this is from my personal experience... (Educator 6).

Therefore, it can be concluded that play was defined by the majority of educators as the main activity of children. The next set of questions explored educators' beliefs about play

**Educators' Beliefs about Play.** The first set of questions in the survey examined educators' beliefs about play. The majority of the educators agreed on the importance of play (n=97) and on the importance of providing materials (n=96) and plenty of time for children to play (n=87). Furthermore, the open-ended survey question about the role of play in kindergarten had 65 responses, out of which, half of the respondents mentioned that play had either an important or very important role (n=34), while others linked play with children's development (n=20) and mentioned play as being the main activity of preschool children (n=6).

Nevertheless, there was some disagreement when it came to questions regarding play in the context of academic learning. The statement "It is more important for kindergarten children to play more than completing academic tasks such as workbooks, worksheets, and similar activities during the day" had contradicting responses, with half of the respondents agreeing and more than a third disagreeing (see Table 5, Appendix F for details). This suggests that more than 30% of the respondents considered academic activities as being more important than play in kindergarten. Therefore, despite the fact that the majority of educators considered play to be important, when it came to choosing between the importance of play and academic activities, more than a third of the respondents thought that play was less important than academic learning.



During the interviews, when asked about the role of play in kindergarten, two educators said that play represented the “paramount” and the “main role”. Three educators said it had an “important” or “very important” role, and one educator said that play had a “special role” in kindergarten. Educator 2 said play in kindergarten had the role of a tool for children’s development. Educator 7 said that the role of play was that of providing emotional release and relaxation.

In short, it is important; because everything ... childhood is largely play; play activity of a preschooler is the main one at this age... When a child plays, then she develops in a balanced way, far and wide. (Educator 6)

It seems that educators on a whole understand the importance of play in kindergarten and use its potential to help children learn better. However, from the interview data, it is mostly perceived as structured organized play, rather than free play. It seems like the majority of educators believe that children learn more through organized play. Although, Educator 6 did mention that in her opinion, “any play develops the child”, the overarching opinion seems to be the following:

In kindergarten the role of play should be more instructional... There is also free play when they are left to their own devices, for play activities... But if this is an organized learning activity, it is done through play, and then the child learns the material better... (Educator 8).

To summarize this section, it appears that educators view the role of play as important in kindergarten; however, there seems to be differing opinions about the importance of play when it is opposed to academic activities such as filling out worksheets. Overall, educators appear to value organized play as a tool to enhance children’s learning.

For early childhood educators, to be able to support play in kindergarten, it is very important to work in tandem with parents; therefore, one of the interview questions asked about what parents thought of play. The next section summarizes parents' opinions about play as perceived by early childhood educators.

**Parents' Opinions about Play.** According to the interviewed educators, the majority of them were not satisfied with parents' understanding of play. Three educators mentioned that parents mostly prioritized school preparation, and that it was more important for them that their children learn how to read, count and write, especially in older groups:

Well, of course, first of all, they want their children to be able to count, write, know the basics, to prepare for school, but when in the afternoon you play with them ... not just let them sit with toys scattered, or puzzles or something else... but when you really work with them purposefully, they are very happy about it... (Educator 2)

Furthermore, another three educators said that parents saw play as frivolous, thinking that children "just played" in kindergarten. For example,

Parents sometimes do not understand that there are different kinds of play, that there are educational games, many parents think that children only play in kindergarten and do nothing else... They do not understand that even educational activities – they are also play-based... (Educator 8)

However, there were also two educators, who said that parents were supportive of play and were always willing to help with resources. For example, Educator 5 talked about parents who made a game out of a card box for children to play with. Educator 2 said that some parents offered to bring and share some games for children to play.

Therefore, it can be concluded in this section, that although some parents are supportive of play, the majority prioritize school preparation and do not have the right understanding of the importance of play, as well as the use of play for children's learning. This may suggest that there needs to be more communication between educators and parents to increase parents' awareness about the importance of play. The next section summarizes the findings on the perceived support for play by kindergarten administration.

**Administration's Support for Play.** All the interviewed educators, except one, considered that the administration was providing plenty of support for play, as they were also educators and understood the importance of play for children's development. According to the educators, their administration encouraged them to use a play-based learning and teaching approach in their daily practice, with methodologists observing classroom activities, providing feedback on them as well as the design of the room, and choosing age-appropriate materials and resources for the classroom. Furthermore, the head of one of the kindergartens chose "play-based learning" as the kindergarten's "direction" (see kindergarten "direction" sub-section for an explanation):

Since they are all educators, like us, I think they always agree, first, that's in their own interest, because the rating of the kindergarten, the development of the child, all these points, monitoring, the quality of knowledge, this all goes first to them... And what can all of this be achieved with? With the help of good games, classrooms that develop..., why not? On the contrary, they are happy, they seem to be in solidarity, they understand that play is the most important thing for a child... (Educator 2)

Only one specialist teacher was not satisfied with her current administration's support, as there were almost no resources that could be used either in the lessons, or for play. She compared her experience with the kindergarten where she used to work, saying that in that

kindergarten, she received strong support from the administration, including the resources, and this enabled her to use a more playful approach and to be more motivated than right now.

Overall, it can be concluded that the administration is also supportive of play and encourages educators to use play-based methods. However, in some cases there seemed to be some need for additional support in terms of providing resources and training. The final subsection presents data on how educators use play for children's learning.

**Use of Play for Learning.** The results of the survey showed that the majority of educators agreed that they use play as a vehicle for meeting learning standards (n=96). However, when it came to play observations, the educators thought that some areas of child development could be observed and assessed through the child's play, whereas others could not. For example, the fact that the majority of educators chose "social and emotional development" (n=75) could suggest that educators observe children during free play and assess their social and emotional skills when children negotiate the rules or react emotionally to certain play situations. Fewer educators indicated scientific knowledge and skills (n=21) and music development (n=28) as areas that cannot be observed during play, which may suggest that either children are not engaged in these types of play, or that educators are not aware of ways to organize and observe some types of play, as well as how to assess some skills during these types of play (See Table 6, Appendix F).

When asked about the primary role of play in their kindergarten classroom, the majority of respondents (n=74 out of 97) saw it as "a means to integrate social, emotional, moral, and intellectual development goals" (Table 7, Appendix F). Furthermore, when questioned about the relationship of play to learning in the kindergarten context, almost 80% of the respondents (n=76 out of 97) saw play and learning as complementary and that they had to go together, so that children learn through play and demonstrate what they have

learned through play (Table 8, Appendix F). Therefore, there seems to be a consensus about the important role of play for the development and learning of children.

During the interviews, educators were asked to provide examples of how play supports children's learning, and they all came up with examples from their unique experiences. In general, all the educators really attempted to add some playful elements into their activities.

For example, Educators 1 and 8 mentioned a friendly character (a doll or a book character) who would usually pay a visit and ask for children's help. With older children, Educator 1 frequently used quests and treasure hunts, where children needed to solve some riddles to get to the next stage of the quest, and they seemed to love the challenge and developing the ability to overcome it: "Play gives them wings... They get the feeling that without them... no one can manage..." (Educator 1).

Likewise, according to Educator 8, it was sufficient to add some playful element to the learning activity at the beginning of it in order to bring out the children's interest and motivate them to fulfill the activity. In these cases, the children became driven by emotions and wanted to prove that they knew everything.

Educator 2 provided examples of learning through logical games – puzzles, mosaics, and the didactic play materials of certain authors like Cuisenaire rods, which are sticks used for counting, and Dienes blocks for building structures, and Voskobovich play materials and games used for learning various concepts. Other educators also mentioned these authors' materials in various contexts, so it seemed like these were commonly used in the context of state kindergartens.

In contrast, Educator 6, who had an older group of 5-6 year-old children, said that they had fewer play-based activities. She described a mathematics game where they were learning the number “six”, and the children were given a picture of a store with various groceries in it and had to imagine going to that store and finding a number of groceries that corresponded to number six in the picture:

Our classes are held in a not very playful way, more traditional, but I try to include games, where possible... I cannot say that I do it all the time, but I try to include them because from my own experience when you incorporate play, children become more interested, when you tell them "Let's play now!", they become interested, and if you say "Now we will learn..." they... react, but not as enthusiastically... (Educator 6).

She also mentioned that their “lessons” last for 30 minutes, and they take a physical break or play a game in the middle of the lesson, after 15 minutes, and the children also have a 10-minute break between the “lessons”.

Overall, it seemed like all the educators tried to incorporate play in the children’s daily activities. However, the emphasis was made on learning new skills and knowledge rather than playing because the teachers seemed to use play to make learning activities more appealing and interesting to children, rather than letting children play and learn in play.

### ***Answering Research Sub-question 3: Play Environment***

There were three survey questions that asked about the environment for play, specifically on the sufficiency of space, materials and the organization of play areas.

Overall, the majority of respondents agreed that their classroom environment (room design, furniture, layout, etc.) provided adequate space for play activities (n=80), a range of interesting materials in ample quantities for children to use during play activities (n=78), and

clearly defined and organized areas (ex: blocks area, role play area, tables for drawing) to support play activities (n=89) (Table 9, Appendix F). However, there were 10-13% of the respondents who disagreed that there was sufficient space, materials and clearly defined areas to support play activities. These results may suggest some differences in the supply of the materials, as well as in the number of children in different kindergartens (for example, if there are too many children, there would not be sufficient space and materials for everyone).

#### ***Answering Research Sub-question 4: Types of Play***

Both the survey and interview questions were set to understand the types of play that are either present or absent in the state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan. Nine broad categories of play (adapted from Miller & Almon, 2009), were presented for educators to choose from with some examples and explanations offered in the brackets.

The survey results have shown that out of all the types of play that took place in educators' classrooms, the most prevalent answers involved playing with the arts (n=62), small motor play (n=60), and language play (n=55), with the least number of respondents choosing make-believe play (n=30) and symbolic play (n=28) (See Table 10, Appendix F for more details). One of the important things to note here is that art-based activities are mostly teacher-led and are often whole-group activities where the teacher shows an example of how to do a certain work of art, and children simply follow step-by-step instructions. Interestingly, those types of play that are mostly child-led, such as mastery play, make-believe and symbolic play have the least number of responses, which could suggest that there are fewer opportunities for such types of play. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

During the interviews, the types of play that are present and absent were discussed in further detail as well as how various types of play support children's learning. Most educators thought they had many types of play in their kindergarten groups, and they felt that they all

supported children's learning and development (see Table 11, Appendix F). Educator 1 identified several types of play:

In kindergarten, there are all types of play, everything, there are board games, we also play word games, with pictures, there are didactic games, there is socio-dramatic play, there are attributes for physically active play, there is creative and arts play, we have all types of play at kindergarten (Educator 1).

According to Educator 8, board games developed diligence, children's numerical skills, logical thinking and reasoning, as well as fine motor skills. Likewise, Educator 5, who worked with younger children, mentioned mostly play that developed motor skills:

We have puppet characters made out of felt, children put them on their hands and play roles and show fairy tales. There are sensory games like playing with lids and distinguishing colors, which also develops fine motor skills, sorting them in certain order, for example, by size, sorting white and red beans by putting them into two different bowls... Music is given through dancing playfully... In music lessons, a child sings songs... first we sit in places, then we get up, we try to find our places, and so we play... (Educator 5).

A music teacher mentioned that they played both didactic and musical games. During didactic games, children would learn about the musical instruments or composers, and during the musical games they would learn about speed and rhythm, as well as movements and beats to the music. They would also work on their pronunciation and articulation, and build up their vocabulary with the help of songs.

For socio-dramatic play, many educators mentioned or showed ready-made sets and zones such as a kitchen, shop, beauty salon, doctor's office. Furthermore, Educator 3



mentioned that socio-dramatic play supports children's learning about the world and the development of non-academic skills:

If you use a socio-dramatic play, then the child loosens up, becomes more relaxed, she also develops communication skills, the child begins to learn to listen or express her opinion if she does not like something...(Educator 3).

In addition, Educator 1 talked about symbolic play where children use objects to replace the things they do not have, for example, using a branch as a thermometer or leaves symbolizing money, and this developed children's imagination and creativity: "And sometimes, for example, when the child's imagination is not enough to realize this plan, then the teacher helps her."

Overall, in the educators' view, there seemed to be various types of play present in the kindergarten, supporting children's learning, however, there were also some types that were missing or lacking. The next sub-section will present these types of play.

**Types of Play and Resources Missing or Lacking.** When asked about kinds of play or games that were lacking in their kindergarten groups, there was a wide range of answers, which were categorized into several types of resources (see Table 11, Appendix F). In some cases, one item fits into several categories, for example, it could be both classified as gross motor as well as opportunities for imaginative play. For instance, Educator 5, who worked with two-year-olds, said that it would be helpful to have walls available for their art – for children to draw and paint, as well as play with different materials, using Velcro that they could attach to the wall. She also mentioned that since children in her group just started walking confidently, it would be useful to have some equipment for gross motor skills developments, such as wooden stairs for them to go up and down.

Educator 2, who worked with special needs children, said that it would be great to have Montessori materials because not all the groups are equipped with them. She considered these materials helpful for the special needs children. She also mentioned that it would be helpful to have a special “sensory room” where all kinds of play therapy would be possible, such as color therapy, sand therapy, art therapy: “It is for the child’s development, the child can relax there, there are hyperactive children, they can be brought into this room, and they begin to relax there, just like we take kids to the sand therapy...” (Educator 2).

Educator 3 talked about multi-purpose wooden planks that she saw during the visits to other kindergartens:

There are such blocks, wooden planks, and children can build houses, bridges, various structures from them... They said that they have 200 pieces in a set, and for one group, let's say, one set is enough, they work there according to a template, first easier structures are built, then they become more complicated... (Educator 3).

Educator 1 and 4 wished for more technologically advanced play: “It seems to me that everything else is available... Interactive games [are needed], I think, the world is changing, and there are all kinds of applications there...” (Educator 1), whereas Educator 4 mentioned what she saw during the professional development workshop in another kindergarten - a room with computers where children could build and programme Lego robots. She also said that they used to have Robotics as a paid extra-curricular activity, but it was canceled because of the quarantine due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She expressed an interest in learning the basics of Robotics to be able to teach children this subject herself without inviting any specialists from outside. Other than that, she was confident they had plenty of games and types of play in their kindergarten group, and that there simply would not be enough space to accommodate more.

Educator 6 considered that they had all types of play, and they were enough. She was against using electronic devices such as tablets and computers for children in kindergarten as she considered them not appropriate for their age.

The music teacher said that she would love to develop children’s theater. She mentioned a colorful “music floor” where children could step on various colors and make different sounds and musical books to use in their activities.

Educator 8 said that they did not have chess, but that she would love to teach children how to play chess. She also said that their kindergarten was 50 years old, and that the material base has not been updated properly for a long time. She gave an example of the interactive touch board that they only had in the music hall, not in the groups. Furthermore, she said that they needed new technologies, and she considered it normal for children to use them as long as the time was limited and the content was controlled by adults. In addition,

Educator 9 mentioned that they had interactive touch boards in only the oldest groups (school preparation groups of 5-6 year-olds), and for this reason they moved groups every year, since it was easier to move the group rather than dismantle the equipment. She also mentioned that the “Intellectum” board games were not available to all children as it was a paid extra-curricular activity that was quite expensive. The other toy Educator 9 wished they had was a Lego constructor, as they did not have any. She also explained that in 2020, there were serious budget cuts because of the pandemic, and the only expenses that were allowed were teachers’ salaries and utilities.

Overall, several educators mentioned that they did not have a sufficient supply of the latest technologies, including broadband Internet connection, interactive boards, computers for programming the Lego robots, and tablets for interactive games. However, Educator 6 was against children at this age using electronic devices, considering them more harmful than useful. Other types of play that were mentioned as missing or lacking were: sensory play, board games, materials for fine motor skills and construction play (Lego blocks and wooden blocks), equipment for gross motor play (such as stairs, for example) and resources for art play (art wall, theater, music floor, and music books).

The next research sub-question was concerned with the role of the educator in children’s play.

#### ***Answering Research Sub-question 5: Educator’s Role in Play***

Both the survey and interview questions explored what educators thought about their role in children’s play. To the question on how they prepared *before play* in their classroom, more than half of the respondents answered they provided materials (n=52), more than a third developed rules for play (n=37) and provided space (n=35) (See Table 12, Appendix F). During play, more than half of the educators were present, observing and accepting play

(n=53); about a half of the educators helped to resolve conflict (n=48) and initiated play by making material suggestions (n=48) (Table 13, Appendix F). Overall, there seems to be strong support during play from about 30-50% of the educators. However, this suggests that the other half leaves children to play without much support on their part. After play experiences, the majority of educators said they talked about and discussed play with children (n=71), more than a third said they documented play via photos, videos, or document displays (n=38); and less than a third talked about and discussed the next play session with children (n=26) (see Table 14, Appendix F).

When children were engaged in play, what many educators chose as their most frequent roles were those of observing children, directing tasks, managing materials, and helping to keep order during play. According to the majority of educators, they engaged with children in play activities the least often, wondering aloud and posing questions to promote reasoning. Overall, it seemed like the educator's role was very active before, during and after play. However, this may also contribute to the fact that children have less initiative and freedom in their play.

Among those interviewed, two educators identified their role as a "guide", who showed how to play or explained the rules, who supported children as they played, gave them direction, and provided prompts and suggestions on how their play can be developed. They also thought that their role as an observer was important. Additionally, Educator 3 said that her role depended on the children: with some children she would have a leading role, with others, she would observe and support when needed. The majority of the interview participants highlighted the importance of an involved educator. "A child becomes more interested when an adult plays with him. Even at home we ask parents to complete tasks together and play with the child" (Educator 3).

Likewise, Educator 4 said that she played with the younger children more than with the older children, since the latter could distribute their roles among each other and play themselves, except when there was a new kind of play that needed to be explained:

For example, when we stage a fairy tale, first, we [teachers] explain and show everything ourselves, that's the very first time; the second time they can already do it themselves, and the third time they already fulfill our roles, for example, the author's role, and they play the roles on their own... There are certain stages like this...(Educator 4).

Nevertheless, Educator 6, who had the oldest group of 5-6-year-olds, thought that educators should let children play and not intervene too frequently:

The educator or teacher, of course, must support children's play, but not too often get involved with children in their play... It is preferable that children play themselves. Only if conflicts arise that cannot be resolved without adults, only then an adult can help, so mostly children play by themselves... (Educator 6)

Educator 9 echoed her colleagues in that her role was in using play as a tool for children's learning, because, in her opinion, this was the only way to teach them something, since due to their age and physiology, children could not focus their attention on something or listen to the teacher for too long.

Almost all the interview participants indicated that they would intervene in children's play if they saw there was a conflict; however, there were some who said that it depended on the situation and on the children; they would observe each case and then decide, whether the intervention was necessary. Overall, it was clear from the integrated data that almost all educators considered their role in play as an important one and that could be characterized as

“an involved teacher”, whose involvement would vary depending on the situation and the children playing. Nevertheless, it is important to ensure that the engagement of educator engagement does not hinder the child’s initiative and freedom. This leads to the final research sub-question that seems to be crucial in all the findings as they concern children’s choice, initiative and free play.

### ***Answering Research Sub-question 6: Opportunities for Play***

The final research sub-question was concerned with opportunities for play provided to children in terms of frequency, duration of playtime, initiative (adult-led or child-initiated) and choice.

**Frequency and Duration of Playtime.** Almost all the survey respondents, except one, said that they incorporated learning through play in their teaching practice. More than half of the respondents (n=58 out of 90) said they integrated playful learning in their classroom four or more times each week and a third of the respondents used playful learning two or three times each week (Table 15, Appendix F). This suggests that more than half of the survey respondents integrated play in their daily teaching practice. Nevertheless, a substantial number of educators did not incorporate play in children’s learning every day (approximately 30%).

As for the duration of each play period, on a typical day, according to more than half of the survey respondents (n=53) each play period on average lasted 15-30 minutes and only four respondents said that it lasted more than 45 minutes (see Table 16, Appendix F). However, it is important to point out that, as it was discovered later, during the interviews, some teachers may have understood “the play period” as a lesson period that integrated playful learning, which could last from 10 to 30 minutes depending on the age group. Other educators may have understood this as a free play period which could last from 30 minutes to

1.5 hour in the classroom or outdoors. Therefore, for future uses this question should be clarified. Nevertheless, it can already be seen from Table 11 (Appendix F), that according to the responses, there were more play periods that were shorter, rather than longer, in duration.

The next theme synthesizes data gathered about children's choice and initiative.

**Children's Initiative and Choice.** More than 55% of the survey respondents answered that in their classroom, play was a blend of child-initiated play and adult-guided experiences (n=51 out of 91), whereas almost one third of the educators said that it was mostly adult-guided (i.e. teacher-created) playful learning activities (see Table 17, Appendix F). However, from the interviews, it would later become clear that play activities were more often teacher-initiated and teacher-led rather than child-directed.

The majority of the interviewed educators said that children had a choice; however, when adding in total how much choice children actually had, it seemed very limited, both in time and variety.

Children mostly had a choice in the afternoon, after their midday nap, if they did not have any additional extra-curricular activities. For example, Educator 8 mentioned that in the afternoon, they used to have extra-curricular activities; however, they were all canceled due to the COVID-19 quarantine regime, and therefore, if they did not have a choreography lesson, the children were free to choose what to play. They would usually choose from the board games or pretend play sets available in their classrooms, or some educators would ask them what games they wanted to play and children would choose.

In the first half of the day there are lessons, then they can go outside or to the swimming pool, but after a nap there are no more lessons, and after an afternoon snack there is free activity. If the weather does not permit going outside, there are



corners that are equipped: girls have hairdressing salons, small pretend play sets, purchased from the “Polesie” brand, colorful, made of good quality plastic, and so girls can get together and play a beauty salon; boys can play with cars and blocks, or assemble a constructor, some children can sit down and play board games... (Educator 9).

Other educators mentioned that the children could choose from the theater plays, songs, games that they already knew – which play to stage, which song to sing, which game to play. However, this again suggests a limited choice and the educator’s lead.

Furthermore, when it came to whole-class activities, all the children were expected to participate; they did not have the choice to quit or not to participate in the first place: “It is demanded from our educator that every child is involved in the lesson” (Educator 3). When asked about the situation when a child chose not to be involved in children’s play and observe others instead, Educator 1 said that she would look to see whether the child genuinely did not want to play or was simply being shy to join the others. She added that if she could “see it from the child’s eyes that he or she wanted to join”, she would help the child to be integrated into the play.

Additionally, Educator 3, who was also a methodologist and a trainer at a professional development center mentioned that as a trainer on the updated curriculum, she trained the ECE teachers, and one of the important points she was trying to get across was about providing choice to the children:

We [trainers] compare how the teacher works in a traditional way, and we propose our own version so that the teacher gives the child more opportunities to show

independence, so that the child has more choice in anything, in play, in lessons ... But many educators do not do it... (Educator 3).

Overall, there seemed to be some choice available for the children, but it was limited in terms of not only time and variety of materials, but also regarding the choice to participate. It seems like the children only had a choice during free play periods or from the educator's suggestions (like the choice of theater plays or songs), which again is a limited choice. Therefore, it can be concluded from this section that opportunities for play are limited both in terms of time, child initiative and choice. This theme is linked to the subject of free play, when children can make choices about play and will be discussed in the next section.

**Opinions about Free Play.** In the survey, there was one question about free play as an appropriate method of instruction. That question provided a definition of free play as play that offers children the opportunity to choose where they play, what they play with and who they play with. Less than a half of survey respondents (n=44) thought that free play was an appropriate method of instruction for children from birth to Grade 3 (see Table 18, Appendix F). There were very few respondents who considered free play as an appropriate method of instruction before the child turned one or after the child started Grade 1. These findings may suggest that infancy and school are not associated with free play. Furthermore, these results may also suggest that educators are not aware of how children of various ages can learn during free play and how that learning can be assessed.

Some educators talked about the benefits of free play such as the development of imagination and social skills during the interviews:

Free play is good for communication, for socialization, for children as a community, I think, because children start to play by their own rules... They have some agreements

with each other, there are those who do not want to play... others want to play by their own rules, that is, they do not have any specific instructions, like, for example, in other learning games, they have a free form of play, it is more... there are no tasks like you need to score this many points... no, they play freely... someone can come up with his own game and play it... And there is always a leader and followers... there you can already see children – who is a leader, who is neutral, who does not give in, who is... there are children who would like it, and there are children who say "No, I don't like it, I won't play" and no one will force them... In other words, it is for the child to decide... (Educator 2).

She also mentioned that since at that moment children were preparing for the New Year celebration, they had to rehearse songs and dance, and that took time from their free play period as well.

The other recurring association with free play was that those educators who allowed children to play freely were mostly young, inexperienced, or even irresponsible, because experienced teachers would usually occupy children with some organized form of activity after the required lessons are finished. There was also an assumption that if the administration were to observe an educator's classroom and saw children playing freely, it would be considered as the educator not doing her job well.

Interestingly, Educator 3 did not think that there should be much time for free play as in her opinion, it was sometimes difficult to get children together and get them to focus on the learning activity after a free play session. However, she did recognize that some children were transformed when they were playing freely, therefore, she concluded that it depended on the children, that perhaps some children needed more free play than others. When

comparing her experience to the international one, she agreed that there was less free play in our context, and she linked that to the demands placed on educators, as they were encouraged to make sure all the children participated in the activity:

There, they have free play. There, children do whatever they want. If one wants to draw, one can go and draw, or if they want to take something... or maybe even not participate in the class, sit and silently play on the side... They have no prohibitions for children there, they do what they want. But our educator is forced to gather everyone, conduct a lesson, just like in a class... Even when educators conduct open lessons, if the child does not join the lesson, then this will be a minus for the educator, the educator must involve all children in every possible way... It is demanded from our educator that every child is involved in the lesson (Educator 3).

Just like her colleagues, Educator 4 said that children only had time to play freely in the early evening, which is after 5 pm. Given that parents had to pick up their children before 6 pm, this left about 30 minutes to one hour of free play. Furthermore, Educator 4, an experienced educator and a methodologist, seemed to be confused, almost scared, by the question about free play, suggesting that children had to follow the educator's plan:

I don't even know... It's not clear... what if the child wants to play something that doesn't correspond to the topic that we are learning? Indeed, they can offer something completely different... after all, they have so many ideas... (Educator 4).

This comment suggests that educators are either not aware of or cannot afford the concept of the emergent curriculum, which is based on the assumption that children's learning is more efficient when curriculum experiences take into account children's interests, strengths, needs, and realities (University of Toronto Early Learning Centre, 2021).

In addition, Educator 5, who worked with two-year-olds, explained that one of the main reasons for less free play and mostly organized play was that “children did not know how to play freely”, that some would be too loud and noisy, others would run around, and this seemed to be unacceptable in her eyes. Another point she made was about the lack of resources to play freely, that if one child took one toy, the other child would want the same toy and they would start fighting over it.

In contrast, Educator 6, who worked with 5-6-year-olds, considered that the children in her group did not have sufficient time for free play because of the full schedule they had:

Not enough [time], because basically, there are lessons, there are extra-curricular activities, in addition to the activities that we conduct, there is music, physical education, they come, they conduct these lessons, then the extra-curricular activities begin - choreography, school preparation... (Educator 6)

Although she did mention that the preschool curriculum was revised and updated with fewer academic hours and lower requirements, for example, in the older version 5-6 year-olds were required to count until 20, now they only needed to know the numbers until 20.

Confirming these views, there were also some opinions expressed among the responses to the open-ended survey questions about the lack of time for play: “It is necessary to give more time for play, since this is the key moment in the process of child development”.

Likewise, Educator 7, the music specialist, said that her subject did not allow for free play because it was limited in time and resources. She mentioned that her time with the youngest children (two-year-olds) was limited to seven minutes, therefore, there was no way she would let children play freely during this time.

Just like Educator 5, Educator 8 commented that free play depended on the level of a child's cognitive skills and imagination; if these were at a high level, then the child could play well independently, but if not, the child would not be able to play independently or their play would be "primitive", and therefore they would need a teacher or peers to guide them in play. She also noticed that in free play, children usually got together according to the level of their development because they were drawn to each other, and these children did not want to play with those who were at a lower level of development because they would get bored quickly.

Educator 9, echoing Educators 5 and 8, also mentioned that the cases where children could not occupy themselves and play independently were becoming more frequent; therefore, in her opinion, it was better to have more organized play rather than free play. However, she also recognized that free play develops children's cognitive skills, creativity, and language, and that through free play one can observe and learn about the children's level of social development, leadership potential and levels of aggression.

Overall, there seemed to be a consensus among the interviewed educators that free play was not as prioritized as organized activities in the kindergarten. Furthermore, it seemed to be treated according to the leftover principle – if children were free from lessons, extra-curricular activities and performance rehearsals, and there was nothing left to do, then they could be left alone to play. This meant that out of nine or ten hours that children spent at a full-day state kindergarten (from 8-9am to 6pm), they had from 30 to a maximum of 1-1.5 hours of free activity, mostly in the evening, provided there were no additional activities that had been planned. In addition, some interview participants linked the involvement of children in free play to the educator's level of experience or responsibility. Moreover, free play, according to the educators' perspectives, often suggested that children were left to play

without any intervention, except for the need to resolve conflicts. Frequently, free play occurred outdoors; therefore, outdoor play will be discussed in the next section.

**Outdoor Play.** When asked about outdoor play, most interviewed educators mentioned that during the winter months, it was less frequent and dependent on weather conditions. Children would only go outside if the temperature was above minus 15 degrees Celsius, and even then, they would only have 20-30 minutes outside. Some educators said that during summer, children would play outside up to 1-1.5 hours.

When asked about whether children played freely outside, the majority of answers were that it was both organized and free play. For example, Educator 2 said that they first played some “traditional” games together, such as catch-up games or cat and mouse, and then the children would be free to play as they liked. She also mentioned that children often brought their own toys from home, and they would ask if they could play with them and take them out of their bags and play with each other. For instance, girls would take out their dolls and play together, and boys preferred to run with a ball.

In addition, Educator 9 said that since she was working with special needs children, it was difficult to organize a play activity with all the children involved, so they mostly played freely outside. As mentioned above, some educators did not consider they were doing their job well if they did not organize activities outside. Likewise, Educator 3 related the following about outdoor play: “Outside there is mostly free play, although it should be organized play”.

Overall, considering the weather conditions during the winter in Nur-Sultan, for several months, the children spent little time outdoors. Although the majority of educators thought that there should be organized play outside as well, they also admitted that children

mostly played freely outdoors. However, again, the time and opportunities for outdoor play were limited.

### ***Unexpected Findings***

During the study, there were some unexpected findings still related to the research question. These will be briefly outlined in this section and comprise kindergarten direction and comments from educators gathered from the open-ended survey questions, such as a need for more materials in the Kazakh language and more training.

**Kindergarten “Direction”.** Additional information obtained during the interviews was about the “directions” of kindergartens. There were two educators who mentioned that their kindergartens had a certain “direction”. As it was explained, the Head of the kindergarten could choose this direction. For example, one kindergarten had an “ecological” direction, which meant that they encouraged educators to use the natural materials such as leaves, rocks, and pine cones in their activities with children, as well as explaining to children about the importance of preserving the planet, using resources responsibly and recycling. The other kindergarten had the direction of “playful learning”, where all the educators were encouraged to use play-based learning and teaching in their daily activities.

**Kazakh Language Resources.** The last open-ended survey questions asked about any additional comments that teachers wanted to add. Among them were some specific suggestions about play that would develop the Kazakh language, with the use of toys and language games, as well as general comments such as: “It is necessary to provide the kindergarten with play materials.”

**Training Needs.** There was also one comment that sounded like a question: “According to the updated programme, we learned about three types of play: (a) under the



guidance of a teacher; (b) structured play; (c) free play. However, the course did not specify whether these types of play should be played at the same time when we give a task or at different times". The last comment demonstrates that although educators have completed some professional development training, it seems like some educators could benefit from additional training on play and play-based learning.

**Performances.** Another unexpected topic that was discussed during the interviews was the role of the performances that children prepared during the year, and some had up to ten performances, that is almost each month, for which they had to rehearse, and that took quite a lot of time from their free play period. This could potentially be a topic for further research.

## Summary

The data in this chapter was organized and presented in order to answer the main research question: "How is play supported in state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan?" the survey and data findings were integrated and categorized by the following six research sub-questions:

1. How much freedom and flexibility do educators have in their teaching practices?
2. How do educators view play and its relation to learning?
3. How does the kindergarten environment provide for play?
4. What types of play are present in kindergarten environments?
5. What is the educators' role in supporting play and learning through play?
6. What opportunities for play are provided?

Some research sub-questions had several themes; therefore, those sub-questions were divided into several sub-sections with separate headings. For example, answering the first research sub-question about the perceived freedom and flexibility in educators' teaching

practices involved the following themes: (a) content of the national standard; (b) methods and process; (c) resources and materials; (d) room design. Answering the second research sub-question about educators' beliefs about play and learning through play required dividing data into six themes: (a) associations with the word "play"; (b) definition of play; (c) educators' beliefs about play; (d) parents' opinions about play; (e) administration's support of play; (f) use of play for learning. Answering the third research sub-question about the play environment did not include any sub-sections since classroom observations were not possible due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Answering research sub-question number four about the types of play in the classroom included one sub-section - types of play missing/lacking. In the answer to the fifth research sub-question about educator's role in play, no sub-sections were necessary. Answering the final research sub-question about providing opportunities for play required dividing the data into the following themes: (a) frequency and duration of playtime; (b) children's initiative and choice; (c) opinions about free play; and (d) outdoor play.

During the survey and interviews, the researcher discovered some additional unexpected data related to the research question and sub-questions, and that data was reflected in a separate section, consisting of the following themes: (a) kindergarten "direction"; (b) Kazakh language resources; (c) training needs; and (d) performances.

## **Conclusion**

The data from the survey and interviews was synthesized according to six research sub-questions. These synthesized findings suggest that there is plenty of support for organized play in state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan, but less support for free play as well as for children's choice and initiative. Furthermore, the integrated data also revealed that educators have a limited understanding of the potential of free and guided play, as well as

their role in support of these types of play. Despite educators' beliefs about the importance of play for children's development, it seems like the subject-based traditional methods of direct instruction are prevalent in the state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan. The next chapter will discuss these findings and how they relate to the reviewed literature.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This research study investigated the support for play in state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, attempting to understand how early childhood educators' freedom and flexibility in their daily teaching practices, their beliefs about play and learning, play environment, types of play, perceived educator's role and opportunities provided for play can support meaningful play experiences.

This chapter discusses and evaluates the findings of the study in relation to research literature on play. Numbers were used to protect the identity of participants and their students. While Chapter 4 with data analysis and findings, provided a detailed analysis of the participants' responses, this chapter considers how the provided support for play relates to the wider research. Findings, organized by research sub-question, are discussed in relation to the literature.

### **Discussion of the Results**

Apart from online survey data, the nine interview participants provided rich data in response to the sub-questions of the main research question: "How is play supported in the state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan?" This section discusses the major findings in relation to the wider research literature. The discussion is organized by the six research sub-questions: educators' freedom and flexibility in their teaching practices, educators' beliefs about play and learning, the role of the educator in play, play environment, types of play, and

opportunities provided for play. Some of the sub-questions contain several components and others do not, depending on the richness of the findings and their connection to the literature. Furthermore, the order of some sub-questions was reversed to allow for a more logical flow of the discussion.

### ***Educators' Freedom and Flexibility***

From the answers of the interviewed educators, it has become clear that although it seemed that there was sufficient flexibility and freedom within the framework of the National Standard in terms of content, materials and room layout, there were also limitations.

For example, the fact that there were cross-curricular themes and sub-themes that educators of a particular kindergarten agreed to follow throughout the year meant that educators were limited in following individual children's interests and questions. This contradicts the literature from the University of Toronto regarding the concept of the emergent curriculum, which is based on the assumption that children's learning is more efficient when curriculum experiences take into account children's interests, strengths, needs, and realities (University of Toronto Early Learning Centre, 2021, para. 2).

In addition, some educators mentioned that they did not have enough materials or time to prepare didactic materials, which suggests that this also limits their flexibility. Furthermore, the set-up of five fixed zones, as outlined in the National Standard, may also limit space in the room as well as educators' creativity and motivation to add other zones. In addition, pressure to reach academic goals outlined in the National Standard may add to this lack of freedom and flexibility. This can be linked to research by Lynch (2015) that found that many educators did not include play in their teaching practices because the time would be taken away from the activities mandated by the standards.

To conclude this section, it can be said that limited freedom and flexibility in daily practices of early childhood educators may lead to limiting play, despite their positive beliefs about the importance of play. The next research sub-question sought to understand educators' beliefs about play and its relationship to learning.

### ***Educators' Beliefs about Play and Learning***

This section discusses how educators' beliefs about play and learning relate to the research literature.

**Association with the Word "Play".** The majority of the interviewed educators associated play with childhood, freedom, creativity, imagination, fun, relaxation. However, critical theorists of play, such as Grieshaber and McArdle (2011) would disagree that play is always fun and fair. The fact that educators in this thesis study mostly associated play with something positive may suggest that they are not aware of alternative theories of play, such as proposed by Fleer (2013), including critical and post-structuralist theories of play. This potential lack of theoretical knowledge was also reflected in the definitions of play, discussed in the next sub-section.

**Definition of Play.** The majority of the educators in this thesis study defined play as a child's main activity in the early years, and it sounded like the definition that they had learned in their Soviet-based pre-service training. Interestingly, Vygotsky (1966) in his work on play and its role in the mental development of the child, said: "It seems to me that from the point of view of development, play is not the predominant form of activity, but is, in a certain sense, the leading line of development in the preschool years" (p. 62). This may suggest that educators' understanding of play may be incomplete or insufficiently deep. However, according to the participants, parents' understanding of play should be expanded as well, as discussed below.

**Parents' Opinions about Play.** More than half of the interviewed educators thought that parents did not have the right understanding of play in the kindergarten, dismissing it and not seeing it as a way for their children to learn and develop. Educators also said that many parents saw the role of kindergarten in preparing their children for school, in teaching them how to read, count and write. It also seemed that some educators felt that their efforts of integrating play in children's learning were not valued by parents because of this misconception of play. Similarly, Moyles (1989) commented on this: "Teachers frequently put the fact that parents do not appear to value play activities in the curriculum..." (p. 11).

Furthermore, one could argue that this pressure from parents about school preparation, both on educators and children, could be partially explained by the wider trend of early childhood academization, which in turn was caused by the global educational reform movement (GERM), which "promotes competition, choice, testing and privatization" as noted by Sahlberg, (2013, para. 8), resulting in rushing their children's development and attempting to prepare them for school the earlier, the better. On the other hand, one comparison study conducted by Parmar et al. (2004) found that Asian-American parents, in contrast to European-American parents, preferred early academic learning over play. Therefore, parents' beliefs about the importance of play could also be linked to cultural context. The next section will discuss administration's support as perceived by educators.

**Administration's Support for Play.** Almost all of the interviewed educators, except one, believed that they had sufficient support from the administration, because they were also educators and understood the importance of play for children's development. However, it could be also argued that the administration expected from educators what was in turn expected from the administrators by the representatives of the Ministry of Education in the National Standard, which keeps being updated to reflect the international best practices in

education, based on OECD recommendations, as suggested by Needham (2018). It is also important to note that one specialist teacher was dissatisfied with the support provided by the administration. Although this lack of support of play was indirect and was mainly expressed in the delay or unwillingness to provide the needed resources for the educator, since this directly influences the quality of play and educator's motivation, it could be argued that even though generally, administration seems to be supportive, there are still cases where more support could be provided. The next section will discuss how play is used for learning by educators.

**Use of Play for Learning.** Generally, both in the survey and during the interviews, all the educators agreed that play had a special and important role in kindergarten, some emphasizing it as a tool for development, others as a way of emotional release and relaxation. However, it was also evident that educators valued teacher-led, structured play-based activities more than free unstructured play, because in their opinions that is how children learned best. However, Professor Diane Levin of Wheelock College, a long-time kindergarten researcher, said that in her own research she found that educators “may say that play is important, but they often don't recognize the difference between the imitative, repetitive play frequently seen today and the more creative, elaborated play of the past. Many teachers don't know the reasons why play is important.” (as cited in Miller & Almon, 2009, p.24). From the findings of this thesis study, educators placed a strong emphasis on learning academic skills and knowledge. This echoes the findings from three university research studies, commissioned by the Alliance for Childhood and completed in 2008, which found that “teacher-directed activities, especially instruction in literacy and math skills, are taking up the lion's share of kindergarten classroom time” (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 25).

In contrast to this approach, in a wide-scale longitudinal research of childcare in England, conducted by Sylva and colleagues (2004), it was found that settings characterized as “excellent” showed evidence of free play for a substantial part of the day. As Karlsen and Lekhal (2019) noted, educators were helping to enhance children’s thinking through meaningful interactions, such as asking open-ended questions, modeling, and formative feedback from adults taking part in play. This leads to the next point of discussion – the role of the educator.

### ***Educator’s Role in Play***

The majority of interviewed educators highlighted the importance of ‘an involved teacher’, whose engagement would vary depending on the situation and the children playing. Although some of them identified themselves as a guide in children’s play, others – as an observer, yet others – as a playmate in some situations, for example, with younger children, believed that their role in children’s play was important. Three educators mentioned that their role included developing or extending children’s play, by interacting with them during their play, pointing on some elements or adding them into play. This echoes what Gordon (2012) said about educator’s intentional interactions who “watches for opportunities to interact with children during naturally occurring ‘teachable moments,’ when the child is poised to learn new concepts” (p. 84).

However, there were three educators who said that during free play they would not intervene at all, limiting their role to that of an observer. Nevertheless, the concept of Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (1978) suggests that children perform better when guided by a more able other, such as a parent, a teacher, and even an older sibling or a peer. This guidance is also referred to as scaffolding, which according to Wall and her colleagues (2015) suggests sustained shared thinking and building on existing abilities. These



interactions, as noted by Early et al. (2010), lead to child's learning, because adults assist children in using and understanding concepts that are beyond their current abilities, by demonstrating awareness of individual children's interests and needs, lending individualized support. For example, as suggested by Karlsen and Lekhal (2019), educators could help children extend their ideas or link their actions to real world experiences. The idea of active involvement is important here since participants should be actively sharing their thinking processes, for the learning to occur (Wall et al., 2015).

This data from the interviews aligns well with the data from the survey questions about the role of the teacher before, during and after play. When children were engaged in play time, the majority of the surveyed educators identified, as their primary role, more often to observe children, direct tasks, manage materials, and help keep order during play. Least often, according to the majority of survey participants, they engaged with children in play activities, wondering aloud and posing questions to promote reasoning. This suggests that, unfortunately, educators were doing least often what the Karlsen and Lekhal (2019) emphasized as scaffolding, important for children's learning: helping to enhance children's thinking through meaningful interactions, such as "open-ended questioning, modeling, and formative feedback from adults" taking part in play (p. 235).

The researcher concluded from this data that educators considered their role as an actively engaged teacher important in the context of organized play, whereas during children's free play their role was limited to that of an observer and a supervisor. Educator's role is closely linked to the next sub-section to be discussed – types of play present in the kindergarten.

### ***Types of Play***

According to Miller & Almon (2009), an early childhood organization that values play would provide support to all twelve types of play mentioned in the literature review. However, from the survey data, out of types of play that took place in educators' classrooms, the most prevalent answers were playing with arts, small motor play, language play, and construction play. Interestingly, the least number of respondents chose make-believe play and symbolic play, which could suggest that there are fewer opportunities for such types of play. However, research on make-believe or pretend play has shown that it develops imagination (Russ, 2004), self-regulation (Berk et al., 2006; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009), social skills such as empathy, communication, ability to solve problems (Hughes, 1999), and helps to express feelings as well as integrate emotion with cognition (Jent et al., 2011; Seja & Russ, 1999; Slade and Wolf, 1999). The fact that pretend play and symbolic play are among the least represented in state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan suggests that children get fewer opportunities to develop these important skills. Furthermore, some types of play were not present because of a lack of materials and resources, which will be discussed in the next sub-section.

**Types of Play Missing or Lacking.** As regards to missing or lacking types of play, some of the interviewed educators mentioned that they did not have a sufficient supply of the latest technologies, including broadband internet connection, interactive boards, computers for programming the Lego robots, tablets for interactive games. Other types of play that were mentioned as missing or lacking were: sensory play, board games, materials for fine motor skills and construction play (Lego blocks and wooden blocks), equipment for gross motor play (such as wooden stairs, for example) and resources for art play (art wall, theater, music floor, music books). These findings contradict Gronlund's (2010) recommendations about a wide range of engaging resources with more open-ended materials, organized and easily accessible to children, ensuring a sufficient amount for several children to use. As Miller &

Almon (2009) noted, various types of play overlap in sophisticated play scenarios and “a well-developed player has a repertoire with many forms of play” (p. 53). Missing some types of play in state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan suggests that children’s scenarios may not be as rich, and children may be not as well-developed, as players, which was confirmed by the findings in this thesis study. This lack of resources is also closely linked to the next point to be discussed – play environment.

### ***Play Environment***

According to the University of Toronto’s Early Learning Center (2021), one of the key points research consistently points to is that “children use play as a medium for exploring and manipulating their physical environment” (para. 1). Overall, the majority of educators in this thesis study seemed to be satisfied with the play environment, however, there were 10-13% of the survey respondents who disagreed that there was sufficient space, materials and clearly defined areas to support play activities. Moreover, during the interviews, it has also become evident that there were some deficiencies in all of these parameters: space, resources and clearly defined areas to support play activities. Nevertheless, Moyles (1989) suggested that children’s play is structured by their environment – the space and the materials available to them. Therefore, the environment affects the quality of children’s play. Gandini (2011) mentioned that Malaguzzi, the father of the Reggio Emilia approach – a child-centered self-driven curriculum and pedagogy, based on experiential learning – said that environment was the third teacher. Therefore, findings in this thesis study suggest that the quality of children’s play may be affected negatively by the insufficient resources and inadequate play environment. This topic is also linked to the next subsection – opportunities for play in terms of time and choice provided for children to play.

### ***Opportunities for Play***

This section discusses opportunities provided for play in terms of time, freedom of choice and initiative, including free and outdoor play.

**Time for Play.** DeVries (2001) and Gronlund (2010) recommend that children should be engaged in daily play periods for at least 45 minutes in order to help them develop meaningful and engaged high-quality play. However, in state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan, most of the play sessions lasted on average 30 minutes or less, and these included both organized and free play periods. Miller and Almon (2009) explain that if a play period is too short, the children cannot immerse themselves into their play and develop sophisticated play scenarios, and if it is too long, play comes apart. “Playful five-year-olds can easily play well for 60 to 90 minutes at a time”, with their play skills being developed over time (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 56).

This quote contrasts the amount of time allowed for free play discovered in the course of this study. Provided there were no extra-curricular activities or performance rehearsals, children would have free time after 4.30-5pm, leaving from 30 minutes to 1 hour at a maximum, before children were picked up by their parents (by 6pm, but usually earlier). Therefore, out of nine or ten hours that children spend in the full-day kindergarten (from 8-9 am to 6pm), they had 0.5-1 hour at most (usually the younger children were mentioned to have 1.5 hour in total, the maximum for older children was 1 hour) for free play and exploration. This also could be the reason for some educators mentioning that often children did not know how to play. As Paley (2004) noted:

Having not listened carefully enough to their play, we did not realize how much time was needed by children in order to create the scenery and develop the skills for their ever-changing dramas. We removed the element – time – that enabled play to be

effective, then blamed the children when their play skills did not meet our expectations (p. 46).

Thus, it can be seen that time provided for free play in state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan is insufficient and does not align with the research literature, and may be the explanation for the findings of this thesis study. The next point to be discussed is children's choice and initiative in play.

**Children's Choice and Initiative.** Overall, there seemed to be some choice available for children, however, this choice was limited in terms of not only time and variety of materials, but also in regard to participation choice, because it was expected from the educator to involve all children in every possible way. It seems like children had choice only during the free play period or from educator's suggestions (like the choice of theater plays or songs), which again is a limited choice. One of the main concerns for children whose activities are too structured and organized is that they may face difficulties when initiative or decision-making is needed. In their study, Needham et al (2018) refer to one of the directors of a private kindergarten with the Montessori approach, where children chose what activities they wanted to be involved in. When they had some children come from other more traditional kindergartens, in the beginning these children found it hard to choose for themselves (Needham et al., 2018). Research by Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2015) on how children learn shows that they learn best when they are given some agency to play a role in their own learning. However, the findings of this thesis study suggest that the play activities are more often teacher-initiated and teacher-led rather than child-directed. Therefore, unfortunately, children in state kindergartens may be missing this opportunity to learn best.

It can be concluded from this section that opportunities for play are limited both in terms of time and child initiative and choice. This theme is linked to the subject of free play, when children can make choices about play, and this will be discussed in the next section.

**Opinions about Free Play.** There were several emerging patterns in the discussion of free play with the interviewed educators. The first mentioned trend was that, according to educators, many children did not know how to play independently, how to occupy themselves, and that they needed help in learning how to play. As an alternative to this approach, Moyles (1989) suggests a combination of free and guided play for child's optimal learning following these three phases:

Through free, exploratory play, children learn something about situations, people, attitudes and responses, materials, properties, textures, structures, visual, auditory and kinesthetic attributes, dependent upon the play activity. Through directed play, they are proposed another dimension and a further range of possibilities extending to a relative mastery within that area or activity. Through subsequent extended free play activities, children are likely to be able to enhance, enrich and manifest learning (p. 20).

Secondly, another common trend was that free play was valued less than teacher-led organized play, because it seemed to be not as good at building children's skills and knowledge. However, evidence from longitudinal research by Sylva et al. (2004) suggests that settings characterized as "excellent" allowed free play for a substantial part of the day, with some support from the educators. Furthermore, as Yogman et al. (2018) noted, free play, or self-directed play, is vitally important for children's exploration of the world as well as their understanding of their interests and preferences. In addition, there is a lot of research

that suggests that exploratory free play is beneficial for further success in school. For example, in one study it was found that the quality of LEGO play at three and four years old predicted mathematical achievement in high school (Wolfgang et al., 2010, as cited in Whitebread, 2018, p. 238). In another study, Barker et al. (2014) reported that the 6–7-year-old children who spent more time in their daily lives doing less-structured activities, such as solitary or group free play, social outings, excursions and visiting museums and zoos, had a higher cognitive self-regulation in school (as cited in Whitebread, 2018, p. 238).

Thirdly, several educators made it quite clear that teachers who let children play freely were not considered competent professionals, mentioning that this was mostly characteristics of young or inexperienced teachers, or those who were not very responsible or did not like children or their job in general. Educator 3 rightly mentioned that in order for children to have more free play in kindergarten, not only did teachers' mindsets have to change, but also that of administration, because they would not understand her if they visited her classroom and saw children playing freely; they would probably make a comment that she was not doing her job well. This comment echoes the voices of kindergarten teachers in the USA, where principals were not happy with educators if children were just playing (Lynch, 2015).

Therefore, in summary, it can be said that children in state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan, unfortunately, may be missing out on the numerous benefits of free play for children's development. Furthermore, considering that most of the free play usually occurs outdoors as suggested by Needham et al. (2018), outdoor play opportunities are also limited. This will be discussed below.

**Outdoor Play.** Many educators mentioned that outdoor play was for the most part free play, however, there were those who said that there were also organized games if the educator was responsible and experienced. Nevertheless, due to the long cold winter that could last up to six months in Nur-Sultan, children often stayed indoors, therefore, this also limited children's opportunities for free play. However, there is a vast amount of research on the benefits of outdoor play. As noted by Clements (2004), outdoor play provides children with opportunities to explore the world around them by engaging with natural objects and substances, such as rocks, flowers, leaves, sticks, sand, mud, and water; and develop their gross motor skills by engaging in physical activity. The decline of outdoor play is correlated with the increase in the obesity and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder rates (ADHD) (Gray, 2011). By freely choosing play activities outdoors, children learn social competence, problem-solving, creative thinking, and safety skills (Miller, 1989; Moore & Wong, 1997; Rivkin, 1995, 2000 as cited in Clements, 2004). Unfortunately, limited opportunities for outdoor play for almost half of the year suggest that children in state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan may be missing out on the benefits of outdoor play.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the major findings in relation to the wider research literature. The overall findings were remarkable in terms of the imbalance in the level of support that organized play received from educators and the lack of support for free play. On the one hand, these findings should not be surprising because the literature reviewed touched upon the global trend in early childhood education academization (Miller & Almon, 2009) and the decline of free play (Gray, 2011). However, it was unexpected to see such a sharp contrast between the time and opportunities for organized and free play. It was also clear that children's choice and initiative were limited, as well as educators freedom and flexibility in



their daily practices. The next chapter will present the conclusion of this thesis study and recommendations for policy, practice and further research.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

### Introduction

This research study investigated the support for play in state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, from the perspectives of early childhood educators. The main research question of this study was: “How is play supported in state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan?” The six research sub-questions that assisted in answering the primary research question were the following:

1. How much freedom and flexibility do educators have in their teaching practices?
2. How do educators view play and its relation to learning?
3. How does the kindergarten environment provide for play?
4. What types of play are present in kindergarten environment?
5. What is educators’ role in supporting play and learning through play?
6. What opportunities for play are provided?

Using an explanatory cross-sectional sequential mixed methods design (Creswell, 2014, p. 572), this study sought to answer these questions by first collecting quantitative data with the help of an anonymous online survey (that provided a general picture of the research problem) and then collecting qualitative semi-structured interview data to help explain or elaborate on the quantitative results, refining and extending the general picture. The research design aligned with the research question as a way to understand the general picture regarding support for play in state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan, but also to explore the deeper explanations from individual practitioners clarifying the broader picture. Survey responses were analyzed with Qualtrics; interviews were transcribed and coded based upon open, axial, and thematic coding aligned with processes suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2008).

The previous five chapters set the context for the study, reviewed the literature related to the research question, described the research design, provided the data analysis and its results, and discussed the findings. This chapter provides a conclusion from the overall findings and their discussion, the study's limitations, implications for policy and practice as well as recommendations for further research.

### **Overall Findings**

Findings from the survey data suggested that overall, early childhood educators believed in the importance and value of play, both in general and in relation to children's learning. However, the survey also revealed that when it came to choosing between academic activities, such as filling in the worksheets or learning numbers, for example, half of the educators did not prioritize play. Furthermore, another important finding was that the majority of educators did not consider free play as an appropriate method of instruction for children from birth to Grade 3, and they also seemed to be unaware of how children's learning could be assessed during free play and other types of play. In most cases, playtime duration and frequency were limited to 15-30 minutes four or more times a week.

Findings from the interviews provided more details and confirmed some of the data discovered in the survey. For example, the fact that academic lessons and activities, sometimes taking the form of organized play, were prioritized over free play, which mostly took place when all the lessons and extra-curricular activities were over, often outdoors, weather permitting. Furthermore, educators who let children play freely were perceived as less responsible or inexperienced. It has also become clear that educators were not sure of how free and guided play could be used in their daily teaching practices, and many of them said they would be glad to have more practical training on play-based teaching and learning. Moreover, educators' understanding of their role in free or guided play was also limited to

supervising in case of a conflict or to playing with those children who ‘did not know how to play’.

The integrated data from survey responses and interviews was synthesized according to the six research sub-questions. These synthesized findings suggest that in the state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan there is strong support for organized play as a way to reach academic goals, but less support for free play as well as children’s choice and initiative. Furthermore, integrated data also revealed that educators have a limited understanding of the potential of free and guided play, as well as their role in support of these types of play. The types of play mostly present in the kindergarten and the role of educator also suggested that there was more organized play and less free play. Despite educators’ beliefs about the importance of play for children’s development, it seems like the subject-based traditional methods of direct instruction are still prevailing in state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan. However, it should be mentioned that many educators noted that they would like to have more practical professional development in play-based teaching and learning. Finally, there was also some data that resources and materials for play were limited. The next section will discuss this study’s limitations.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study sought to understand how play is supported in the state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan by exploring the perspectives of early childhood educators. The data gathered during the online survey and the interviews helped to answer the main research question as well as the six research sub-questions. However, the study also has some limitations.

One of the limitations was that the study had only two Kazakh-speaking participants, because several Kazakh-speaking survey respondents, even though they indicated that they

wanted to participate in the follow-up interviews when contacted seemed to be fearful and distrustful to take part in the interviews. Another limitation was that six out of nine interviews were conducted during the children's nap time since many educators worked a full day from early in the morning till the evening. They may have felt uncomfortable during this time or rushed, worried that children might wake up. Furthermore, online interviews were, in general, shorter than interviews conducted face-to-face. In addition, online interviews had connection problems with video image pausing or freezing and connections being interrupted a few times. Perhaps, the online format has somehow influenced the rapport established between the participants and the researcher. Finally, almost all the educators felt like they had to ask for permission from the administration to take part in the interviews, which sometimes delayed the process, and may have also resulted in some pressure from the administration. Nevertheless, the findings of this thesis study have resulted in some recommendations for practice, policy and further research, provided below.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Hearing the voices of practitioners is important, not only to understand their daily realities, but also to help improve these by reconsidering current practices and policy in early childhood education.

### ***Recommendations for Educators***

This subsection will focus on some of the findings and how these lead to recommendations for educators, including: (a) developing educators' knowledge on play-based pedagogy; (b) expanding theoretical knowledge on play theories and research; and 3) exchanging experiences through peer observation, collaboration and wider networking.

**Develop Knowledge on Play-based Pedagogy.** Apart from interviewed educators who said that they would like to have more hands-on practical training on how play could be

integrated into daily activities, it was also evident from some of the survey responses that this kind of training is necessary. It seems like educators would also benefit from the professional development course on how to support learning during both guided and free play.

Furthermore, it was clear from the findings that educators were not sure how learning in guided or free play could be assessed. Therefore, it would be beneficial for them to have training on how to observe children's play and assess their interests, strengths, and learning. Moreover, experienced educators could potentially take part in developing, improving and providing such training to their colleagues. Apart from formal training, educators could look up resources available on the Internet.

**Expand Knowledge on Play Theories.** In addition to practical training, it would be also useful for educators to know the key theories on play as well as recent research on play to be able to advocate for play, both in their practice and in their conversations with parents, administration and the larger community. Apart from formal training, educators could look up resources in the libraries and on the Internet.

**Exchange Experiences through Peer Collaboration.** Interviews have revealed that some educators lacked experience and support in implementing play-based teaching and learning, others had no time to go and observe their more experienced colleagues who successfully integrated play into their daily practices.

It is also important for the administration to support educators in their practices, therefore the next subsection will briefly outline the recommendations for administrators.

### ***Recommendations for Administrators***

This subsection will focus on the recommendations for administrators, including: (a) expanding administrators' knowledge both on play-based pedagogy and play theories and

research; (b) providing conditions for regular professional development; and 3) providing conditions for mentorship and collaboration, including networking with other kindergartens.

**Expand Knowledge on Play and Play-based Pedagogy.** As it was mentioned by one of the interviewed educators, even if the practitioners have undertaken professional development and meaningfully integrate play into their daily practice, it would be difficult to explain the new approaches and methods to the administration. Therefore, it is important for the administration to undertake the same training both on the theory of play and practice of play-based pedagogy so that they could support educators in their daily practices.

**Provide Conditions for Regular Professional Development.** The majority of the interviewed educators worked full-day either because they needed the double salary, or because they did not have a partner to swap with. This was one of the reasons for not being able to undertake any of the professional development courses. Therefore, the administrators need to create time and opportunities for all the educators to be involved in the professional development training regularly, at least twice a year.

**Provide Conditions for Mentorship and Collaboration.** For the reasons, mentioned in the previous paragraphs, as well as because of the large number of young professionals with little experience, it would be useful to set up mentorship and collaboration programs in the state kindergartens where educators can support each other and share practices, including networking with other kindergartens.

These issues are closely linked to the policy implications that will be discussed in the next section.

### **Recommendations for Policy**

Apart from the implications of the findings for practice, there are also recommendations for policy revisions for the Ministry of Education. This section will briefly

outline early childhood education policy implications including: (a) revision of the national standard of preschool education and related documents; 2) updating pre-service training and improving professional development to include theory and practice about play and play-based pedagogy; and 3) raising the status of early childhood educators.

### ***Revision of the National Standard of Preschool Education and Related Documents***

Findings in this study indicate that educators' freedom and flexibility in their daily decision-making in terms of content, materials and room layout are limited by the National Standard. Therefore, it is recommended to revise the National Standard and other related documents, allowing educators more freedom and flexibility in their daily practice.

It would also be beneficial to outline the minimum requirements for materials and resources to be provided in every state kindergarten and designate the budget for these because almost all the educators indicated that they were lacking some materials and resources.

Furthermore, time for activities also needs to be revised, because a 7-minute-long activity for two-year-old children seems to be too difficult to plan and to realize. Considering that there is no specifically allocated time for free play, it would be useful to outline in the Standard that at least one and a half hours of free play should be provided for children every day (Miller & Almon, 2009).

### ***Updating Pre-Service Training and Professional Development***

To provide educators with quality practical training, there need to be updates in both pre-service training and professional development courses, provided by universities and professional development centers like "Centers of Excellence" and "Orleu", where educators not only learn about the importance of play through the most recent research, but also where they would learn how to incorporate play in their daily practices. The National Standards



content and requirements keep changing, but it is not clear whether other documents also get updated and whether educators get trained according to these updates. Furthermore, it would be great to introduce the concept of an educator as a researcher of her practice and a life-long learner to allow for continuous improvement of practice.

### ***Raising the Status of Early Childhood Educators***

The problem of low status, low salary and reputation of the early childhood educator profession remain very relevant today. Almost all the educators interviewed worked with children all day, that is for 10 hours – from 8 am to 6 pm, whereas normally, they would work with children for half of the day – one educator in the morning, the other – in the afternoon. The main reason indicated by educators – very low salary, so working a full day would mean higher wages for them. Some of them mentioned they were single mothers, and they needed the money. One educator talked about the fact that they did not have time for professional development and peer observation/collaboration, because they were busy all day long in their bubble. Another reason for double shifts was the shortage of staff. Therefore, the government needs to address this issue by raising the salaries of the early childhood educators and providing social benefits for them, thus attracting more people into the profession. The next section will outline the recommendations for further research.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This section briefly outlines where further research could be potentially interesting and contribute to understanding the research questions better. There are three recommended steps for further research on the topic of play in ECE: (a) comparison studies; (b) use of different methods; and (c) role of performances in kindergarten.

#### ***Comparison Studies***

This research was limited to the state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan. Further research could be conducted in private kindergartens or other urban and rural areas. Furthermore, different age groups and methods (e.g. Montessori, Reggio Emilia approaches) could be compared in terms of the amount of support received for play and play-based learning.

### ***Use of Different Methods***

This study used a mixed-methods research design to answer the research question. The data were collected through an online anonymous survey and semi-structured interviews. To investigate further, various other methods could be used, such as experiments, classroom observations, focus groups, narrative research and others. Furthermore, the additional quantitative methodology could be used to explore the quality and frequency of interactions between children and educators “during play periods to enrich our understanding of the role of the teacher” (Docken, 2017, p. 215).

### ***The Role of Performances in Kindergarten***

One of the unexpected topics that emerged during the interviews and which could be potentially explored further is that of performances (“utrenniki”). These were often mentioned as an explanation for the lack of time for free play because children needed to prepare and rehearse their songs, dance, poem recitals. Moreover, there are approximately ten such performances throughout the year, which means that there is always something to rehearse on an ongoing basis, such as Autumn ball, First President’s Day, Independence Day, New Year’s Eve, Women’s Day on 8 March, spring celebration Nauryz, Unity Day on 1 May, Defender of the Fatherland Day on 7 May, Victory Day on 9 May, Children’s Day on 1 June, etc. Such celebrations, as a heritage from the Soviet Union, would be interesting to investigate as well as what various stakeholders, including children, think about them.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter provided a conclusion from the overall findings, the study's limitation, implications for policy and practice as well as recommendations for further research. Overall, the research has demonstrated that although the majority of educators understood the value and importance of play, they still prioritized academic learning that sometimes took the form of organized play. Therefore, educators saw play mostly as a tool to make learning more attractive. The findings directly linked to this are concerned with educators' limited freedom and flexibility because, for the most part, they had to follow the National Standard.

Furthermore, integrated data also revealed that educators have a limited understanding of the potential of free and guided play, as well as their role in support of these types of play. Moreover, limitations in time and materials also affected both educators' practices and the quality of children's play. Despite educators' beliefs about the importance of play for children's development, based upon the findings, it appears that the subject-based methods of direct instruction prevail in state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan. Finally, and most importantly, there seems to be an imbalance in the use of organized and free play, with fewer opportunities provided for free play and children's choice and initiative. The types of play mostly present in the kindergarten and the role of educator also suggested that there was more organized play and less free play. These important findings, indicating the significance of play for young children's development, may contribute to further research as well as improvements in policy and practice.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A. Letter to the Department of Education of Nur-Sultan

Dear Sholpan Maratovna,

My name is Sogdiana Chukurova and in the framework of writing my Master's Thesis, I am conducting research about the unique topic - play in early childhood education settings. This is a "hot" topic internationally, however, it appears to be the first research to be conducted on the topic of play in the early childhood education in Kazakhstan.

I would like to kindly ask for your support in distributing the announcement about the study as well as the link and the QR-code to the online survey among all the state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan. I'm attaching the recruitment letter that contains the link to the survey and the QR-code.

If you like to learn more about the study, here is a brief overview. It has been proven by the research that play is very important for children's development. Since many children spend their time in early childhood education organizations, it is essential that these provide an appropriate environment for children's development. It is important to hear the voices of practitioners to understand the place of play in their daily practice and children's lives. The data obtained as a result of this study may potentially influence public policy in the field of early childhood education in Kazakhstan, as well as serve as a basis for continuing to improve the early childhood educators' training and professional development.

I would like to explore how early childhood educators in state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan support play in their daily practice. The research includes an anonymous survey for the educators followed up by interviews with the first 9 educators working in state kindergartens who would like to participate in the research, who indicate high level of support for play and who have at least two years of work experience in kindergarten. Procedures will be followed to ensure ethical research: all data will be confidential to protect participants' and kindergartens' identities.

This study has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Nazarbayev University. All the necessary documents are attached:

- Recruitment announcement with link and the QR-code for the survey
- Ethics Committee approval

Please, let me know if you have any questions. Otherwise, I will follow up in 5 days to check that you have received the email and to answer any questions you may have.

Kind regards,

Sogdiana Chukurova

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**Appendix B. Advertisement for Recruitment of the Participants for the Research****Support for play in state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan: early childhood educators' perspectives**

Dear Teacher!

Do you think play is important for children's development? Do you work in the state kindergarten in Nur-Sultan? If you answered "Yes" to these questions, you can become a part of my study!

You will be asked to answer some questions in an online survey via the link or the QR-code provided below. **All survey participants will be entered for a chance to win 6 gift certificates in the amount of 5000KZT at Magnum. The deadline for the survey completion is November 30, the live raffle would take place on December 1, on Instagram account @for.families at 21:00.** The survey is anonymous and does not collect any identifying information unless you want to take part in the raffle. Before starting the survey, you will need to read the informed consent form.

[LINK TO THE SURVEY](#)    [QR-CODE](#)

If you have any questions, please, do not hesitate to contact me. Thank you for your time!

Sogdiana Chukurova

MSc Educational Leadership student  
2019-2021 cohort of School Education  
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+7 701 250 03 90

**Appendix C. Informed Consent Form (Survey)****Support for play in state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan: early childhood educators' perspectives**

**DESCRIPTION:** You are invited to participate in a research study on understanding how early childhood educators support play in state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan. You will be asked to answer some questions in an online survey via the link provided below. The survey is anonymous and does not collect any identifying information unless you would like to participate in follow-up interviews and/or unless you would like to be entered a raffle for a chance to win a gift certificate of 5000KZT in Magnum. The deadline for the survey completion is November 30, the live raffle would take place on December 1, on Instagram account @for.families at 21:00. If you consent to be contacted for an interview, you will be entered for a chance to win access to an online course about play paid by the researcher. The results of the survey may be used in scientific articles, conferences, making policy decisions, etc.

**TIME INVOLVEMENT:** Your participation will take approximately 20-25 minutes.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** The risks associated with this study are minimal with potential risks being stress or embarrassment related to sharing information. There are also some risks related to the breach of confidentiality – both on digital platforms that can be hacked and in public spaces where the interviews may potentially take place. To address these potential risks, the researcher ensured that the survey was anonymous and the questions could not reveal individual identities. The benefits that may reasonably be expected to result from this study are reflection on and better understanding of your own practice, and providing opportunities to early childhood educators to be heard. Also, data collected in this survey may be helpful for potential policy improvements in the early childhood education.

**PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS:** If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The alternative is not to participate. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. The results of this research study may be presented at scientific or professional meetings or published in scientific journals.

**CONTACT INFORMATION:**

**Questions:** If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research, its procedures, risks and benefits, contact the Master's Thesis Supervisor for this student work: Dr. Anna CohenMiller, [anna.cohenmiller@nu.edu.kz](mailto:anna.cohenmiller@nu.edu.kz), +7 (7172) 70 49 57, +7 (701) 109 0392; or the researcher herself – Sogdiana Chukurova, [Sogdiana.chukurova@nu.edu.kz](mailto:Sogdiana.chukurova@nu.edu.kz), +7 (701) 250 0390.

**Independent Contact:** If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the NUGSE at [gse\\_researchcommittee@nu.edu.kz](mailto:gse_researchcommittee@nu.edu.kz).

Please proceed to the survey if you agree to participate in this study.

- I have carefully read the information provided;
- I have been given full information regarding the purpose and procedures of the study;
- I understand how the data collected will be used, and that any confidential information will be seen only by the researchers and will not be revealed to anyone else;
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason;
- With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

**Appendix C1. Informed Consent Form (Interview)****Support for play in the state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan: early childhood educators' perspectives**

**DESCRIPTION:** You are invited to participate in a research study on understanding how early childhood educators support play in state kindergartens of Nur-Sultan. You will be asked to answer some questions during individual interviews. However, pseudonyms will be used to provide confidentiality. The interviews will be audio or video-recorded following your permission. Recordings will be stored on the password protected computer and will be used by the researcher only for transcription and data analysis. The results of the data analysis may be used in scientific articles, conferences, for making policy decisions, etc. All the identifying information will be removed after 1 year. Those who participate in the interviews will be entered for a chance to win access to an online course about play paid by the researcher.

**TIME INVOLVEMENT:** Your participation will take approximately 45-60 minutes.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS** The risks associated with this study are minimal with potential risks being stress, embarrassment related to sharing information or painful memories triggered by the interview questions. There are also some risks related to the breach of confidentiality – both on digital platforms that can be hacked and in public spaces where the interviews may potentially take place. To address these potential risks, the researcher will work with the participants to agree on the comfortable place for them to hold the interview. The researcher will also keep all the data, including the identities of the participants, confidential, on the password protected computer with all the identifying information removed after 1 year. Pseudonyms will be used and any information potentially identifying the participants or kindergartens, will be removed. The benefits that may reasonably be expected to result from this study are reflection on and better understanding of your own practice, and providing opportunities to educators to be heard. Also, data collected in the interviews may be helpful for potential policy improvements in the early childhood education.

**PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS:** If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The alternative is not to participate. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. The results of this research study may be presented at scientific or professional meetings or published in scientific journals.

**CONTACT INFORMATION:**

**Questions:** If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research, its procedures, risks and benefits, contact the Master's Thesis Supervisor for this student work: Dr. Anna CohenMiller, [anna.cohenmiller@nu.edu.kz](mailto:anna.cohenmiller@nu.edu.kz), +7 (7172) 70 49 57, +7 (701) 109 0392; or the researcher herself – Sogdiana Chukurova, [Sogdiana.chukurova@nu.edu.kz](mailto:Sogdiana.chukurova@nu.edu.kz), +7 (701) 250 0390.

***Independent Contact:*** If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the NUGSE [gse\\_researchcommittee@nu.edu.kz](mailto:gse_researchcommittee@nu.edu.kz).

Please sign this consent form if you agree to participate in this study.

- I have carefully read the information provided;
- I have been given full information regarding the purpose and procedures of the study;
- I understand how the data collected will be used, and that any confidential information will be seen only by the researchers and will not be revealed to anyone else;
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason;
- With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**The extra copy of this signed and dated consent form is for you to keep.**

**Appendix D. Survey Questions****Support for play in the state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan: early childhood educators' perspectives**

1) Please read the Informed Consent (link provided) and choose:

- Yes, I have read the informed consent and volunteer to participate in the study
- No, I do not consent.

*Skip Logic: If No, I do not consent. Is Selected, Then Skip To End of Survey*

This section contains **demographic questions**.

2) Gender

- Male
- Female

3) Age

- 18-25
- 26-35
- 35-45
- 46-55
- 56-65
- 65 and older

4) Highest Degree Earned

- High School
- Vocational training
- Bachelors (BA/BS)
- Masters (MA/MS)
- Doctorates (PhD/EdD)

5) Was any of your educational training specific to early childhood?

- Yes
- No

6) Total Number of Years Working in Early Childhood Education

- 1 year
- 2-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16 or more years

The following statements and questions have been designed to understand educators' perspectives and attitudes on play and playful learning as part of the kindergarten instructional program in state kindergartens. Please answer honestly based on what you believe to be true for you in your current placement.

### Teacher perspectives

For the following questions, please choose the words that most accurately represent your beliefs about play in kindergarten.

7) How important is play in the kindergarten classroom?

- Not Important
- Slightly Important
- Important
- Very Important

8) It is \_\_\_\_\_ for the teacher to provide a variety of materials to support children's play.

- Not Important
- Slightly Important
- Important
- Very Important

10) It is \_\_\_\_\_ for teachers to plan extended periods of time for children to engage in play.

- Not Important
- Slightly Important
- Important
- Very Important

11) It is \_\_\_\_\_ for kindergarten children to play more than completing academic tasks such as workbooks, worksheets, and similar activities during the school day.

- Not Important
- Slightly Important
- Important
- Very Important

12) If a teacher observes child's play, s/he can learn about a child's

No      Probably not      Probably yes      Yes

Motor development?

Social and emotional development?

Math knowledge and skills?

Language and literacy knowledge and skills?



Science knowledge and skills?

Music development?

13) I integrate play as a vehicle for learning to meet learning standards.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

14) What is the primary role of play in your kindergarten classroom?

- Play is a break from work and motivation to finish academic work.
- Play is a way to make academic tasks more appealing.
- Play is a means to further social and emotional development.
- Play is a means to integrate social, emotional, moral, and intellectual development goals.

15) How do you view play as it relates to learning in kindergarten?

- Play and learning are two different things. There is a time for play and a time for the work of academic learning.
- Play and learning can go together. Kindergarten children learn some skills and knowledge through playful activities.
- Play and learning are complementary and must go together. Kindergarten children learn through play and demonstrate what they have learned through play.

16) Free play is defined as offering children the opportunity to choose where they play, what they play with and with whom they play.

Using this definition, free play is an appropriate method of instruction for what grade(s) or age groups? (Please mark all that apply)

- Birth - 1 year
- 1 and 2 year olds
- 3 and 4 year olds
- 5 and 6 year olds
- 1st Grade
- 2nd Grade
- 3rd Grade
- All ages

### **Play Environment**

17) My classroom environment (room design, furniture, layout, etc.) provides adequate space for play activities.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

18) My classroom environment provides a range of interesting materials in ample quantities for children to use during play activities.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

19) My classroom has clearly defined and organized areas (ex: blocks area, role play area, tables for drawing) to support play activities.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

### **Opportunities for Play**

20) I incorporate learning through play in my teaching practice

- Yes
- No

*Display This Question:*

*If I incorporate playful learning in my practice; Yes Is Selected*

21) How often is playful learning integrated in your classroom in an average week?

- Once a week.
- Two or three times a week.
- Four or more times each week.

*Display This Question:*

*If I incorporate playful learning in practice; Yes Is Selected*

22) On a typical day, how long is each play period on average?

- 0-15 minutes
- 15-30 minutes
- 30-45 minutes
- 45 minutes or more

23) Play in my classroom is:

- Mostly child-directed, self-selected free play
- A blend of child-initiated play and adult-guided experiences
- Mostly adult-guided (i.e. teacher-created) playful learning activities

### **Types of Play**

24) What types of play take place in your classroom? (select all that apply)

Yes No

- Small Motor Play (e.g. play with small toys and manipulatives like stringing beads, puzzles, sorting objects, Legos)

- ✓ Mastery Play (repeating an action over and over to mastery, such as making dozens of bows for birthday packages)
- ✓ Rules-based Play (making up own rules, social negotiation to adapt rules for play situation)
- ✓ Construction Play (e.g. building houses, ships, forts, and other structures)
- ✓ Make-Believe Play (also called pretend play; begins with “Let’s pretend” and follows child’s narrative or story)
- ✓ Symbolic play (children taking an object and converting it into a toy or prop through fluid process of fantasy or imagination)
- ✓ Language Play (e.g. playing with words, rhymes, verses, and songs; telling stories and dramatizing them)
- ✓ Playing with Arts (e.g. integrating forms of art into play, drawing, modeling, creating music, performing puppet shows; explore arts to express feelings and ideas)
- ✓ Sensory play (e.g. playing with dirt, sand, mud, water, and materials with different textures, sounds, and smells to develop senses)
- ✓ Other (describe)

### Role of the Teacher

25) How do you prepare *before play* in your classroom? (select all that apply)

Yes No

- ✓ Providing space (setting up centers, choice areas)
- ✓ Providing time (a set time in the day/week allocated to choice/play)
- ✓ Providing materials (open-ended materials, imaginative play props, etc.)
- ✓ Delineating choices available (from “everything open” to specifying choices)
- ✓ Asking children to choose or assigning children to activities
- ✓ Developing rules for choice/play (ex: limiting number of students in each area, limiting length of time in each area, assigning play buddies, etc.)
- ✓ Other (please specify)

26) How do you provide support *during play* in your classroom? (select all that apply)

Yes No

- ✓ Initiating play by making activity suggestions
- ✓ Initiating play by making material suggestions
- ✓ Providing suggestions to specific children about what to play
- ✓ Responding to play by limiting or stopping play
- ✓ Helping resolve conflict
- ✓ Helping play proceed, setting limits, or answering questions
- ✓ Inquiring or commenting on play
- ✓ Being present; observing and accepting play
- ✓ Other (please specify)

27) How do you provide support *after play* experiences? (select all that apply)

Yes No

- ✓ Talking about and discussing play with children
- ✓ Allowing material to stay in place to continue play
- ✓ Documenting play via photos, videos, or document displays
- ✓ Talking about and discussing the next play session with children
- ✓ Other (please specify)

28) When children are engaged in play time, what is your primary role? (rank from 1 being what you do the most to 4 being what you do the least)

\_\_\_\_\_ I monitor behavior and discipline children if conflicts arise

\_\_\_\_\_ I instruct children in how to do different activities and observe children that they are on-task

\_\_\_\_\_ I observe children, direct tasks, manage materials, and help keep order during play

\_\_\_\_\_ I engage with children in play activities, wondering aloud and posing questions to promote reasoning

29) What is the role of play in kindergarten?

30) Additional Comments - Do you have anything else to add on the topic that has not been captured by the questions on this survey? Please feel free to add your thoughts here. Thank you.

31) If you would like to participate in a raffle with a chance to win 6 gift certificates with the amount of 5000KZT in Magnum, please, leave your mobile phone number:

### **Consent to Interview**

31) Consent to be contacted for Interview:

If you feel you use play regularly in your daily practice with children and you have at least two years of work experience in kindergarten, I would be interested to talk further about your beliefs and practice. The interview will take about an hour of your time and can be conducted at your convenience either online or offline (location and time to be determined by researcher and interviewee). If you consent to be contacted for an interview, you will be entered for a chance to win access to an online course on play paid by the researcher. Please indicate your willingness to participate in the next phase of this research study.

No, thank you.

Yes, I actively support play in my practice and am willing to participate in an interview.

*Display This Question:*

*If Consent to be contacted for Interview. Yes, I am willing to participate in an interview. Is selected.*

32) Name

33) Current Kindergarten

34) Phone Number

**Thank you for your time!**

**Appendix E. Interview Questions****Support for play in state kindergartens in Nur-Sultan: early childhood educators' perspectives**

1. How long have you taught in the current kindergarten?
2. How are decisions made about curriculum, room design, materials available, etc.?
  - a. How much flexibility and freedom do you have in your daily practice?
3. What are the first things that come to mind when you hear the word “play”?
4. What is your definition of play?
5. How do you think parents think of play in kindergarten?
6. How do you think administrators think of play in kindergarten?
7. What is the role of play in kindergarten, in your opinion?
8. What do you see as your instructional role in supporting play?
9. What types of play take place in your classroom? How do these types of play support student learning? Can you, please, provide an example?
  - a. What kinds of play would you like to see take place that aren't there already?
10. How do you see play relating to learning in kindergarten? When was the last time you used play in your class? can you take me back to that time (or some other point) where play seemed useful for learning?
11. How much choice of play activities do children have in your classroom? What kind of options are provided to children allowing for choice in play?
12. What do you think about free play?
13. Do you have anything else to add?

**Appendix F. Findings presented in table format****Table 1. Age Range Of Respondents**

Age range	18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	Total
Respondents	8	39	35	18	7	107
Percentage %	7.48%	36.45%	32.71%	16.82%	6.54%	100%

**Table 2. Respondents' Level of Education**

Level of education	Respondents	Percentage %
High school diploma	0	0.00%
Vocational education and training	21	20.39%
Bachelor's degree (Ba/BSc)	77	74.76%
Master's degree (MA/MS)	5	4.85%
Doctoral degree (PhD/EdD)	0	0.00%
Total	103	100%

**Table 3. Respondents' Years of Experience in ECE**

Years of experience	Respondents	Percentage %
1 or less	13	12.15%
2-5 years	31	28.97%
6-10 years	27	25.23%
11-15 years	15	14.02%
16-20 years	8	7.48%

20 or more years	13	12.15%
Total	107	100%

**Table 4. Interview Participants**

	<b>Participant's pseudonym</b>	<b>Online or face-to-face</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Years of experience in ECE</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>generalist/specialist</b>
1	Educator 1	face-to-face	RU	31	ECE	Generalist
2	Educator 2	face-to-face	RU	13	School Teacher	Specialist ("Intellectum" games)
3	Educator 3	face-to-face	RU	8	School Teacher	Generalist and Methodist
4	Educator 4	face-to-face	KZ	7	ECE (MA)	Generalist (younger kids, 2-3 year-olds)
5	Educator 5	face-to-face	KZ	18	ECE	Generalist + Methodist
6	Educator 6	Zoom	RU	5	School teacher	Generalist (used to be a specialist – English teacher)
7	Educator 7	face-to-face	RU	9	Music and singing	Specialist (Music teacher)
8	Educator 8	Zoom	RU	18	ECE	Generalist
9	Educator 9	face-to-face	RU	10	Primary School Teacher	Specialist (2 subjects - Maths and World Around Us; speech therapist)

**Table 5. Opinions on Questions on Teacher Beliefs about Play and Learning**

<i>How important is play in the kindergarten?</i>				
Not important	Not so important	Important	Very important	
		17	80	
<i>It is _____ for the teacher to provide a variety of materials to support children's play</i>				
Not important	Not so important	Important	Very important	
1		42	54	
<i>It is _____ for teachers to plan extended periods of time for children to engage in play.</i>				
Not important	Not so important	Important	Very important	
3	6	65	22	
<i>It is more important for kindergarten children to play than to complete academic tasks such as workbooks, worksheets, and similar activities during the day</i>				
Absolutely disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree, nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Absolutely agree
10	25	10	23	27
<i>I integrate play as a vehicle for learning to meet learning standards</i>				



Absolutely disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree, nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Absolutely agree
5	2	4	19	67

**Table 6. Opinions on the Question: “If a teacher observes child’s play, s/he can learn about a child’s...”:**

Motor development	58
Social and emotional development	75
Math knowledge and skills	35
Language and literacy knowledge and skills	48
Science knowledge and skills	21
Music development	28

**Table 7. Opinions on the Question: “What is the primary role of play in your kindergarten classroom?”**

Play is a break from work and motivation to finish academic work.	2
Play is a way to make academic tasks more appealing.	12
Play is a means to further social and emotional development.	9
Play is a means to integrate social, emotional, moral, and intellectual development goals.	74

**Table 8. Opinions on the Question: “How do you view play as it relates to learning in kindergarten?”**

Play and learning are two different things. There is a time for play and a time for the work of academic learning.	2
Play and learning can go together. Kindergarten children learn some skills and knowledge through playful activities.	19
Play and learning are complementary and must go together. Kindergarten children learn through play and demonstrate what they have learned through play.	76

**Table 9. Opinions on the Play Environment**

<i>My classroom environment (room design, furniture, layout, etc.) provides adequate space for play activities.</i>				
Absolutely disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree, nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Absolutely agree
2	7	6	25	55
<i>My classroom environment provides a range of interesting materials in ample quantities for children to use during play activities.</i>				

Absolutely disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree, nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Absolutely agree
1	13	4	20	58
<i>My classroom has clearly defined and organized areas (ex: blocks area, role play area, tables for drawing) to support play activities.</i>				
Absolutely disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree, nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Absolutely agree
2	9	6	15	64

**Table 10. Responses to the Question: “What types of play take place in your classroom?”**

1.	Playing with Arts (e.g. integrating forms of art into play, drawing, modeling, creating music, performing puppet shows; explore arts to express feelings and ideas)	62
2.	Small Motor Play (e.g. play with small toys and manipulatives like stringing beads, puzzles, sorting objects, Legos)	60
3.	Language Play (e.g. playing with words, rhymes, verses, and songs; telling stories and dramatizing them)	55
4.	Construction Play (e.g. building houses, ships, forts, and other structures)	54

5.	Sensory play (e.g. playing with dirt, sand, mud, water, and materials with different textures, sounds, and smells to develop senses)	40
6.	Rules-based Play (making up own rules, social negotiation to adapt rules for play situation)	35
7.	Mastery Play (repeating an action over and over to mastery, such as making dozens of bows for birthday packages)	31
8.	Make-Believe Play (also called pretend play; begins with “Let’s pretend” and follows child’s narrative or story)	30
9.	Symbolic play (children taking an object and converting it into a toy or prop through fluid process of fantasy or imagination)	28
10	Other:  “intellectual games”, “developing games”, “attention games, fingerplay, active play”, “Voskobovich games”, “music games”	7

**Table 11. Types of Play and Resources Present (+) and Missing/Lacking (-)**

	Sensory material s	Gross motor play	Fine motor play	Imagina tive play	Technol ogy	Interact ive games	Board games	Art
Ed 1		+	+	+	-	-	+	+
Ed 2	-	+	-				+	

Ed 3	-		-	+				
Ed 4	+	+	+	+	-		+	+
Ed 5	-	-	+	+				-
Ed 6	-	+	+	+	-		+	
Ed 7		+			-			-
Ed 8	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	
Ed 9		+	-	-	-	-	-	+

**Table 12. Responses to the Question: “How do you prepare before play in your classroom? (select all that apply)”**

Providing materials (open-ended materials, imaginative play props, etc.)	52
Developing rules for choice/play (ex: limiting number of students in each area, limiting length of time in each area, assigning play buddies, etc.)	37
Providing space (setting up centers, choice areas)	35
Providing time (a set time in the day/week allocated to choice/play)	30
Asking children to choose or assigning children to activities	27
Delineating choices available (from “everything open” to specifying choices)	22
Other (please specify)	3

**Table 13. Responses to the Question: “How do you provide support during play in your classroom? (select all that apply)”**

Being present; observing and accepting play	53
Initiating play by making material suggestions	48
Helping resolve conflict	48
Providing suggestions to specific children about what to play	40
Inquiring or commenting on play	37
Initiating play by making activity suggestions	33
Helping play proceed, setting limits, or answering questions	28
Responding to play by limiting or stopping play	13

**Table 14. Responses to the Question: “How do you provide support after play experiences? (select all that apply)”**

Talking about and discussing play with children	71
Documenting play via photos, videos, or document displays	38
Talking about and discussing the next play session with children	26
Allowing material to stay in place to continue play	19
Other (please specify)	3

**Table 15. Responses to the Question: “How often is playful learning integrated in your classroom in an average week?”**

Once a week.	2
Two or three times a week.	30
Four or more times each week.	58

**Table 16. Responses to the Question: “On a typical day, how long is each play period on average?”**

0-15 minutes	21
15-30 minutes	53
30-45 minutes	12
45 minutes or more	4

**Table 17. Responses to the Question: “Play in my classroom is:”**

Mostly child-directed, self-selected free play	27
A blend of child-initiated play and adult-guided experiences	51
Mostly adult-guided (i.e. teacher-created) playful learning activities	13

**Table 18. Opinions on the Question: “Free play is an appropriate method of instruction for what grade(s) or age groups?”**

Age range	Number of respondents
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Birth - 1 year	5
1 and 2 year olds	22
3 and 4 year olds	38
5 and 6 year olds	29
1st Grade	11
2nd Grade	6
3rd Grade	6
All ages (from birth to 3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade)	44



## Appendix G. An Example of Interview Transcription and Translation

Original	Translation
<p><b>Исследователь:</b> Какие у Вас ассоциации со словом «игра»?</p> <p><b>Педагог 1:</b> «Игра»? Ну, мы живем игрой (улыбаясь)... Я столько лет – 31 год – в детском саду работаю, игра – это основной вид деятельности детей, и дети только развиваются в игре. Дети другого языка не понимают, поэтому только в игре им можно доступно объяснить...</p>	<p><b>Researcher:</b> What do you think about when you hear the word “play”?</p> <p><b>Educator 1:</b> “Play”? Well, we live by play (smilng)... I've been working in kindergarten for so many years – for 31 years, and play is the main activity of children, and children only develop in play. Children do not understand another language, so only in play we can explain to them easily...</p>
<p><b>Исследователь:</b> Каково Ваше определение слова «игра»?</p> <p><b>Педагог 5:</b> В игре ребенок раскрывается, я думаю, когда даешь немного свободы ребенку. Например, в нашем детском саду, когда рисуют дети, у нас есть определенные правила - садимся за стол, вот тебе бумага. Свободы никакой. Можно было бы предоставить стену, где дети могли бы рисовать, чтобы там дети рисовали свое настроение, чтобы была стена, которую легко стереть..</p>	<p><b>Researcher:</b> What is your definition of the word “play”?</p> <p><b>Educator 5:</b> In play, the child opens up, I think, when you give a little freedom to the child... For example, in our kindergarten, when children draw, we have certain rules - we sit down at the table, here's a piece of paper. No freedom. It would be great if we could provide a wall where children could draw and paint, so that children could express their mood, if there was a wall which could be easily cleaned..</p>
<p><b>Исследователь:</b> Что, по Вашему мнению, думают об игре в детском саду родители?</p> <p><b>Педагог 2:</b> Ну конечно, они в первую очередь хотят, чтобы их дети умели считать, писать, азы знали, к школе чтоб готовили, но когда после обеда играешь с ними ... не просто посадил, игрушки дал, раскидал, пазлы там, еще что-нибудь, а когда ты с ними действительно занимаешься целенаправленно, то они очень даже этому рады..</p>	<p><b>Researcher:</b> What, in your opinion, do parents think of play in kindergarten?</p> <p><b>Educator 2:</b> Well, of course, first of all, they want their children to be able to count, write, know the basics, to prepare for school, but when in the afternoon you play with them ... not just let them sit with toys scattered, or puzzles or something else... but when you really work with them purposefully, they are very happy about it...</p>