TEACHER EXPERIENCES WITH PLAY-BASED LEARNING: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY IN SUBURBAN BRITISH COLUMBIA

by

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Abstract

In Surrey, British Columbia teachers use play-based learning to support young students under the guidance of the provincial curriculum including language diverse settings. This qualitative phenomenological research study investigated teacher experiences with implementing play-based learning for English language learner support in kindergarten and Grade 1 classrooms. All participants were employed by the Surrey school district during the research study. Six participants completed interviews and another six completed digital surveys that were used for complementarity. Interview and survey transcripts were coded with a Vygotskian theoretical lens and five themes were developed: teaching philosophies and practices, school experiences, literacy, play, and English Language Learning. Conclusions included teachers defined play-based learning in different ways; teachers noticed positive impacts of play on ELL students; teachers used two distinct play-based strategies for supporting ELL students; and the pandemic had negative impacts on teachers, their students, and student caregivers. Recommendations for teachers of ELL students included getting directly involved in play, teaching play strategies explicitly, and employing teaching strategies that incorporated language usage and play including the story workshop method and free play.

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This thesis is dedicated to the families I work with in the British Columbia public education system. Your hard work and dedication to raising your children to the best of your ability is inspiring.

I want to thank my partner, children, parents, pets, and colleagues for supporting me with completing this. I appreciate every time you fed me, hugged me, laughed with me, and reminded me of my own strength. Thank you also to my supervisor who did not give up on me. This was not an easy time in history to do anything and it is only because of all of you that I pulled this off. Thank you.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis investigated the intersection of play and language development in suburban British Columbia (BC) kindergarten and Grade 1 classrooms. The provincial curriculum has directed teachers to use play as a literacy support (Province of British Columbia, 2019a; 2019b) through "playing with language" (https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/curriculum) alongside recent population growth in BC through immigration (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2018) which has led to greater language diversity in schools. The BC Ministry of Education *English Language Learners Policy Guidelines* (2018) states that students receiving public funding for language learning require "specialized" (p. 7) support for a term of up to 5 years (p. 10). The term "specialized" suggests that English language learning is an exceptionality that places it within the scope of this thesis. It is a unique exceptionality as it is not considered a disability (Sousa, 2011) and it is funded for a limited amount of time. There is little published research representing experiences of teachers using play to support young English language learner (ELL) students. The goal of this research was to uncover that perspective.

In this chapter, I discuss the research significance and purpose of this phenomenological inquiry, the study's and my context, as well as an overview of the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

Significance of the Research

For early elementary teachers in Surrey BC, language diversity has required adapting to the needs of ELL students who started kindergarten with less English exposure than students who spoke only English at home. There is some evidence in literature that the play-based approach prescribed in the provincial curriculum may be effective for supporting young ELL students (Kuhl, 2007; Lundberg, 2009; Roskos & Christie, 2001; Roskos & Christie, 2001; Vygotsky,

1966/2016). While previous literature demonstrated that play supports language development more generally, this study investigated whether it is being applied in equally effective ways in BC, early primary English-language-learning school environments.

Many aspects of the wide-ranging instructional strategy known as *play-based learning* are less formulaic than traditional means of literacy and writing instruction, meaning play potentially provides freedom for BC teachers to exercise teacher autonomy in differentiating for and including ELL students. I adopted a phenomenological teacher-perspective approach to uncover play-based methods for supporting language development in early primary ELL classrooms because I suspected that through uncovering the experiences of teachers, I could demonstrate instructional methods that could be adapted to meet the needs of individual ELL students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to uncover early primary teacher experiences with using play to support language development in ELL classrooms in suburban British Columbia. It asked the central research question: **What are the experiences of early-elementary teachers using play-based-learning as a strategy for developing literacy skills amongst kindergarten and Grade 1 students?** Supporting questions included:

- What kinds of assessments are teachers using to assess play as a language-development support in the classroom?
- How are teachers adjusting their play-based instructional practice in response to assessments of the practice?

Two phenomenological concepts can be applied to explain the motivation for this inquiry: epistemology and ontology. Epistemology is the nature of knowledge (Dibley et. al., 2020). In

phenomenological study the experiences of humans are valued as a form of knowledge. My lived experience as teacher affirmed that building knowledge through a reflexive, collaborative process of discussion and shared experiences with colleagues was a dependable form of meaning-making. In my practice, my colleagues had valuable knowledge to share and together we improved the experiences of students and their families through sharing with one another what we knew to be effective teaching practice. Ontology is the nature of being (Dibley et. al., 2020). In phenomenological study this means that researcher bias is embraced. It is not possible to separate my experience from the experiences of the teacher participants and observe as an objective outsider because I am not an objective outsider. I exist in the same context as the study participants. This bias is not a failure of the study, because my existing, or *being*, in the same context as study participants brought the study into existence. It was the condition that allowed me to conduct meaningful interviews with them.

Background of the Study

The study was conducted in Surrey, BC. With recent population growth in the region, this district has been challenged to create space for and support new students. Many school additions, new schools, and property acquisitions were in development or planned for the near future throughout the study (https://www.surreyschools.ca/page/112/capital-project-office). It is a language-diverse district with more than 196 languages spoken by students at home as of 2022 (Surrey Schools, 2022). This is a significant rise from only 91 in 2002 (Sereda, 2016). Only 45.96% of students in this district in 2015 spoke English at home, while in 2005, 60% of students spoke English at home (Sereda, 2016). These statistics demonstrate a trend in language diversity growth. To further demonstrate the vastness of language diversity, in 2015, in a district mainly composed of English-speaking schools, 15 648 students were registered as speaking primarily

Punjabi at home. Of the remaining students speaking languages other than English at home, 4279 spoke Chinese or Mandarin, 3575 spoke Filipino, 2481 spoke Hindi, 1484 spoke Vietnamese and 1311 spoke Korean (Sereda, 2016). For the 2022/2023 school year the district reported that of students who spoke a language other than English at home, they spoke Punjabi, Mandarin, Hindi, Tagalog, and Arabic the most (Surrey Schools, 2022).

This school district has a welcome centre for new ELL families that supports language development as part of its extensive programming. The welcome centre website lists several programs and resources developed to support ELL and new immigrant families including programs for new immigrant ELL students and their families to address significant literacy needs (https://www.surreyschools.ca/welcomecentre). Dedication of resources to support immigrants and language learning is evidence of a school district with a large ELL population.

The global pandemic was also part of the context of this study: the pandemic had impacts on how children played and socialized and how educators supported them with learning through play. Play-based educators around the world first adjusted to the movement from in-person to fully online instruction and then back to in-person in a new and restricted learning environment (Timmons et al., 2021). Then they shifted their practice to supporting students experiencing negative impacts of prolonged isolation from peers (Egan et al., 2021). Other negative impacts that teachers were adapting to during this time included constant school staffing shortages, illness of school staff and students, and a general sense of fatigue (Gillani et al., 2022). More research is needed to understand how these factors impacted this school district specifically.

Researcher Context

In this section I address my bias towards play-based learning for ELL support. To manage my bias, I embraced the concepts of epoché and reduction (van Manen, 2016a). This included

acknowledging my own context within the research. My history as elementary school teacher began in a northern BC community where I taught students in Grades 1 through 6 for 4 years before relocating to the Surrey school district where I currently work. Here I experienced more language diversity in the classroom than I had further north. The relocation drew my attention to the challenges of teaching in an ELL classroom and the successes of colleagues who were using play-based instructional strategies when students spoke little or no English. I was intrigued by this, not having seen the method used so consistently across subject areas before and I wondered if teachers in other locations were aware of the effectiveness of play as instructional support for ELL students.

During the time that interviews and surveys were being conducted I taught kindergarten and in September of 2022 I changed positions to an elementary school administrator in the same school district. As an administrator I supported teachers but was no longer directly involved in teaching early primary students daily. Despite this, I continued to advocate for and implement play-based education in my new role.

My bias as a play-based educator was present throughout the study. I cannot deny that I have always enjoyed participating in play-based learning and instruction. This may be due to nostalgia for my childhood, but I suspect that just as play is natural for children (Kuhl, 2007) it is natural for adults. Or it may be due to my Vygotskian teacher education, during which I was taught to employ scaffolding techniques. Either way, I have come to believe that play is a natural way to employ Vygotskian theory in practice. For example: when I taught kindergarten my young students were given multiple play-based options when practicing letter formation. They might hunt through a tub of dried beans in which plastic letters are scattered to find all the letter *A*'s or they might be given an assortment of loose parts such a stones and acorns to form the

letter *A*. Whenever possible, my students were given time and options to best show what they knew through play. It was an enjoyable and simple process for both them and me.

The assessment process was equally simple. My school district provided me with multiple reporting options including a digital portfolio system. The digital portfolio system freed me to photograph or video students as they played and it allowed me to attach assessment comments to video and photo artifacts, communicating with caregivers in live-time. The visual assessment artifacts offered a clear representation of student progress without extraneous or complex written language. Many ELL caregivers preferred this format over traditional paper report cards as they reduced communication barriers.

Limitations

A phenomenological design led to limitations associated with researcher error and my position as researcher practicing within the field heightened this possibility. Van Manen described this state as “au monde” or being both “in” and “of” the world (2016a). It was a limitation that required me to employ van Manen’s cycle of epoché and reduction. I limited potential for this sort of error through a process of ongoing reflection and acknowledgment of personal bias in reflexive journal entries which is described in further detail in chapter 3. There were also limitations associated with the pandemic. Prior to the start of the study, I believed I was experiencing computer mediated communication (CMC) exhaustion, a condition commonly known as “Zoom fatigue” (Nadler, 2020) and thought my participants would likely be experiencing the same. It is possible that this limited the amount of applicants for the study.

The study had potential to justify my own instructional choices, but this was not my motivation. My intention was to use findings to develop the fields of early learning, play-based learning and English language learning for the benefit of other educators. Despite the challenge

of bracketing personal bias, I chose to investigate a topic for which I have great personal affection intentionally. The result was that my wonder for play-based learning in this context continued throughout the process of completing the study.

Chapter Summary

ELL students and early primary teachers in this context have experienced and implemented play-based learning prior to this study, but the unique quality of this suburban setting suggested that those outside of it may not have fully grasped some of its benefits. In this setting, it is often *only* during play times that I noticed gains in my students' language skills. I wondered if knowledge of these gains would be beneficial to teachers supporting classrooms with fewer ELL students or in different contexts.

The literature review in Chapter 2 addresses the terminology and philosophy that applies to the field of play-based learning and themes uncovered in study data. The literature review also demonstrates the value of this kind of study as it reveals a history of applying play and English language learning strategies in diverse contexts. In the third chapter are the methodology, ethical considerations, research procedures, data analysis and study evaluation. Throughout all these sections, a focus on adopting a researcher perspective that prioritized experiences of educators using play-based strategies to support ELL students is present. Chapter 3 also addresses my Vygotskian theoretical positioning and its conflicts with a phenomenological method. The fourth chapter includes results of the study and discusses themes uncovered. Results included codes uncovered in interview and survey transcriptions as well as theme development. In the concluding chapter I discuss conclusions I found in the study results as well as pedagogical, methodological, and theoretical implications, followed by a set of recommendations. In the very last section, I discuss lessons I learned as a researcher.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Play-based learning has been central to my work for several years because it was central to my teaching philosophy, which I explain below, and because the BC Ministry of Education required it to be (BC Ministry of Education, 2023). My philosophy developed out of experiences with play as child, educator, and parent. The BC curriculum incorporates play-based learning as "playing with language helps us discover how language works" and "curiosity and wonder lead us to new discoveries about ourselves and the world around us" (BC Ministry of Education, 2023, "English Language Arts K" section). The BC Ministry of Education published two additional documents to support teachers with play-based learning and instruction known as *Play Today* (Province of British Columbia, 2019b) and the *British Columbia Early Learning Framework* (Province of British Columbia, 2019a). These resources, in combination with the provincial curriculum, create a prescription for play in BC primary classrooms. My pre-understandings (Dibley et al., 2020, p. 28) of play were also present in the investigation. In Chapter 3, I explain how the concept of pre-understandings benefitted the research.

Literature in the field of play-based learning is vast. To narrow its scope, reflect my understandings, and define key terminology in this chapter, I referred to my research question "what are the experiences of early-elementary teachers using play-based-learning as a strategy for developing literacy skills amongst ELL students?" Investigating this question within published literature on the topic, I identified five focus areas: (1) teacher and caregiver experiences, (2) play as pedagogical, (3) play for language development, (4) play for ELL literacy support, and (5) play-based learning for ELL support during the pandemic. In this way I addressed teacher perspectives, including their connections to student caregivers; assumptions

that play is an accepted form of instruction and learning; that play supports literacy; and that play has unique value for supporting ELL students.

Teacher and Caregiver Experiences

The data in this study uncovered a deep belief that relationships between teachers, their students, and student caregivers impact the well-being and learning of students. In this study the term "caregiver" refers to adults legally responsible for the care of students outside of school. I have chosen this term because it includes parents, guardians, and adults caring for students without the legal status of parents and legal guardians including older siblings, grandparents, family friends, and others. The following two studies demonstrated the existence of this concept in literature prior to the study. They show the interconnectedness of teachers, students, and student caregivers in school environments.

The Hagenauer et al. (2015) quantitative European study of 132 teachers demonstrated a connection between teacher-student relationships and teacher feelings of joy. Researchers used Frenzel's model of emotions which suggests that a person's emotional response is related to their evaluation of a situation. Surveys were developed in which teachers could rate emotional response to various aspects of teaching on a scale. Aspects of teaching included teacher emotions, teachers' self-efficacy, and teachers' perception of student behavior. Findings included discovering that student engagement and student lack-of-discipline were predictors of teacher emotions. Self-efficacy was a predictor of joy but not negative emotions. The mean level of joy was relatively high compared to anger among participants. This noted, anger may have been misrepresented in the study as it may have incompatible with some teacher norms that were assumed in the study development including care for students. It also may have been due to the sample which was comprised of mainly experienced teachers. The Hagenauer et al. study

demonstrated the potential of participants to have emotional connections to how effective they believe they are as educators and how positive they perceive their relationships with students to be. This study demonstrates that teacher relationships and their connection to teacher feelings are an important aspect of the experience of being a teacher.

An American study investigating the co-caring relationship of teachers and parents found that relationships between the adults who care for a child impact student well-being (Lang et al., 2020). The study surveyed parents of infants or toddlers attending childcare in 90 different families. Participants completed demographic questions, a co-caring relationship questionnaire, the Child Parent Relationship Scale (CPRS) short form and the Infant-toddler Social Emotional assessment. Results demonstrated that co-caring relationships between parents and teachers of young children have direct impacts on the social emotional wellness of the children. When parents felt confident in the teachers' abilities to care for their children, the social emotional wellbeing of the children was greater. This study demonstrated that there is immense value in educators co-caring with student's caregivers when planning for instruction and this too is an important aspect of the teacher experience.

Keung and Cheung's (2019) mixed-method study investigated the success of play-based pedagogy implementation in Hong Kong kindergartens. The investigation was through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory which states that children develop within a complex system of relationships and environments (Berk, 2013, p. 26). While this is different from the Vygotskian lens of this proposed study, it does not conflict with it and is an intriguing addition to literature regarding play-based pedagogy.

Researchers identified three key components in the holistic education of young children: parents, teachers, and kindergarten schools (Keung & Cheung, 2019). Their method included

participation of 50 Hong Kong kindergartens over 2 years. From the 50 kindergartens, 73 principals and head teachers and 211 teachers participated in quantitative surveys that ended with an invitation to participate in a qualitative interview. Twenty-nine participants including principals, head teachers, and teachers, from 11 kindergartens participated in focus groups. The data collected lacked the perspective of the parents, despite identifying them as a key component in successful child education.

The quantitative surveys included five sections addressing personal information, effectiveness of play-based learning, impact on the children's learning, play pedagogy implementation, development in future and professional development (Keung & Cheung, 2019). Analysis of surveys demonstrated that a collaborative school culture positively impacted teachers' implementation of play pedagogy as well as connection between school and home. It also demonstrated that implementation of play pedagogy in combination with strong home-school connection had significant positive impacts on child development. The strongest positive impact on student learning was made by teachers. Researchers identified three themes in qualitative data: articulating the play pedagogy, a reflective and collaborative kindergarten culture, and involving parents. Interview findings also demonstrated the high value of collaboration between teachers for student learning and development. Researchers concluded that support for collaboration between all stakeholders, parents included, should be supported. This study suggests that play-based pedagogy requires collaboration to be effective, another characteristic to add to the list of play pedagogy attributes.

A recent mixed methods study in the Netherlands (Katwijk et al., 2022) investigated the value of inquiry among preservice teachers. The 359 educator participants completed digital questionnaires and 30 of those participated in focus group sessions. Results demonstrated that

preservice teachers found inquiry to be a challenging, rewarding, and valuable habit of mind. Despite expressing feelings of exhaustion associated with preservice teacher education, they found the benefits of inquiry worth the negative experiences of tiredness and stress.

A 2013 ethnographic, feminist study on an early childhood educator's experience with teaching while completing graduate studies is evidence that teacher inquiry is often uncomfortable (Madrid et al., 2013). The single participant co-authored the study to ensure trustworthiness between participant and researcher. Data from daily discussions, classroom interactions, field notes, interviews, video, and audio transcription were combined to create an ethnographic record from which the researcher created results and discussion. Uncovered themes included *toys from home & consumerism* and *sassy girls: relational and physical aggression*. These findings led the participant co-author to feel uncomfortable emotional responses, and at the same time, the discomfort motivated her to engage in productive discussions with both students and their caregivers regarding play behaviors. Discomfort with assessing play in educational settings with stakeholders demonstrates the possible complexity of assessment and suggests that educator experiences with play assessment may be uncomfortable as well.

Play as Pedagogical

For the purposes of this study, pedagogy refers to an educator's teaching practice in response to theory and personal philosophy. Van Manen (2013) described the complex challenge of developing pedagogy for children as multisensory, having to "see, feel, sense, reflect and respond" to affect learning (p. 10). Research has reported that educators who have used a play-based learning method to implement pedagogy in early learning classrooms learned that effectiveness required a balance of free, unstructured play, and instruction. However, teaching responsively, as van Manen suggested poses logistical and planning problems. It requires

commitment to continuously adapting instructional methods. Edwards (2017) offered the solution to this problem as embracing an open-ended, modelled, and purposeful style of instruction (Edwards, 2017). This section of my literature review attempts to uncover the theory, research, and practice behind this complexity.

In this section are education theories that have supported the development of play-based learning into pedagogy are introduced, followed by evidence of ongoing research and development that evolved from those theories. I have included a section on play-based learning for social-emotional development, which has been a distinct and large subsection of play-based pedagogy. Next, are two sections on physical aspects of play-based learning specific to this pedagogy: play-environments and play materials. The concluding section is on play pedagogy during the pandemic and addresses the specific challenges of using play-based pedagogy during the COVID 19 pandemic. Play-based learning is a pedagogy with a history of theory, practice, and research; as well as unifying elements that define it as such.

Founding Play Theorists and Innovators

Play has been a part of child-development theory and practice throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. One of the most influential thinkers in psychology of the 20th century, Jean Piaget promoted learning through play for children of a young age. Piaget identified play as part of the preoperational stage of a child's development: through play a child could assimilate the world to his or herself (Piaget & Inhelder, 2000). By this definition, play was a means of expression for a human limited by his or her early stage of existence. In future decades of research and theory play would move from being an indicator of developmental stage to also being method of learning and making meaning.

Lev Vygotsky was another major 20th century learning theorist. His sociocultural theory continues to guide many developments in the field of education today. In 1933, Vygotsky (2016/1966) posed that play was more than expression. He defined play as "wish fulfillment" for a child and more than a pleasurable, childlike pastime (p. 8). "In play a new relationship is created between the semantic field – that is between situations in thought and real situations" (Vygotsky, 2016/1966, p. 20). To Vygotsky, play was the way a child learned about the world. His elevating of play as a form of meaning-making was an ideal theoretical lens for this phenomenological study as Vygotsky's theories add to the study's ontology during data analysis. To understand Vygotsky's view of play it is helpful to know two key pieces of terminology central to his thinking: sociodramatic play and the zone of proximal development.

Sociodramatic play involved planned-ahead scenarios and included roles with rules for the behaviors of each role (Hostettler Scharer, 2017). It was the method by which children learned social rules and practiced situations beyond their own experiences and ability. Vygotsky's term "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD) (1978/1935) has been referenced frequently in published literature. The ZPD is a theoretical space in which a child learns best, with supports put in place or removed to create parameters to promote learning without overwhelming or boring the learner. It is my suspicion that early primary teachers spend more time trying to find and assess the appropriate ZPD for individual students than they do on any other aspect of planning or assessment. Important to the topics of this research study, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (2016/1966) placed value on the ability of social interaction to construct language and meaning, posing that cultural forces caused more important cognitive development in human beings than biological ones. In following decades, researchers would continue to build on his

writings by presenting play-based methods and tracking the success and failure of using them in early learning environments.

The Italian school known as Reggio Emelia is one of the 20th century's most well-known implementors of play-based learning and much of its pedagogy was aligned with Vygotsky. Reggio Emelia's continued prevalence in play-based discussions makes it worth including in this review of early 20th century developments in play-based learning. Reggio Emelia claimed to address a gap the founders believed existed between early learning theory and practice in a specific context (Malaguzzi, 2012). The initiative began as a post-war grassroots community school built by families of young students. The goal of the families was to provide children with a higher quality school that was not discriminatory, and separate from the Catholic Church (Malaguzzi, 2012). Loris Malaguzzi, its founding educator, described play as one of a "hundred languages," a term referring to a child's need for multiple modes to communicate intelligence. Malaguzzi described make-believe play as the way young children developed intelligence, reciprocity among children, the ability to persist in activity and dialogue, and the ability to create symbols (Malaguzzi, L. & Gandini, L., 1993). The Reggio Emilia method has continued to evolve and be studied around the world by early childhood educators into the 21st century (Hewitt, 2001; Childress, 2020; North American Reggio Emilia Alliance, 2021; Sunday, 2020). It is on the basis of theorists and practitioners such as Piaget, Vygotsky, and Reggio Emelia that the following research developed as part of a field of play-based learning. These founding play theorists rate play as a valuable form of learning as it is used by the participants in my study to support literacy and language learning.

Subsequent Play Research

In this section I demonstrate some more recent findings in play research. This research assumes the import of play, based on earlier theorists including the ones I listed above, but investigate the nuances of play and how teachers currently implement it.

Choice is a concept commonly associated with play pedagogy. Patall et al.'s (2008) research on intrinsic motivation is a good example of choice in play. In their comparison of 41 studies, Patall et al. found that choice had a large positive effect on intrinsic motivation but only a small positive effect on subsequent learning. This may have been because not all included studies measured positive effects of performance, learning and effort. The authors also found that the type of choice that seemed instructionally irrelevant had the most positive effect on intrinsic motivation. This may suggest that offering choice to students in times of free play in the classroom has value for educators looking to increase student engagement and success.

Researchers investigated whether children were absorbing content knowledge teachers assumed was embedded in play-based lessons in an Australian study in environmental education (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013). They identified virtues of the strategy: opportunities for play and discovery, relating to specific cultural experiences not necessarily understood by all children, and leading to making meaning and developing an understanding of the world. Cutter-Mackenzie and Edwards hypothesized a definition of "purposefully framed play" (p. 202) composed of 3 types of play: free play, modeled play, and teacher-child interaction opportunities. This three-piece model demonstrated an example of a pedagogical plan for play instruction.

Cutter-Mackenzie & Edward's study included 16 early learning centres enrolling children ages four and five in Melbourne, Australia. Learning Centre teachers were presented with three clusters to choose from, with each cluster focussed on one of the three types of play listed above. Next, teachers created play-based lessons related to the chosen cluster type as well as with a

focus on environment and sustainability. Lessons were video recorded and presented to children followed by a video recorded discussion with the children of what they had learned. The resulting video evidence was presented to teachers for further discussion. Each teacher was individually interviewed and the resulting interviews were video recorded for further data collection.

Findings included the discovery that teachers used pedagogical play strategies different from those defined in the project. All three types of play were best implemented in conjunction with each other (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013) which implied that free play alone was insufficient for children to gain meaning from play. Adult involvement was necessary for play to be effective. Further evidence demonstrated that play was more than childlike behaviour to be included in early primary programming for social interaction and relief from academic learning. This study uncovered the complexity of balancing different play types in an education setting and the value of understanding the purpose of each type.

In a study of 101 Ontario kindergarten teachers the challenge of defining play-based learning was studied (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). The researchers used surveys to identify varying definitions of play, different adult roles in play, and the range of benefits and challenges of play-based pedagogy. Analysis revealed that 41% of participants described play as being useful for social skill development while 59% believed that it led to academic learning as well. This led the researchers to identify a need for a clearer definition of the play-based learning mandate for Ontario teachers.

Results of the Fesseha and Pyle study revealed widely varying perceptions of play as an instructional strategy. It also had implications for assessment: because teachers did not agree on the motivation for using a play-based instructional strategy assessment plans were equally

contradictory. If teachers included play only to teach social skills, they did not assess students on any content areas such as math or reading during play times. This study demonstrated that the motivation for including play-based learning may have a direct impact on what is being reported by teachers regarding student success with play-based learning.

Play for Social-Emotional Learning

This section demonstrates that in published literature play is valuable for its ability to support students with social-emotional learning, a core competency in the BC curriculum.

A 2021 Hong Kong study investigated the connection between positive relationships and student happiness (Leung et al., 2021). Nine hundred eighty students in Grades 4, 5 and 6 completed a questionnaires, once at the beginning and once at end of the school year. The questionnaires asked students to rate their relationship with their parent(s), peer(s), and teacher(s). They were also asked to rate their sense of academic achievement and happiness. Researchers discovered that positive relationships with parents and peers correlated with student sense of happiness and recommended that schools take measures to support peer relationships at school. This study demonstrates the value of teaching social-emotional learning and social skills at school. The following studies demonstrate a connection between social emotional learning and play.

Evidence that social-emotional learning is an accepted part of play-based learning pedagogy is cross-discipline, appearing in both early learning and psychiatric fields of literature (Anderson et al., 2018; Marcelo & Yates, 2014; Whitebread et al., 2009; Wilson & Ray, 2018). A small-scale 2018 American study regarding supporting students at risk of behavioural disorders demonstrated that student ability to play is considered a determiner of overall success in school (Anderson et al., 2018). In this study classroom teachers selected used the Early Screening

Project assessment and Preschool and Kindergarten Behaviour Scales to select three kindergarten students. All three students were assessed to be at risk for either or both emotional and/or behavioural disorders. The same four-component intervention focused on social skills instruction, adult mediation, self-evaluation, and parent involvement was used on all three over the course of 4-5 weeks. A multiple-baseline-across-participants design was used, and results were graphed daily. For all students, an improvement in the amount of positive social interactions was noted every time interventions were used for all students. This study was quite small, with only three students and a study length of only 5 weeks, however, it reveals the import placed on success with play interactions. The focus on teaching social skills needed for play demonstrates the need for play instruction – that is, not every skill a child develops during play evolves without explicit teaching.

Play-based learning for social-emotional learning has also been harnessed into an effective counselling method for children exhibiting aggressive behaviour. A 2018 randomized control study of play therapy in Texas Title 1 elementary schools demonstrated that focused child-centered play therapy (CCPT) may result in aggressive children becoming less aggressive, more self-regulated and empathetic (Wilson & Ray, 2018). The study sample included 71 children between five and 10 years old. Thirty-six children participated in the treatment group and 35 in the waitlisted control group. All participants had been identified by teachers as having problematic aggressive behaviours. The Children's Aggression Scale (CAS) and the Social Emotional Assets and Resilience Scales (SEARS) were used as instrument measures to assess children's progress as pre and post-tests. Children in the treatment group received play therapy according to the CCPT manual which involved the counsellor creating a safe playroom environment for the child and building a strong therapeutic relationship with the child. The

playrooms were set up in unoccupied rooms in the schools and included the play materials outlined in the CCPT manual. Play sessions were 30 minutes each, twice a week for eight weeks. Data was analyzed for three variables: aggression, self-regulation, and empathy. Both parents and teachers completed the pre and post-tests, demonstrating that their respective perceptions between these two groups could be quite different on the aforementioned dimensions. Teachers did not notice as much improvement in aggression, self-regulation or empathy as parents did. The researchers hypothesized that this could be due to the challenge of individualized child support in a classroom setting. A longer study would be needed to confirm findings, but this research suggested play therapy as a promising support for aggressive behaviour. This is an example of how play-based learning can be applied in a public-school setting towards social emotional learning.

Play is also an instructional method to teach social skills to children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The Terpstra et al. (2002) research paper recommended several ways in which play could be used to support social skill development among autistic children in a classroom: teaching play skills in isolation, script training, peer modelling, and pivotal response training. The authors asserted that play should be taught in a variety of ways to students with autism. The aforementioned recommendations demonstrate that play teaches social skills and can be taught explicitly in multiple ways.

The above research is valuable to this study as it demonstrates the value of the social aspect of play for learning. Social emotional learning has been shown to be an important aspect of play. In future sections of this review, I demonstrate the connection between social development and language and literacy development.

Play Environments

Modern play pedagogy has included an emphasis on the environments of play-based learning. Literature has demonstrated that play environments are a sub-field of play-based learning investigation (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2021; Keeler, 2015; Sandos & Mehus, 2021; Speldewinde et al., 2020) because play is a physical act that is directly impacted directly by the spaces in which it occurs. Play environments are valuable to this study as they are a practical aspect of play-based learning in BC early primary classrooms. One of the most basic elements of environment is its status as an indoor or outdoor, the former being the more traditional educational. However, studies show that outdoor educational environments may foster learning. The following two studies investigated outdoor schools and the impact that this type of play environment may have on children. They demonstrate that environment may have a significant impact on play at school.

A UK study of child experiences with integration of indoor and outdoor play settings demonstrated the impacts that outdoor vs. indoor environments may have on play-based learning (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2021). The phenomenological study used semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to uncover the experiences of 33 young students from two UK forest schools. The dominant feature of the forest schools was adherence to play-based pedagogy. Data demonstrated three themes: break from routine, learning through play, and collaboration or teamwork. Participants were able to make comparisons between the two environments they attended school in, including being able to physically interact more freely with the subjects of their learning. Comparisons demonstrated a clear preference for outdoor learning environments. Students were able to explain that this preference was not just due to how the outdoor learning made them feel, but also due to how they learned in the outdoors. Participants demonstrated that

outdoor play-based learning gave them the freedom necessary to engage and direct their own learning which led to more meaningful learning experiences.

This study reveals another facet of play-based pedagogy: freedom as necessary for a child to take ownership of the learning process. While play-based learning involves varying levels of student agency and choice, this study reveals the value of giving students ability to take charge of learning. It has specific value to my own research because of its phenomenological methodology and its focus on student perspectives, an important contrast to my own focus on educator perspectives.

In a five-year, ethnographic study of three bush kindergarten (kinder) programs in Australia, researchers identified three unique play pedagogies: teacher-led play, student-led play, and teacher-guided (Speldewinde et al., 2020). Australia "Bush kinder programs" refers to programs that evolved from the UK forest school trend and Scandinavian outdoor learning trends. At the time of that study, bush kinder practitioners were not sufficiently commonplace enough for educators to be complacent with their pedagogy. Researchers noted that bush kinder program educators appeared more likely to understand the theory behind their practice while many teachers in UK forest schools no longer understood why forest schools employed the methods that they did. This demonstrates that research-based play instruction can exist without teachers understanding its value. This led researchers to believe that pedagogies of the three teachers they studied had more of a direct, causal impact on students than pedagogies of forest schoolteachers.

The study included three bush kinder programs that took place entirely outside in all weather (Speldewinde et al., 2020). Often no materials, other than what is provided in nature, were given to the children to inspire and support play. As part of an ethnographic methodology,

researchers were “participant observers” (Speldewinde et al., 2020, p. 4), developing their findings mainly through listening and observing teachers and students during the program as well as through semi-structured teacher interviews. At times they made video recordings that were deleted before leaving the school sites that same day. Three study vignettes were published, each one presenting a scenario from one of the programs that demonstrated the program teacher’s dominant play pedagogy. While vignettes did accurately present a specific pedagogy, they were quite limited considering the 5-year scope of the study. This created the sense that the researchers were possibly over-quick to assign a specific pedagogy to each teacher. The potential problem with this method of research presentation is that is not difficult to imagine that teachers might commonly use all three pedagogy styles in their practices. For example, a teacher might begin a new unit of learning with a student-led lesson in which students explore and then report what they have found or learned. Next, the teacher may use these student findings to present a teacher-led lesson with on-topic books or activities to build on the topics that the students are engaged in. As an end to the unit, the teacher might use a teacher-guided lesson to remind the students of what they have learned previously and continue to extend that learning. However, the vignettes effectively present all three pedagogy types. This study demonstrated that while environment may be a large factor in play pedagogy for some, it is still the over-arching pedagogies like Furtak et al.’s student-led inquiry (2012) and Edward’s play framework (2017) that determine the structure of individual play lessons. For this research study the research on play environments creates a framework for participant discussion of environment, a topic I anticipated would frequent discussion in interviews as my own practice led me to participate in many such conversations with colleagues. The motivation for including the next section on play materials is the same.

Play Materials

Another unique quality of the physical context of play-based pedagogy is its play materials. Like play environments, play materials are a common concern of play-based educators. Budgets and availability limitations have led to educator creativity and forced teachers to reflect carefully before adding materials to their classrooms. This aspect of play-based learning became more complex than ever as material sanitation in classrooms was enforced during the early phases of the pandemic (Worksafe BC, 2020). Sanitation led to infrequent usage of once oft-employed materials that now required quarantining between uses as well as complete disuse of materials that have proven difficult or impossible to effectively sanitize. The issue of pandemic material use requires more study as educators continued to adapt to the pandemic context after the completion of this study.

Loose Parts. A pervasive theory in play materials often associated with Reggio Emelia is the theory of loose parts. In his 1973 theory, Nicholson proposed that "both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it" (p. 6). This meant that when a person had the ability to create or change his or her own environment, learning and development was fostered. Nicholson's theory placed import on the choice educators make when choosing play materials for children. In contradiction to the mainstream assumption that expensive toys manufactured for specific kinds of play were better, the concept of loose parts presented everyday materials and natural objects such as feathers, spools, and cotton balls as superior learning materials. Loose parts appealed to Reggio Emelia educators because it allowed students to express themselves creatively.

Nicholson's theories continued to be applied to early learning pedagogy into the following century. In a 2008 two-part study of a preschool playground, Maxwell et al. (2008)

compared the learning outcomes of using traditional fixed playground equipment versus loose parts. Researchers studied each section of the fixed play equipment and noted the types of play that occurred using each part. In the second phase of the study, they added loose parts to the fixed equipment playground to identify the impact loose parts had on each of the previously identified types of play. What they concluded was that the loose parts encouraged two kinds of play, which had been happening infrequently or not at all, prior to the loose parts additions: constructive and dramatic. Interestingly, the loose parts encouraged both types because children would use the parts to build enclosures inside which they enacted dramatic play scenarios. Prior to the addition of loose parts, children had mostly been participating in functional play, performing the specific actions for which each part of the fixed equipment had been designed. For example, when using the slide, they would slide.

This reveals play materials have the potential to foster both Nicholson's creativity and Vygotsky's sociodramatic play. They can create a more effective environment for play-based learning simply by existing in or as the environment. For the purposes of this study, they also reveal that material choice is an important consideration for educators looking to implement pedagogy grounded in theory and part of the experience of participants. It is a budget-friendly concept to consider the idea that inexpensive, common items such as stones and pinecones could be better choices than expensive, commercial toys in education settings.

This section demonstrated founding theory on play-based learning, more current research and some of the physical, practical elements of implementing play-based education in a modern setting. In the next section I discuss research surrounding the link between play and language and literacy development.

Play for Language and Literacy Development

The second play concept in this chapter is play for language and literacy development. I have chosen to focus on language and literacy as this concept connects to the last section of this literature review and helps build a case for my research question. This section is divided into four subsections: (a) social interaction for language acquisition, (b) connecting oral language to written language, (c) instructional challenges with teaching literacy through play-based learning, and (d) play for literacy and language development during the pandemic. These four sub-sections reflect the complexity of early literacy development and the daily considerations of early learning educators.

Social Interaction for Language Acquisition

In the 1930s, Vygotsky (2016/1966) hypothesized that through play a child was "a head taller than himself" (p. 18). The metaphor described sociodramatic play's ability to allow children to practice language necessary in the adult world. This was part of his explanation for the importance of language in the development of a human being. He argued that through language development a child could move from relying on others to relying on his or her own inner speech, taking control over his or her own mental functions (1986/1934). Supporting young students with learning through social play is part of my participants' experiences as teachers. In the following century, play researchers would build on Vygotsky's theories about play and social language development through studies in many areas of education.

In the Kuhl and Meltzoff (1996) study, researchers hypothesized that language learning resulted from linking sensory and motor experience. Questions remained, including how do infants discern which phonetic units combine to form phonemic categories? Although physiological changes in an infant's brain during language acquisition, such as when perception transitions to being language-specific, can be traced throughout the process of language

acquisition it is still not known why they occur (Kuhl & Meltzoff, 1996). Further investigation led to a 2007 paper in which Kuhl hypothesized that social interaction was in fact necessary for "natural" language learning (p. 110). The researcher detailed the complexity of speech acquisition as an explanation for why repeated exposure without social interaction is not enough to teach infants how these sounds become language (Kuhl, 2007). Kuhl found that, based on two previous studies (Maye et al., 2002; Saffran et al., 1996), that social interaction was the vital component to infant speech acquisition. She detailed her and a colleague's study from 2003 in which American infants were given Mandarin lessons via tutors who read books to and played with toys with the infants during lessons. To test whether the human tutor's presence was necessary for this learning, two additional groups of infants were put through the same process but this time tutors were presented via television or audio-only form. The last two groups produced no measurable language learning gains (Kuhl, et al., 2003). Kuhl concluded that social interaction was necessary for language learning because they were highly motivating and created a relationship between auditory labels, objects, and the speakers' intentions (Kuhl, 2003).

This suggested that social interaction is a requirement of language learning, evidence of the viability of Vygotsky's language theories. Although Kuhl's research focused on infant language acquisition, it had implications for social interaction when learning subsequent languages later in a child's life. Because play is a social activity and does not require adults to work with children one-to-one this evidence can be applied in the classroom through play-based peer tutoring. Peer tutoring is when peers teach peers without direct adult assistance. Kuhl's 2007 paper concluded by asking what defines "social agent" for an infant? Does it have to be another human being, or could there be an alternative such as an interactive language-instructing robot? (Kuhl, 2007). The pandemic era makes these questions even more relevant as young children

connect to educators through digital means more than before and families rely on technology to support early learning more often. For the purposes of this inquiry, finding a method that allows peer tutoring to occur without direct adult assistance is an important aspect of the experience of teaching young students in a modern classroom as this allows teachers to support other students with separate tasks.

Play Connects Oral Language and Written Language

Play-based learning has been well-established in early-primary education but its ability to connect a child's oral language to his or her literacy learning is what makes it an effective part of early-primary classrooms. Requirements on educators to create inclusive literacy programs while meeting curriculum demands is well-documented in literature (Kersten & Pardo, 2007). The challenge of making the connection from oral to written language is that while spoken language is biological, reading is not (Kamhi & Catts, 2012, Chapter 1). Historically this has created challenges for BC educators, especially when students enter the mainstream education system with minimal exposure to written English language. This challenge is part of the experience that this study is investigating as it is part of the context in which the study's participants exist.

Oral and Written Language at Home. The home setting is a child's first language-learning setting and literature suggests that literacy-rich home environments prepare a child for future literacy learning success. A 1982 comparative ethnographic study of three American communities demonstrated the challenges of transition from oral to written language for children of diverse socio-economic backgrounds (Heath, 1982). Literacy events imbedded in each community's culture uncovered community perceptions of early learning for children of lower socio-economic classes. The study found that the three physically close communities known as Maintown, Roadville and Trackton, had noticeably differing beliefs about storytelling that

caused literacy success rates for the children of each town. The range in success rates demonstrated that creating inclusive literacy instruction is further complicated by differing socio-economic contexts within learning cohorts.

Details from each of the communities uncovered possible discrepancies in literacy exposure in different settings. In Maintown children were exposed to books at 6 months. By age two, they were expected to use knowledge of stories from books to create imaginative narratives. In this town books were considered entertainment and connections between all aspects of life and literacy were supported by families. It was common for adults to have a running verbal commentary about what they were reading and to involve children in it, even during everyday activities like cooking. In Roadville the children were also exposed to books at an early age but were not encouraged to make connections between literacy and the world around them. Adults in Roadville did not model literacy processes for children as they did in Maintown and storytelling in Roadville was formal with only certain people in the community recognized as storytellers. The content of children's books in Roadville was chosen to promote Bible stories or moral teachings while fictionalized accounts were often considered lies. Roadville students struggled more than Maintown students with higher-level literacy tasks such as making personal connections, expressing emotions, or being creative. In Trackton, the children were not given literacy materials at home other than what was sent from church. The children in Trackton were not read to at home. Adults in Trackton believed that children learned through experience and that parents were not required to have any kind of literacy-tutoring role in their children's lives. Parents did not focus on teaching specific vocabulary skills to young children, but adults prioritized competitive storytelling from which young children gained some language skills and the ability to create narratives. When children from Trackton went to school, they encountered

literacy talk that was completely new to them, such as questions about stories and descriptions of individual experiences. They had not learned basic reading comprehension skills at home. For many of these children, literacy at school was incredibly challenging. These three contexts demonstrated how home environments can directly impact a child's ability to connect oral and written language in future. It should be noted that this study is dated and depends on a traditional instructional model that relies less on child-centred, play-based instruction. I included this study here to illustrate the contrast between my beliefs and this study's teacher participant beliefs about early learning. The existence of dated concepts regarding literacy instruction are also part of my participant's context and should be recognized even when they continue to be partially relevant.

The Heath study revealed the power of immersion in a literacy-rich environment. While a play-based curriculum in communities such as Trackton cannot compensate for lack of literacy at home, it may allow children to participate in common cultural practices (Vygotsky, 2016/1966). Problematically, the Heath study did not acknowledge that the different kind of language knowledge the children of Trackton possessed prior to school could hold value at school. To counter this lack demonstrated in the Heath study, when children's learning is less structured, play offers an opportunity for children to present freely what they know about the world (Vygotsky, 2016/1966).

Strategies for Bridging Oral and Written Language. Roskos and Christie's (2011) meta-analysis researched the history of the relationship between play and early literacy and labeled it the "play-literacy nexus" dividing knowledge into two categories: knowledge *of* the nexus, found by researchers; and *in* the nexus by children, their families, and teachers (Roskos & Christie, 2011). They found that enriched play settings had a positive effect on young children's literacy development and discovered that these environments included defined and designated

dramatic-play areas, literacy objects, adequate time, support from teachers and peers, and connections made between play and the curriculum. In the development of literacy, narrative was identified as a key component linked to play. Sociodramatic play encouraged practice with narrative through experimenting with storylines and genre as well as other narrative elements which in turn related to reading comprehension. There was evidence, although minimal, that play had a positive effect on early literacy skills such as phonological awareness and letter knowledge through literacy-enriched play settings. Specifically, the technique of "play-planning" in which students wrote out in advance what and how they were going to play may have developed some mature behaviours that supported executive functioning. These suggestions offer clear advice to educators trying to be successful with teaching literacy through play.

A small two-phase, qualitative Australian study sought to investigate the opposition to formal phonics programs among early learning educators (Campbell, 2020). The study was designed in response to a government push towards forcing teachers to use a commercial phonics program instead of relying solely on play-based methods. In the first phase of the study teachers were given a survey with one Likert-scale statement and two belief statements opposing commercial phonics programs. In the second phase, three teachers were interviewed using semi-structured interviews that used open-ended questions.

The researcher discovered that participants preferred to use child-centred, play-based lesson formats to bridge students' oral language skills and literacy skills (Campbell, 2020). Often teachers used student names to begin teaching literacy, which maintained a focus on individual children. Play-based lessons were developed using student names. They engaged students through playing with the letter sounds in their own names. While this strategy avoided usage of commercial phonics programs, it in many ways replicated the process of a commercial phonics

program through explicit teaching of phonemes and graphemes, even if the educator did not use or understand those terms. This study was too small to draw any global conclusions from it, yet it is an example of how teacher perspectives often determine how literacy is introduced to young learners through usage of oral language. It also demonstrates how development of student-centred literacy activities that incorporate play can involve all the same concepts included in a commercially produced literacy program.

At Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) School in Portland, Oregon, educators developed a method they named Story Workshop to support students using play and art to bridge the gap between and oral and written language (Mackay, 2021). In this method teachers created a provocation of materials to encourage students to create a story. Next, they set up a structure with students to ensure they get started with their story creation before students are given time to create through play or art. Lastly, students are given the opportunity to share and reflect on their stories together. Through this method students use oral language skills, play, and sometimes written language to convey the elements of story. The Story Workshop method presents one method of using play to develop literacy skills in a developmentally appropriate way, suggesting that there are already-developed methods available to the participants of this study.

Challenges of Integrating Literacy with Play

Despite promotion by play theorists and evidence of the success of using play to support literacy instruction, there have been difficulties with defining what it has meant to include play-based literacy learning in classroom instruction. A 2018 study investigated teacher perspectives on the integration of literacy in play-based kindergarten classroom practices in Ontario (Pyle et al., 2018). The study examined literacy behaviors within three education contexts: direct instruction, guided play, and free play. The method researchers employed included an urban and

a suburban school district with 12 Kindergarten teacher participants. They identified three distinct issues: direct instruction played a key role in literacy learning, play was less structured and easy to plan for, and there was uncertainty surrounding how teachers could get involved in play for literacy learning. Three key themes emerged: free play, guided play, and a need to develop a balanced pedagogical approach. The researchers concluded that more studies addressing the role of play in the development of academic skills was needed.

Multiple conclusions regarding links between play and language and literacy may be drawn from the literature: (a) one of the basic elements of play, social interaction, may be required to acquire language (Kuhl, 2007); (b) play connects speaking to symbolic language (Roskos & Christie, 2001); and (c) connecting literacy to play is a widely used strategy despite its challenges (Pyle et al., 2018).

Play for ELL Literacy Support

Following evidence that play supports learning in general and language learning specifically, this inquiry asks next: how can play support ELL learners specifically? Although it might appear that implications are simplistic, that all elements of instruction applied to language development for students who have only spoken English prior to elementary school can be applied to students learning English as an additional language, the reality is that additional language learning is more complex and requires additional consideration. In this section I present some of the theory around additional language learning, Vygotsky's (2016/1966) sociodramatic play for ELL, the impacts of social class systems on ELL students, strategies for supporting ELL students that can be embedded in play, and special considerations for ELL students during the pandemic. Although the research surrounding play-based learning for ELL instruction is not as

robust as in other areas of play learning, I propose that the applications of the following theory and research could be and likely is being applied in play-based ELL early learning contexts.

Language Learning Theory

Vygotsky was one of many language theorists of the 19th and 20th centuries. During this time three scientific traditions emerged in this field: behaviourist, cognitive-computational and dialogical (Johnson, 2004). In the 21st century the literature of language learning evolved to encompass all these traditions and continues to present the process as deeply complex. To apply this knowledge to young learners, theorists have developed some useful metaphors to describe the process of language learning as well as the problems with over-simplification. For the purposes of this study, it demonstrates the complexity of learning language, through play (Vygotsky, 2016/1966) or otherwise.

Metaphors for Language Learning. Lippi-Green (1997) used the metaphor of a sound house to simplify understanding of additional-language learning. The sound house was what a young child created during initial language acquisition. Having learned a subsequent language, the child did not tear down the first sound house and start again, but instead, created an extension on the original house. What this meant was that young students who learned additional languages, based the newer languages on the language or languages they knew first, applying the rules and nuances of the first language to all new languages learned, each language learned becoming part of the foundation for the next one. The result was that a learner of multiple languages ended up with a language system that was much more complex than a peer who spoke one language.

Ellis used metaphors to explain the problem with applying an overly simplistic understanding of language learning (2001). Using metaphors such as the container, machine,

negotiator, problem-solver, builder, struggler, investor, sufferer, traveller, struggler, and worker to describe a language learner categorized learner types instead of focusing on the diverse and complex process of learning a language. Both Ellis and Lippi-Green's metaphors suggested a daunting complexity to educators working in classrooms composed of students with many and diverse language backgrounds.

Language as Social Act. In a research review Washington-Nortey et al. (2022) uncovered themes in literature that suggested that young children's language development was likely to have been positively impacted by social peer interactions but that further study in this area would be necessary to confirm. The review found that most study into the relationships that impacted very young children's oral language development focused on their caregivers.

Bakhtin, a Russian language-learning philosopher, posed that language only existed in address to someone else (1986). This meant that language is a social act that has implications for play-based instruction. Play with peers is a highly social act requiring almost constant language use and practice. Play also requires little differentiation for different "sound houses" (Lippi-Green, 1997) which can make it an attractive strategy to teachers attempting to employ inclusive instruction methods. Young learners may be more comfortable with language deficits between peers when they are playing instead of doing what may be perceived as schoolwork. To avoid the limitations of Ellis' metaphors, play-based learning may be employed to give students the ability to take charge of their learning and cater it to their specific learning needs. A child is free to use body language and props to compensate for limited language ability during Vygotskian sociodramatic play, all the while learning from a peer-tutor who uses age-appropriate vocabulary. This is further explained in the following section. Learning language as a social act for young children means learning language through play, as play is how children socialize.

Sociodramatic Play for Language Learning

Vygotsky connected dramatic play to his zone of proximal development (ZPD), arguing that each ZPD was specific to the child (1978/1935. This has implications specific to English language learners who are often learning not only a new language but a new set of social practices and cultural norms. To be able to use dramatic play to practice new social activities minimizes the abstract quality of language-learning at school.

Researchers Banerjee, Alsalman and Alqafari (2016) used the literature surrounding play support for literacy as evidence for a sociodramatic play strategy for ELL students. Sociodramatic play in this context involved teacher-created dramatic play scenarios in the classroom. The scenarios had six characteristics: (a) make-believe using objects, (b) a make-believe role, (c) make-believing about a situation, (d) persisting with play in the face of challenges, (e) using language to communicate within play, and (f) social interaction during play. The teacher's role in the sociodramatic play, mediating and facilitating it, was vital. The teacher led to "enhancing language richness of the environment." The researchers detailed two kinds of interventions for setting up sociodramatic play: environmental and adult. Environmental interventions included increasing dramatic play time, prepping students prior to play centre time, limiting centres available at one time, providing reading, and writing materials at the centres, incorporating cultural elements in each centre and building a picture dictionary. Each of these elements may be applied in most BC early primary classrooms. Adult interventions included the adult as observer, stage manager, player, mediator, interpreter, and social director (Banerjee, et al., 2016). These interventions require direct involvement from teachers and potentially become part of the experience of being a play-based educator.

The specificity of this strategy implied potential for reducing the challenge of interpretation of provincial play-based curriculum mandates. By using the above listed interventions, play becomes intentional and leads to opportunities for students to symbolically show what they have learned, bridging the gap between literal experience and symbolic writing or drawing. For ELL students, it is extra important not to miss any of these steps as they may have no prior knowledge of pumpkin patches and without hands-on play, will find the lessons too abstract.

Language Learning and Social Class Systems

Because play is a social act, learning language through play has the potential to reflect existing community social class systems. When learning a new language, social class systems play a role in students' experiences (Motha & Lin, 2014). These systems exist in communities (Han, 2011; Han, 2013; Han, 2014; Theodorou, 2011) and classrooms exists within the cultural setting of their communities (Toohey, 1998). Teacher perspectives on ELL student families and caregivers inevitably impact student experiences within the classroom (Wassell et al., 2017) and the ongoing discussion of whether immersion is an effective language instruction tool or the product of colonialism or classism as it has historically existed within education systems further complicates curricular choice-making in classroom instruction (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Toohey, 1998; Angelova et al., 2006; Theodorou, 2011). Without acknowledging the disadvantages that this places on language-learners, educators risk putting vulnerable children at an even larger disadvantage. While this is not an answer to the problem of class disadvantages, the following study presents how challenging it can be to overcome pervasive systems of gender and race in ELL classrooms which likely exist within the classrooms and in the experiences of this study's participants.

A 2004 year-long ethnographic study in a New England public school kindergarten class demonstrated that institutionalized power allocations have been a significant deterrent to language learning (Hruska, 2004). This study adopted an ethnographic approach to analysis of a teacher-researcher perspective. The teacher-researcher allowed herself to take a critical view of her own practice to be part of a catalyst for change in her field of supporting English-language learning. Over the course of an entire school year, 25 classroom events were recorded through field notes, interviews, and video recorded data. They were transcribed and triangulated for codes found throughout the three data collection types. The classroom included nine girls and 14 boys. There were 17 native English-speaking students and six Spanish-dominant students. The teacher-researcher supported the kindergarten classroom teacher in 45-minute blocks of time each school day throughout the school year.

The data analysis identified a variety of gender constructs adopted by students. Noticeably, the girls tended to adopt private accusations between one another of romantic liaisons, while the boys often took part in whole-class competitive discourse. The boys developed an ideology of superiority, power and ability that led to the belief that they were more knowledgeable than their female peers. In turn, this led to the girls being forced to choose between either engaging in this type of discourse or not participating in whole-class interactions at all. This problematic system suggested that the educators should be concerned about the self-esteem, engagement, and overall success of the girls as they went into higher grades. This was especially true for girls of a lower language and ethnic status in their community. It also had negative implications for the boys, who likely struggled to maintain the positions of power that they competed for. This problem was exacerbated among the boys whose race or ethnicity differed from the majority as their social class automatically placed them at a disadvantage.

Students tended to build relationships with same gender peers, limiting social interactions with different gender students. This was often driven by toy choice during the free play times as certain toys were associated with gender such as dolls for girls and blocks for boys. Cross-gender relationships were shorter term and terminated by the boys. For the Spanish-dominant students this problem was exacerbated as they were often pulled from the classroom for language support activities and had to renegotiate relationships upon return. The study found overall that access to social interaction and language was inequitable among students. The implications of these findings suggested that the atmosphere in which a child learns has direct implications for learning. If a child is not given free access to interact and play with peers, he or she is at a direct disadvantage for language development, a finding made worse when the child belongs to a lower linguistic or ethnic class in the community. It also had implications for choice of play materials suggesting that educators should be working towards eliminating gendered materials or ideas regarding who should or should not be playing with specific materials based on gender. This study presents ELL educators as tasked with the difficult prospect of understanding more about their students than their language strengths and weaknesses. It suggested that when employing play-based strategies, consideration of the language power dynamics between peers must be considered. What can a teacher do to make language learning more equitable for students of a lower language status in the community? For the purpose of this study, classroom social class systems demonstrate the complexity of supporting young students with learning through social play.

Other Language Learning Strategies

Besides acknowledging and working towards eliminating class systems, additional strategies to support language-learning through play may be found in literature, although

somewhat indirectly. Gersten and Geva's 2003 article listed strategies for teaching reading to young language learners. This review did not propose play specifically to support ELL but listed several strategies that can be incorporated into guided play. They included using gestures and facial expressions, teaching about relationships, use of prompts, and adjustment of the instructor's own English language expression. Each of Gersten and Geva's strategies were natural elements of sociodramatic play. For example, when acting out the process of planting pumpkins and pretending to be farmers, exaggerated gesturing and facial expressions could be easily incorporated. Explicit teaching regarding relationships is a natural part of teaching children how to interact with each other at play centres and props are already included in most plans for sociodramatic play centres.

Having reviewed play for language development and literacy development, this part of the literature review demonstrated that play-based education strategies may be implemented for the specific purpose of supporting ELL students. Sociodramatic play has proven to be an effective strategy for not only new language acquisition, but also to learn cultural norms (Banerjee, et al., 2016). Play has also been shown to be a cueing system for ELL students, scaffolding their language development process (Gersten & Geva, 2003). This section also demonstrated the gap in knowledge surrounding this area and points to the potential for further study as little research has been done on the educator perspective of using play to promote new language learning.

Conclusion

The intention of categorizing play-based-learned into the aforementioned sections was to demonstrate the motivations of using play to support language development. Play should be viewed as a tool to support language learning, and not merely viewed as a natural or intuitive

childhood phenomenon. Furthermore, because children are motivated to play, it may be effective to harness its potential. This is not to say that free play without specific learning goals is not invaluable to a child's development. Rather, it means that using play as an instructional strategy requires including specific elements. Furthermore, instructional play for ELL support must be strategic.

This literature review also serves an additional purpose: to demonstrate my pre-understanding of play as an inclusive teaching strategy for ELL educators. Because play can be applied to develop social skills, to support literacy learning and because it is the natural way through which children learn about the world (Vygotsky, 2016/1966), it can be applied universally in a classroom with multiple learning needs. Heideggerian phenomenological methodology acknowledges pre-understandings as part of a quest for meaning through dasein (Heidegger, 1962/2019). In chapter 3 I explain the concepts of preunderstandings and dasein further but for the purposes of this literature review it is important to acknowledge that my preunderstandings of play through my experiences, education, and practice have dictated my choice for this research topic. My own experiences led me to believe that inclusion is the most important and challenging aspect of implementing 21st century education. Fortunately, it is valued in BC's curriculum as evidenced by its prioritization of core competencies, over-arching proficiencies necessary for the success of every student in BC's public education system (BC Ministry of Education, 2023). The competencies are designed to be achievable by all students in kindergarten through grade 12 and touted to include development of practical life skills. The core learning components include (a) personal social competencies, (b) thinking competencies, and (c) communication competencies. This prioritization works toward realization of the United

Nations Children's Fund convention on the rights of the child, specifically Article 28, which is a clear mandate for accessible education for every child (UNICEF, 1989).

Because core competencies are universal, they are inclusive and appear in communications of student learning (CSL) for all students. This has marked a movement away from educating children with unique learning needs separate from their peers and is a continually evolving process. By highlighting play's educational value for every student prior to presenting its effectiveness for ELL students specifically, this review uncovered my pre-understanding of the inclusive value of play. Investigating play-based learning for ELL students also revealed the need for more research regarding the topic. While recent studies in this area exist, they are few and located in contexts different from this study.

Chapter 3: Research Design

Play-based learning evolved during the 20th century into a pedagogy for instruction of early primary learners (Piaget & Inhelder, 2000; van Manen, 2013; Vygotsky, 1935/1978; Vygotsky, 2016/1966; see also Edwards, 2017; Malaguzzi, 2012). Currently, play-based instruction is prescribed in my BC context (Province of British Columbia, 2019a). Despite prescribed support for play-based learning instruction of early primary students, it was not the purpose of this study to promote play-based learning. Rather, it was to uncover the experience of employing play-based learning in early primary British Columbian classrooms as an ELL support. This was to address a scarcity in the literature surrounding play-based learning with these learners through adoption of a phenomenological approach that investigated teacher experiences.

In this chapter, I describe the paradigm, methodology, methods, ethical considerations and evaluation used in this study. These sections demonstrate how data collection and interpretation was directed by a hermeneutical methodology to investigate experiences of early-elementary teachers using play-based-learning as a strategy for developing literacy skills amongst ELL learners. In Chapter 5, I connect this methodology to my positionality through reflection on the experience of conducting this study as a BC early primary teacher myself.

Research Paradigm

I addressed the central phenomenon of play-based learning for ELL support through employment of a qualitative paradigm (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Qualitative research may be understood by considering its epistemology in comparison to quantitative research: qualitative research uncovers meaning behind phenomena through non-numerical data in response to "why?" while quantitative research presents meaning through analysis of numbers, logic, and

objectivity. The word “uncovering” refers to the nature of qualitative research: qualitative researchers try to understand the experiences of participants as those participants present them. Conversely, quantitative research finds meaning through determining cause and effect, predicting, or describing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Together the two paradigms present a more complete understanding within a greater field of literature and study.

A qualitative paradigm was appropriate for this study the field of education is full of experienced professionals whose perspectives may add greatly to play-based learning literature and I was motivated by a sense of wonder to uncover their perspectives on using play-based learning in the classroom. This field also has diverse contexts within a single school district making it possible to identify a phenomenon across that single school district.

Research Methodology

There were multiple methodology options for qualitative inquiry into play-based instruction for ELL support; however, I chose a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology. In this section I explain why I did not choose a different methodology.

The purpose of a case study is to understand one phenomenon well (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A case study might have demonstrated how play-based pedagogy could be applied practically through analysis of a single classroom that employed it and might have produced rich evidence, although it would not have achieved the goal of this inquiry which was to understand the phenomenon of experiencing using play-based learning to support ELL learners. To do that I needed to demonstrate that a phenomenon existed across a region of study. There was another practical reason why a case study was not a wise choice for this inquiry: if I had conducted the research in my own classroom without input from other teacher perspectives, the resulting single

perspective would have been less valuable to the inquiry as it did not address a phenomenon occurring in more than one classroom. Thus, I did not choose a case study design.

An ethnographic design might have been adopted, through approaching play-based ELL educators within a single school district as a cultural group. While this was possible, it was never the purpose of the study to adopt a cultural lens. I chose a hermeneutic phenomenology as it investigated the phenomena of play-based instruction without focusing on the culture surrounding participants as a group. It is not of interest to me to provide a study that highlights this culture. It was the perspective of individual educators that was of interest to me.

Van Manen's phenomenology of practice guided data collection and interpretation. His two conditions for phenomenology, a proper phenomenological question and analysis of pre-reflective experiential material (van Manen, 2016a) applied in this context with limitations. Including a Vygotskian view of play limited my ability to collect pre-reflective material and it eliminated the need to prove that play is a valuable inclusion in early primary ELL instruction. The goal of this type of data collection was to allow interviews and surveys to uncover truths about play-based learning in early primary classrooms rather than support Vygotsky's beliefs. The Vygotskian lens served to develop discussion of the findings as they presented in the global context of play-based learning and Vygotsky's theories provided some context for participants.

Within the phenomenological strand of qualitative research are two main methodologies from 20th century philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. These are not the only two major phenomenological theorists, although a comparison of the two will help justify my choice of a hermeneutic phenomenology.

Husserl

Husserl is considered the founder of phenomenological philosophy. His ideas marked a movement in research away from empirical data collection. Prior to Husserl, data was found only in sensory experiences. Counter to prior research philosophy, phenomenology centred in the transcendental (van Manen, 2016a, p. 53). The transcendental refers to what is found outside of us, versus the incidental which is found inside of us (van Manen, 2016a, p. 53. Transcendental phenomena are experiences as we perceive them and reflect on them. Husserl's phrase "back to the things" was found in many of his writings and, although it is not clear specifically what he means by this in each instance, it more generally has been considered to mean that investigations should always begin directly with the subject being investigated and remain untampered with by dogma or assumption (van Manen, 2016a). The goal of Husserl's phenomenology was to find the meaning behind the truths that might be identified in empirical studies. It was a quest for true meaning. However, there were distinct challenges with adopting this kind of phenomenological study as it was impossible to fully remove researcher assumptions and bias.

Heidegger

Heidegger was Husserl's student. He credited Husserl with initiating his inquiry into phenomenology but took issue with the abstract nature of Husserl's investigation of truth (van Manen, 2016a). Heidegger was concerned with being *in* the world, or *Dasein,* as opposed to Husserl's being *of* the world. Heidegger's *Dasein* has been interpreted in multiple ways, but I have adopted Dibley et al.'s interpretation which considers Dasein to be a space in which human beings experience the world (Herskowitz, 2020, p. 20). Importantly, Heidegger's Dasein embraced a human being's prior understandings as the way to better understand human

experience. Heidegger's phenomenology was so different from Husserl's that Husserl asserted that Heidegger's was not phenomenology at all (Herskowitz, 2020).

There are several terms associated with Heideggerian phenomenology that are relevant to this study. The following Heideggerian terms are explained here as they apply to this study.

Hermeneutics. Heideggerian phenomenology is also known as hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenology. The term comes from the history of biblical studies in which scholars examined and re-examined a text looking to uncover shared or common meanings as well as previously uncovered understandings. This was achieved through attempting to re-experience the author's thinking by examining individual sentence structure and the author's psychology (Dibley et al., 2020, p. 19). Van Manen defines hermeneutics as the theory and practice of interpreting text. Van Manen's hermeneutic cycle requires reflectively appropriating, clarifying and making explicit the meaning of human existence (van Manen, 1997/2016b). Hermeneutic research has evolved over time from investigation of biblical texts to a reflective and cyclical process of inquiry into meaning. This cyclical process was applied to this study in all phases through keeping a reflexive researcher journal, coding transcripts, returning to codes to reflect on them, returning to transcripts to recode and theme them, and interpret the resulting data.

Authenticity. Heideggerian authenticity is, at first, unconscious, happening when experience forces a human being out of everyday thinking (Dibley et al., 2020, p. 22). The researcher's quest in hermeneutic phenomenology is to capture and reflect on authentic experience. This was applied in this study through transcribing live interviews and using the transcriptions as original data.

Technology. Heidegger (1966) warned of the dangers of leaning too heavily on technology and protocol as these things would lead to an absence of thinking. He described technology as in control of the relationship between humans and the world and as ruling the whole earth. Technology represented calculated thinking in opposition to meditative thinking. In this age of easy access to information through technology, this proposal looks to uncover meaning through direct communication with educators as part of a hermeneutic cycle. One of the goals of this study is to ignore assumptions surrounding play-based learning that are easily accessed through the wealth of technology we now possess. Assumptions about play-based learning are found in curriculum, social media, and play-learning resources such as play-based materials and books. It is time efficient and easy to believe that technology is correct in the assumptions that it presents, but this study proposes a meditative thought process instead with the potential to uncover truths specific to the context of participants.

Language. Maly, a Heideggerian scholar, described hermeneutics as a calling to exist with language instead of from language (Maly, 2008, p. 46). Heidegger's own writings are challenging to read because they model language as meaning instead of just using language to present concepts in a traditional sense. This is both complex and liberating: it means that language may be far more dynamic than traditionally thought, although it is also a record of the evolution of meaning. It allows meaning-makers the freedom to evolve and change. This study did not attempt to write in the style of Heidegger, but it presented the language of participants as an emergence of meaning to be reflected on.

Time. Heidegger's concept of time was directly connected to his concept of temporality (1962/2019). Dibley et al. (2020, p. 24) explains Heidegger's version of time as significant rather than chronological. The significance is in the value of meaning as it occurs. This research valued

the temporal as it recorded the language of participants and then my recorded thought-process as I repeatedly reflected on them. The interviews were the main instruments of temporal meaning-making.

Hermeneutic phenomenology was well suited to the goals and limitations of this study. It allowed for collection of data from participants that was reflected on and interpreted. It did not assume that prereflective data was not being presented but embraced the process of reflection and interpretation. I was liberated as researcher from the pressure of attempting to present prereflective truth through adopting hermeneutic methodology. This suited me as researcher as I am drawn to qualitative data as a preferred presentation of truth. It also suited the constraints of my schedule as I was able to reflect on data over a great period of time, as my schedule allowed.

Limitations

A phenomenological design led to limitations associated with researcher error and my position as researcher practicing within the field heightened this possibility. Van Manen described this state as “au monde” or being both “in” and “of” the world (2016a). It was a limitation that required me to employ van Manen’s cycle of epoché and reduction. I limited potential for this sort of error through a process of ongoing reflection and acknowledgment of personal bias in reflexive journal entries which is described in further detail in the *Data Analysis* section. There were also limitations associated with the pandemic. Prior to the start of the study, I believed I was experiencing computer mediated communication (CMC) exhaustion, a condition commonly known as “Zoom fatigue” (Nadler, 2020) and thought my participants would likely be experiencing the same. It is possible that this limited the number of applicants for the study.

The study had potential to justify my own instructional choices, but this was not my motivation. My intention was to use findings to develop the fields of early learning, play-based

learning and English language learning for the benefit of other educators. Despite the challenge of bracketing personal bias, I intentionally chose to investigate a topic for which I have great personal affection. The result was that my wonder for play-based learning in this context continued throughout the process of completing the study.

In the following sections, I demonstrate my process of conducting a hermeneutic phenomenological research study to uncover the phenomenon of teaching play-based learning to support ELL learners in suburban British Columbia.

Data Collection

Heidegger posed that articulation through interpretation and discourse creates meaning (Heidegger, 1962/2019). I chose a data collection method that prioritized language and allowed for discourse between the participants and myself. This method addressed the central phenomenological research question (What are the experiences of early-elementary teachers using play-based-learning as a strategy for developing literacy skills amongst ELL learners?) through allowing participants to uncover their experiences. The data collection process included open-ended interviews and digital surveys.

Before beginning data collection, I received permission to commence with the study from both SD 36 and the University of Northern BC (BC) Research and Ethics Board (REB). An open-ended interview model allowed for discourse structured enough to compare experiences between participants and identify consistent themes. It also offered enough flexibility for participants to uncover their experiences in a phenomenological way. Digital surveys were sent to a separate set of participants working in the same school district for the purpose of complementarity. This was done to bring more participants into the study to better understand

participant experiences with play-based learning without increasing the researcher workload by more than what was feasible.

Participant Recruitment

To recruit participants, I developed a poster (Appendix C) that advertised the purpose and format of the study, my contact information, and the incentive of a Starbucks gift card. The poster was posted on social media group pages that targeted teachers in this school district, with consent of group moderators. Twelve candidates contacted me via the email address on the poster before I deleted the advertisement from social media groups after a month. All twelve candidates qualified for the study as teachers of kindergarten or Grade 1 in the target school district. Six of the candidates were willing to complete the interviews and six candidates expressed interest in completing a survey. Through email communication we scheduled a time for completion of each interview and survey.

Participant Interviews

Six participants completed interviews. I conducted two interviews in-person at a local café and four virtually using the video-conferencing application Microsoft Teams (2022). This application was chosen for video conferencing because it was supported by the Surrey school district, and so I expected all participants would be familiar with it. While I anticipated that in-person interviews would be easier and more effective, I discovered the reverse: virtual interviews led to more control over background noise and distractions and resulted in a greater number of and longer responses to prompts. Interviews were all audio recorded using two digital audio recorders. I transcribed each interview and made reflexive entries in my researcher journal within 24 hours of each interview. See *Data Analysis* section for further information regarding reflexive

journal entries. Virtual interviews were also easier to transcribe as they had less background noise.

A typical question-and-answer interview schedule did not fit with a hermeneutic methodology as it would not have uncovered participants' experiences (Dibley et al., 2020). Typical interview questions can be problematic as they may force answers from participants rather than uncover experiences. A pre-designed interview schedule (Appendix A) with eight essential questions and subsequent probing questions was created to address the need to uncover data that could be coded and discussed across multiple participant experiences to achieve the goals of this research. To create a schedule that encouraged participants to uncover experiences I developed questions designed to encourage participants to describe experiences with play-based learning to support ELL students in early primary settings. Essential questions reflected the research questions and the literature review in Chapter 2. Subsequent probing questions were planned to avoid missed opportunities for further dialogue and unwanted pauses in conversation, but this did not mean that spontaneously developed prompts could not also be used. Specifically, I was free to employ unscripted prompts when I spontaneously thought of more appropriate prompts during interviews (Dibley et al., 2020, p. 97). This process involved close attention to my interview schedule during the interview, highlighting chosen prompts as I employed them, and reflecting on which prompts had been used as the interview progressed so as not to miss opportunities to discuss any aspect of play-based learning. While this required quick-thinking, the method produced a very conversational style of interview.

Probing questions were designed within a hermeneutical methodology. They allowed participants to direct which ones were employed based on answers to essential questions. For example, if a participant mentioned a literacy routine in their response to the second essential

question, I would choose one of the prompts from the "literacy routines" section under the second essential question. However, if the participant said something to the effect of "I have problems maintaining an effective literacy routine" I might design a prompt on-the-fly that would focus on problems with literacy routines. This might go something like "you mentioned you have problems with maintaining literacy routines. Can you unpack that for me?" This is different from asking direct questions because prompts are effectively not questions at all. They introduce a topic and then invite the participant to discuss it. The interview schedule was piloted in a practice interview to confirm that no necessary adjustments were required before I proceeded to interview participants. All prompts were based in hermeneutical philosophical thinking with the goal of generating meaning, rather than discovering straightforward answers.

The schedule generated enough consistency across participants to allow for interpretation. Probing questions were used if key terms were presented by the participant as explained above. To determine which key terms to use, I isolated themes in the literature review: assessment (Pyle et al., 2018); ELL, immigrant, translation and refugee (Banerjee, et al., 2016; Ellis, 2001; Godsey, 2020; Gersten & Geva, 2003; Hruska, 2004; Johnson, 2004; Lippi-Green, 1997); literacy routines (Roskos & Christie, 2011); problems, challenges and successes with play (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; O'Keefe & McNally, 2021); collaboration with colleagues (Pyle et al., 2018); engaging families or caregivers with play (Keung & Cheung, 2019); play and social-emotional learning (Anderson et al., 2018; Marcelo & Yates, 2014; Whitebread et al., 2009; Wilson & Ray, 2018); play environments (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2021; Keeler, 2015; Roskos & Christie, 2011; Sandos & Mehus, 2021; Speldewinde et al., 2020); play resources, materials and toys (Maxwell et al., 2008; Nicholson, 1973); play curriculum, methods or programs (Childress, 2020; Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013; Hewitt, 2001; Malaguzzi, 2012; North

American Reggio Emilia Alliance, 2021; Piaget & Inhelder, 2000; Sunday, 2020; Vygotsky, 1966/2016); problems or challenges with literacy (Chamberlain et al., 2020); engaging family and caregivers with literacy (Heath, 1982); literacy programs, methods or curriculum (Campbell, 2020; Roskos & Christie, 2011); literacy materials (Chamberlain et al., 2020); adapting instruction for ELL learners (Banerjee et al., 2016; Johnson, 2004); engaging ELL families and caregivers (Banerjee et al., 2016); and problems with intersecting literacy and play for ELL support (Kuhl & Meltzoff, 1996; Pyle et al., 2018). I created prompting questions that addressed the above themes to make sure that interview data remained grounded in research. Please see the left column of Appendix A for all topics listed in the interview schedule.

I followed each essential question in the schedule with scripted co-constitution dialogue that reflected participant answers. Co-constitution is the process of clarifying meaning through shared experience. This process took advantage of my own experiences as a teacher through comparison of an experience that I had with something the participant said. Co-constitution was employed when I required more clarity from the participant and ensured that I adhered to a hermeneutic research cycle (Dibley et al., 2020, pp. 145-149). Sometimes co-constitution did not follow the script because it was necessary to adapt it to maintain a natural flow of conversation.

Interview surveys included six sections: (a) the participant context; (b) play; (c) literacy; (d) English language learners; (e) intersecting literacy, play, and (f) English language learning; and (g) miracle questions. The five miracle questions were designed to elicit further dialogue from participants and were based on a fantasy scenario in which the participant could have their dreams come true regarding play-based learning for ELL students. The inclusion of miracle questions in the schedule was to address the possibility that a participant might not have much to

say in the prior five sections. They had the effect of ending interviews on a positive note and all participants appeared to enjoy the section.

Interviews were conducted through use of a web-based video-conferencing tool or in-person. The choice of format (in-person/online) was determined through email communication between me and each participant. Meetings were audio-recorded with two digital recording devices that were then downloaded onto an external hard drive with the files for each interview labeled anonymously through use of a numerical system (i.e., Participant 1). Interviews were transcribed for analysis by hand and transcriptions were saved on the external hard drive, with files labeled anonymously using the same file-naming system as was used for audio recordings. Member-checking was conducted following each interview through sending a transcript to the participant digitally with detailed instructions on how to member-check. Participants were each given one week to complete that process.

Digital Surveys

Digital surveys of a second group of participants were conducted during the interview process to increase the scope of data collected, orient the research to phenomenological phenomena, and improve cross-validation (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015, p. 103). Having six additional participants complete surveys broadened the scope of the study. While surveys did not bring additional themes to the study, they did achieve the process of cross-validation by confirming the themes that were uncovered in interviews (see Appendix C to view the survey schedule). Six additional participants completed a digital survey using the Survey Monkey® program. A personalized survey was created for each of the six participants using their participant number to title each of their surveys.

The purpose of the surveys was to produce complementary data for analysis, and it was not essential that they reflect the conversational style of the interview data. There purpose was to confirm themes found in interviews and so it was only necessary to incorporate the same topics that were present in the interview schedule. Digital survey prompts were like essential and prompting questions in interviews but more simplified. Avoiding complex or redundant language in surveys was important as it minimized potential for participant confusion. The digital surveys employed questions like all but the first two essential questions in the interview and included prompts designed to evoke dialogue surrounding the key terms in the interview schedule. This allowed comparison between the two data sets.

Data Analysis

Hermeneutical research embraces shared contexts of participant and researcher to produce meaning. With knowledge and experience in common it is possible to gain understanding of a participant's experiences because researchers can create environments in which participants feel safe and valued (Platzer & James, 1997). This was evidenced in the co-constitution discussion in each interview. However, shared contexts mean that data analysis processes are linked inextricably to the experiences of the researcher. Data analysis in this study required multiple cycles of interpretation and reflexivity with transparency to maintain its validity. To achieve this, I kept a reflexive researcher journal in which I asked myself three questions after accepting each set of digital survey results, performing each interview, and completing each coding cycle: *Am I seeing what I want or expect to see in this data? Am I open to the possibility that I will see something that I do not want to see or that is unexpected? Am I open to new meanings and explanations in this data?* (Dibley, et al., 2020). These questions addressed my presence in the research by acknowledging preliminary reactions to data without

dismissing them or allowing them to control the research process. For example, once the initial coding cycle had been completed for the first interview, I recorded how surprised I was to see how often the participant referred to their insecurities as a teacher. After each interview, I recorded in the journal my personal reaction of discomfort to how often teacher insecurities had appeared in the data. I initially found the insecurities alarming as a teacher because of what the insecurities implied to me at that phase of the research. Did it mean that there was a greater problem going unaddressed in BC education? Later in the data analysis process I began to feel more comfortable with this code as insecurities blended into the greater theme of *school experiences*. Beside other feelings of joy and pride, teacher insecurity became a part of the larger concept of teacher feelings which in turn was a part of *school experiences,* one of the themes developed in the final phase of theme development. In this way, recording my reactions prevented me from drawing conclusions too quickly. It was through repeated reflection that I was able to identify the greater theme. The process of recording my bias and reactions within the journal also had the effect of generating more data to reflect on and it helped me develop themes that I could feel confident in. The journal entries themselves became data to reflect on, creating the reflexive cycle.

I coded data inductively to adhere to a hermeneutic position, transcribed each interview by hand, and identified initial codes within 24 hours of conducting each interview (Dibley et al., 2020, p. 119). The first coding cycle was important as it occurred during those 24 hours and was the most valuable evidence of recording phenomenological data, because it was closest in time to the interview event. I organized initial codes into tables after each interview was transcribed, grouping codes by topic in the hopes that the topics would present clear themes once all transcripts were coded and all initial codes were organized in similar tables. Once all interviews

were concluded I read them again, looking for additional codes across interviews. For example, in one of the later interviews I uncovered the code "word work." In subsequent coding cycles, I looked for this code in previous interviews to make sure that it was not missed in case it developed into a pattern across interview transcripts. At this point initial themes were developed and analyzed (see Table 1 in Chapter 4 "Evolution of Themes").

I revisited my initial research questions and reflected on my research purpose to maintain my original inquiry before each attempt to select themes. Each attempt involved reading all codes and arranging them into groups titled by themes. It took me three attempts to settle on five themes that encompassed all codes I had uncovered in transcripts and addressed research questions. Learning to embrace the phenomenological methodology through reflecting on my thinking in my reflexive researcher journal helped me notice a problem with over-explaining during the first phase of theme development. During this phase I included descriptors of most themes as well as an explanation of whose perspective the theme meant to uncover. The journal entries show my discomfort with choosing themes as an inexperienced researcher as I struggled to not explain my thinking within the theme names. During this phase of theme-development I regularly wrote in a reflexive journal, noting my fears that the themes being uncovered would not address my research questions properly.

In the next phase of theme development, I narrowed themes down to seven phrases. During phase 2 I found that most of the codes I had uncovered now fit in chosen themes. In the third phase I merged three themes into *teaching philosophies and practices* to better address my research questions. This was done through re-reading the codes in each of the three themes and recognizing that they all fit into a larger theme. At this point I began to note in my journal relief that my research questions were being addressed by what I was discovering in data. This choice

better highlighted the themes of play, literacy and English language and grouped together many concepts within *teaching philosophies and practices* that did not necessarily respond to my research questions. The *teaching philosophies and practices* theme includes many important concepts, but I did not feel that they were as pertinent to this inquiry as the other themes because it did not explicitly answer my research questions.

I chose a key participant quote for each theme to demonstrate how the themes sounded in interviews. Choosing key quotes from the survey transcripts proved challenging as the surveys did not present teacher opinions or feelings the way that the interviews did. Teachers were more succinct in their survey responses and did not seem to offer as much vulnerability. This is likely due to the format of the surveys which did not effectively mimic the back-and-forth discussion of the interviews. When choosing key quotes from the interviews I discovered several "juicy" quotes for each theme but in the surveys, I found myself choosing from more flat, less passionate language and was forced to find quotes that were merely "on-topic." I included these quotes to demonstrate the difference between the two types of data collection.

The purpose of digital surveys was to confirm themes that were already found in interviews no additional themes were uncovered in survey data. Once themes were confirmed the data was ready to be developed for discussion and conclusions regarding research questions and the Vygotskian lens. This is explained in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Ethical Concerns

The value of the study was linked to my ethics as researcher. For this reason, my ethical stance is included in this section. I will cover the following sub-sections here: Informed Consent and Confidentiality.

Informed Consent

In qualitative research, informed consent can be difficult to ensure as the research is reliant on the researcher-participant relationship. This relationship can impact how well the participant understands the purpose of the study and how much or what the participant discloses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To address the ethical concern of consent being both informed and willing (Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR], Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada [NSERC], & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada [SSHRC], 2018), I asked participants to complete a consent form detailing the purpose of the study and how the data could potentially be used (TCPS2, 2018), stored, and destroyed. Each participant was informed of all potential risks associated with the study including possible data leakage (CIHR, et al., 2018). Participants were also informed that consent could be withdrawn at any point during the study and that the attached data would be withdrawn and destroyed at that point. Consent forms were provided to participants more than 24 hours in advance of each interview or survey to allow time for participants to read them and ask questions, as necessary. No person over which I had real, or perceived authority was asked to participate (CIHR et al., 2018).

Confidentiality

Confidentiality in interview-based phenomenological research is a unique challenge because the authenticity of the interviews may make it difficult to retain participant anonymity. One of the purposes of transcribing the research by hand was to remove identifying features in interviews although it was possible there would be instances where this would prove difficult. For example, a participant may describe the features of a playground that may seem to me to be quite general but might be specific to a certain school location. Dibley et al. (2020) described the

interview process in hermeneutic phenomenology as evocative, creating situations in which participants may reveal things that they had not planned to. While co-constitution, which is described further in the following section, alleviated some of this concern, the practice of submitting a copy of each transcription after it was edited for identifying features to the involved participant was also necessary. Any identifying features that I removed from transcripts were noted through substituting omitted text with asterisks. Each participant was given at least a week to review their transcript. This gave participants opportunity to identify anything additional in the transcript which they felt made them unnecessarily vulnerable. At the same time, responsibility for ensuring confidentiality was largely on myself as researcher.

The digital survey could potentially give participants a false sense of anonymity as they completed them independently (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To address that concern survey transcripts were also read closely for identifying details and survey transcripts were provided to participants with guidance towards advising the researcher of any identifying details that had not yet been omitted. Each participant was given at least a week to review their survey transcript and was provided with instructions for member-checking via email, just as with interview transcripts. No survey or interview participants requested removal of identifying features from their transcript.

To further address confidentiality in the study, recordings were removed from the original recording devices and saved to a password-protected external hard drive kept in the researcher's locked home office. All consent paperwork and audio recordings were stored in accordance with the approval granted by UNBC's REB. Additionally, all consent and data storage processes as well as data destruction processes were submitted to the University of Northern British Columbia

Research Ethics Board for approval prior to the beginning of data collection as in accordance with the university's research protocol (UNBC, 2021).

Evaluation of the Study

To evaluate the study, a three-part plan was employed throughout the research process: I employed van Manen's epoché and reduction (2016a), complemented interview data with survey data, and regularly presented research to my thesis supervisor.

The Epoché and Reduction

To employ van Manen's epoché and reduction required abstaining from "theoretical, polemical, suppositional and emotional intoxications" (2016a, p. 222) to maintain a natural attitude or perspective of the world. There are several components to van Manen's epoché-reduction: a sense of wonder, attitude of openness, concreteness, and an appropriate approach to the topic. Dibley et al. (2020) presented this concept as adopting a regimen throughout the research as a cycle of managing the presence of the researcher in the research and demonstrating rigour. One way that this can be achieved during data collection and analysis is through employing co-constitution during interviews to confirm participant answers (Dibley et al., 2020). Co-constitution was employed through presenting a scenario to the participant and asking if it is like what the participant had described to avoid having them repeat or confirm answers. For example, if a participant mentioned having difficulty with getting students to put play materials away properly, I might ask for clarification by providing an example from my own practice and then asking if this example is similar to the experience of the participant. It might sound like "in my first year teaching students would often throw play materials at bins during clean up and the toys would go all over the place. Is this similar to what you are describing?" Transcripts were also sent to participants to check for anonymity, but it was the co-constitution done during the

interview that more closely reflected the truth of that moment. Participants were informed that they could ask sections or phrases be omitted but were not asked to change or add to their answers after the interview was completed.

Data Complementarity

A digital survey was employed to complement found codes and themes in the interviews. Due to ongoing changes in the field of education during the global pandemic, surveys were collected during the same time interviews were performed to alleviate potential inconsistencies from changing pandemic protocols and policies.

Presentation of Research to Supervisor

Throughout the research cycle, the study was presented for feedback from my faculty supervisor including my reflexive researcher journal. This was done with openness to the reality that my inexperience required both supervision and input and with an attitude of professional collaboration. Initial survey data with copies of consent forms from the six participants who were selected and who agreed to participate in interviews was sent to my supervisor once all initial surveys were completed. My supervisor offered advice and support, confirming that I was completing the data collection process properly.

Interview transcripts with codes found in the initial two coding cycles were presented to my supervisor upon completion. Digital surveys completed during the interview process were also presented with codes identified in the initial two coding cycles as they were completed. Identified themes were presented to my supervisor once all interviews and surveys were completed and the codes had been grouped into themes. My supervisor offered critiques and suggestions and he supported me with refining themes into five. I proceeded to writing the thesis with supervisor approval after all data was submitted for review.

Conclusion

The dual perspective of a phenomenologist and Vygostskian created research parameters that promoted both openness and learning. While it was somewhat contradictory to adopt a Vygotskian lens in a phenomenological study, the Vygotskian lens acknowledged the researcher and many of the participants pre-understandings regarding play. As the original qualitative paradigm, phenomenology offered this investigation the opportunity to learn from educators in the field of early learning through adopting a sense of wonder and openness. Beyond responding to my initial research question, the purpose of adopting an hermeneutic methodology was to encourage a sense of wonder, inquiry, and collaboration amongst early childhood ELL educators in suburban BC. This continues to be my goal in presenting study findings.

Choosing an interview-based data collection method honoured the phenomenological methodology through co-construction of meaning between interviewer and participants that was recorded as it happened. This allowed for uncovering of new knowledge as data was collected with an attempt to acknowledge and benefit from bias and pre-understanding. On a personal note, this process was reflective of previous experiences collaborating with colleagues in early learning through discussion and reflection. Using inductive coding in tandem with a reflexive researcher journal honoured the phenomenological method through creating a record of meanings as they were uncovered throughout the process, a system that made it possible to remain accountable as researcher.

Anonymity and confidentiality in a hermeneutic methodology presented unique challenges. By removing details that identified participants, unnecessary distractions were also removed, and the essence of their experiences was further uncovered. Thorough editing, co-constitution and accountability were combined as a practical method for achieving this process.

Usage of van Manen's epoché and reduction as a method of evaluation further adopted a hermeneutic methodology. The rigorous process of co-construction, complementarity through digital surveys and submission of research artifacts to my supervisor allowed for meaning to be uncovered that was both authentic and valid. Through adherence to this planned approach, co-constructed meaning that responded to my research question was achieved.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

In the following chapter are the results of the research including uncovered codes and an explanation of how codes were identified and categorized. Following the results is a discussion of chosen themes: *teaching philosophies and practices*, *school experiences*, *literacy*, *play,* and *English language learning*. The section for each theme includes a thorough discussion of its meaning and presentation in the data and a justification for its inclusion in this study.

I collected data from teacher participants in two ways: interviews and digital surveys. The results and discussion were largely formed from data uncovered during interviews and interviews were transcribed and coded within 24 hours of completion. After all interviews were completed, they were coded again, and I developed codes developed into themes. Next, I analyzed survey transcripts analyzed to confirm themes found in interviews. I uncovered themes through a Vygotskian lens, which I discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Results

My plan to advertise the study on social media platforms associated with this school district was effective and it took less than one month to recruit participants for six interviews and six surveys. Each participant reached out to me via the email address advertised on the recruitment poster and via email we arranged between us a date for each to participate in either the interview or the survey (depending on the participant's preference). All participants who expressed interest met the criteria for participation. All interviews and all but one survey were conducted within a single month. The last survey took an additional six weeks for the participant to complete due to individual technical difficulties.

Interview Results

I conducted and transcribed each interview and recorded any codes initially uncovered. I completed a reflexive researcher journal entry after each interview to reflect on each interview experience. Next, I revisited each transcript, uncovering further codes. I then counted the occurrence of each code and deleted any codes that appeared only once to confirm that each code represented a pattern. Next, I chose themes that I suspected would encompass all codes and began the process of attempting to group codes into themes. During this process I continued to reflect on theme development in my reflexive research journal and identified a need to make themes more concise and inclusive of all codes. Table 1 demonstrates the process of developing themes over three phases. In the last phase, I chose five themes: *teaching philosophies and practices, school experiences, literacy, play and English language learning*. I chose the first two themes to encompass a large amount of interview and survey data that did not directly answer the research questions while the last three themes were identified to isolate answers to the research questions.

The demonstrate the strength of each theme, I included the total number of instances that the codes occurred which is a standard practice in phenomenological studies, in particular (van Manen, 2016a, 2016b). Table 2 presents the number of times each code appeared in interviews. *Teaching philosophies and practices* presented more than any other theme. It represents the all-consuming day-to-day professional choices that teacher participants made, demonstrating the experience of being an early primary teacher in suburban BC. This theme included a complex and multi-layered thought process. *School experiences* contains the next largest number of codes and was chosen to represent what it felt and looked like to participants to be at school. It was chosen as a theme to demonstrate what the last 3 themes felt and looked like for participants in

the school setting. The last 3 themes were common across all interviews and were chosen to isolate concepts related to the research questions. By isolating them I hoped to make it easier to address research questions. The discussion section contains a more in-depth discussion of each theme.

Survey Results

Table 1

Evolution of Themes

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Teacher perspectives on professional practices • Assessment • interpretation and implementation of provincial curriculum • planning for the school day • planning for the school year • inclusive practice • teacher collaboration • communicating student learning • teacher context • teacher as learner • instructional strategies	Personal teaching philosophy Planning and assessment	Teaching philosophies and practices
Vygotskian theory uncovered in teacher experiences.	Professional practices	
Teacher experiences with learning environments • inside • outside teacher feelings	School experiences	School experiences
teacher experiences with teaching & supporting language and literacy development	Literacy	Literacy

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
teacher experiences with teaching & supporting play-based learning	Play	Play
teacher perspectives on student experiences • ELL students	English language learning	English language learning
teacher perspectives on caregiver experiences • ELL caregivers		

Table 2

Themes in Interviews

Theme	Codes	Total codes	Key quote
Teaching Philosophies and Practices	Applied Design, Skills and Technologies (ADST), art, assessment, calendar, casual collaboration, class routines, commercial curriculum, co-teaching, cross-curricular learning, differentiation, digital portfolios, directed drawing, drama, drawing, early career teaching, experiential learning, explaining to students, explicit instruction, exposure to different teachers, fair assessment, field trips, flashcards, formative assessment, hands-on learning, holding space for students, independent work, interactive learning, manageability, modelling, modelling honesty, modifying curriculum, morning meeting, music, numeracy, observation, one-on-one, open-ended activities, pair work, physical instruction, problems as puzzles, problem-solving, professional development,	763	"When I'm teaching a certain format of writing … not in the curriculum explicitly but I know it fits in there somewhere [I] am always like "am I doing this? Is this part of the curriculum because there's nothing telling me if it is, or it isn't really." I do find that quite hard…it's …so open-ended and broad, which is beautiful…, but I also sometimes look at it and I'm like are my kids writing … should they be writing two sentences or ten sentences?"

Theme	Codes	Total codes	Key quote
	provincial curriculum, provincial curriculum as open-ended, pull-out vs. push-in, reflective practice, repetition of instruction, representation, responsive practice, rewards, role-playing, rubrics, rules and expectations, scaffolding, science, setting realistic expectations, shape-of-the-day, small group instruction, small group work, Social Emotional Learning (SEL), social studies, soft start, stepping back, student choice, student culture, student goal setting, student independence, student individuality, student-led, student reflection, student self-assessment, summative assessment, teachable moments, teacher as learner, teacher as researcher, teacher / caregiver relationships, teacher challenges, teacher collaboration, teacher communication with students, teacher curiosity, teacher education, teacher expectations, teacher flexibility, teacher passion, teacher patience, teacher preference, teacher priorities, teacher risk-taking, teacher talk, unit planning, universal designs for learning (UDL), unstructured philosophy, visual supports, weekly schedule, whole class instruction, whole class work, writing assessment, year planning		
School Experiences	afternoon learning, behavior challenges, building and creating, caregiver communication with school, caregiver connection to school, class and school community, class discussions, classroom environment,	449	"I think we need to bring the families in more often and I would love to start doing that and kind of see if it makes a difference in that disconnect between

Theme	Codes	Total codes	Key quote
	classroom volume, connecting school and home, cultural diversity, deep learning, defining context, expert / novice, freedom of movement, gardening, inner city, interruptions, food, forest, morning learning, neuro diversity, outdoor learning, pandemic impacts, range of student ability, relationship, repetition, resource access, resource management, school dynamics, social skills, starting late in the school year, structured learning, student comfort, student communication, student comprehension, student confidence, student creativity, student critical thinking, student empathy, student engagement, student enjoyment, student flexibility, student focus, student fear, student fun, student group dynamics, student motivation, student movement, student preference, student pride, student self-regulation, student stamina, student stress, student success, student teacher, student/teacher ratio,teacher enjoyment, teacher feelings, teacher insecurities, teacher optimism, teacher-owned resources, technology, whiteboards		these families that have different experiences with school. I want – I'm worried it's not going to help because those families, the ones I really want to see, are the ones that are too busy to come in. But I'm going to encourage grandparents to come and maybe grandparents will start talking about how it's so different from when they went to school. And maybe that'll spark some conversations in the houses, in the homes. I think any information that families can get about what it is we do in our classrooms and all of the new practices and the adaptations that we make is extremely important. Most families, even full English-speaking families, do not realize what we are doing at all. They have poor interpretations of what we do in our classrooms."
Play	academic play, assessing play, collaborative play, cross-curricular play, definitions of play, diversity of play, dramatic play, expectations for play, exploratory play, found play	316	"I'm teaching Social Studies or Science to them, if they don't have a chance to play with it, they're not going to use language

Theme	Codes	Total codes	Key quote
	materials, free play, games, guided play, imaginative play, indoor play, initiating play, integrating literacy and play, lack of play, learning to play outside, literacy play, loose parts, math play, modelling play, morning play, oral language in play, outdoor play, parallel play, planning for play, play-based learning, play centres, play challenges, play environment, playful SEL, playground, play materials, play opportunities, prioritizing play, problems with play, scheduling play, social skill development in play, story play, story workshop, structured play, teacher play with students, time for play, too free play, unauthentic play, unsafe play, unsuccessful play, violent play		at all. They're just going to sit there listening. Do you know what I mean? So, they have to play with it to not just hear the words that they're learning but to use the words that they're learning. So that's how that part goes into it. And the same thing with math. They can't just learn the math skills and write the worksheet."
Literacy	alphabet knowledge, associating movement with letter sounds, bookmaking, books in the classroom, guided reading, interactive literacy, journals, labeling, letter formation, letter hunts, letter magnets, letter-sound knowledge, letter sounds, letter work, literacy centres, literacy challenges, literacy games, literacy instruction methods, literacy resources, literacy routines, literacy support, noisy reading, oral language development, phonemic awareness, phonics, poetry, printing, punctuation, read aloud, reading, reading / writing instruction relationship, receptive language, relevance of literacy, sounding-out words, spelling, storytelling, student names, syllables, teacher narration,	316	"I really like doing hands-on literacy activities. So, literacy stations, things that they can manipulate with their hands and move their bodies."

Theme	Codes	Total codes	Key quote
	vocabulary, word hunts, word work, writing		
English Language Learning	English language learners, ELL caregiver comfort, ELL caregiver communication, ELL caregiver connection to school, ELL caregiver perceptions, ELL caregivers, ELL caregiver voice, ELL inclusion, ELL student communication, new-immigrant instruction, no English-speaking abilities, translation	69	"Play-based learning is super important for language development, especially for kids for whom English is a second language because they learn by interacting with their peers. They learn to speak with their peers before they speak with their teachers..."

Tables 3 and 4 (below) demonstrate the presentation of the above listed themes in survey data and how the survey data compared to interview data. The survey data served the purpose of confirming the existence of themes uncovered in interviews, although there was less rich discussion in the surveys to discuss. For example, the quote selected for *English language learning* uncovered the participants' personal philosophy about English language learning and why the participant believes play supports English language learning; but the quote for the same theme in the surveys only acknowledged that the participant noticed that play is an effective strategy for ELL students.

In the following section is a more in-depth discussion of each theme and why I chose to include it in this study.

Discussion

The chosen phenomenological method led to an uncovering of five themes: *teaching philosophies and practices*, *school experiences*, *play*, *literacy,* and *English language learning*. Themes are listed in order of the one that presented most often to the one that presented the least

to model a layered approach: the first and second themes are quite broad and the last three more narrow. *Teaching philosophies and practices* and *school experiences* were chosen to represent the participants' experiences more fully and *play*, *literacy* and *English language learning* were chosen to address research questions specifically. The first two themes arose as part of the

Table 3

Themes in Complementary Survey Data

Theme	Codes	Total codes	Key quote
Teaching Philosophies and Practices	year planning, shape-of-the-day, class routines, provincial curriculum, provincial curriculum as open-ended, commercial curriculum, cross-curricular learning, numeracy, problem-solving, Applied Design, Skills and Technologies (ADST), science, social studies, art, drama, music, formative assessment, summative assessment, observation, student self-assessment, digital portfolios, teacher education, professional development, teacher collaboration, casual collaboration, teacher / caregiver relationships, role-playing, directed drawing, holding space for students, soft start, open-ended activities, experiential learning, small group instruction, whole class work, independent work, student-led, student independence, student choice, teacher challenges, teacher passion	117	"I do not have a criterion but I do observe who is playing, how they are playing? Are they able to share, problem solve, clean up without constant reminders? I will wander around the room and talk to students. But if they are deep in play I do not want to disturb the rich play they are participating in…"
Play	play-based learning, scheduling play, literacy play, math play, integrating literacy and play, story workshop, oral language in	112	"Students work out their theories and ideas through play. They ask questions

Theme	Codes	Total codes	Key quote
	play, free play, play centres, cross-curricular play, social skill development in play, dramatic play, exploratory play, modelling play, teacher play with students, games, play environment, indoor play, outdoor play, playground, play materials, loose parts, found play materials, problems with play, lack of play		naturally. They move through the world with curiosity and wonder. Students actively explore their environment and the world around them through play. By exploring ideas and language, manipulating objects, role-playing or experimenting with various materials students make sense of the world around them…"
Literacy	literacy instruction methods, student names, phonics, literacy support, literacy routines, oral language development, vocabulary, storytelling, receptive language, phonemic awareness, syllables, reading, read aloud, guided reading, noisy reading, letter sounds, letter-sound knowledge, letter work, printing, word work, spelling, bookmaking, writing, journals, poetry, literacy centres, literacy games, books in the classroom, literacy resources	82	"After I had children of my own and saw their literacy skills growing very rapidly in the preschool years even though I was not formally teaching them skills, I asked myself why and how was this different than the students in my class, some of whom seemed to be stalled in their literacy growth. The biggest answer I came up with was how much I read fun and interesting books to my own kids … I had to give my students that same fun, yet rich literacy experience and let them hear language in books as well as deepen their understanding …"
School Experiences	social skills, pandemic impacts, resource access, teacher-owned,	71	"COVID has really put a strain on learning

Theme	Codes	Total codes	Key quote
	resources, resource management, whiteboards, technology, class and school community, morning learning, behavior challenges, building and creating, connecting school and home, caregiver communication with school, caregiver connection to school, inner city, classroom environment, student movement, expert / novice, student comfort, student focus, student fun, student stress, student success, student creativity, student critical thinking, student engagement, student enjoyment		expectations. I find that students coming to class are not at the same prior learning levels they were pre-COVID. The literacy preparedness that students are coming to school with now is at a much lower level than prior years. Many students came unprepared for K this year especially and so literacy levels were well below expectations…"
English Language Learning	ELL caregiver perceptions, ELL caregivers, ELL inclusion, ELL student communication, no English-speaking abilities	8	"I have found that using play-based learning allows [ELL] students to participate in classroom activities …"

Table 4

Summary of Interview and Complementary Survey Data

Theme	Codes in interviews	Codes in surveys
Teaching philosophies and practices	763	117
School experiences	449	71
Play	316	112
Literacy	316	82
English language learning	69	8

process of a phenomenological methodology including inductive coding. The final three were identified to address the main research question: What are the experiences of early-elementary

teachers using play-based-learning as a strategy for developing literacy skills amongst ELL students? The identification process was completed through repeated reflection on both the research questions and my journal entries that I made each time I attempted to create themes.

Teaching Philosophies and Practices

Much of what teacher participants spoke of fell into this theme possibly because of the existence of "teacher autonomy." This theme did not explicitly address play, but it addressed the experience of a play-based early primary teacher in this context. Teacher autonomy is a contract-protected right of teachers employed in the British Columbia public education system to "decide on instructional and assessment strategies" to teach and assess students on the provincial curriculum (British Columbia Public School Employers Association, 2009). It is an empowering aspect of teaching in the BC public education system, but it places most of the responsibility for the education of children on classroom teachers. Consequently, a large amount of a teacher's work time is dedicated to professional choice-making and leads to complex patterns of instruction as revealed in Sawyer's (2017) study on teacher curriculum development. In the Sawyer study 25 teachers were interviewed to uncover their application of educational theory in their teaching practice over the course of 11 years. Some of the participants entered the profession with a formal background in teacher education. These teachers started their practice with an understanding of educational theory. The other teachers gained their understanding of theory through professional development. Sawyer discovered that teachers from both groups that continued in the field of education throughout the 11 years were able to do so by developing a flexible approach to instruction, incorporating various educational theories and curricula. Teachers who were more rigid in their approach, adopting a specific theory and using specific curricula repeatedly were more likely to quit teaching before 11 years. In this study participants

often reflected on curriculum choice and demonstrated patterns of thoughtful choice-making when it came to curriculum. Participant 1 repeatedly referred to decisions regarding pre-made curriculum resources. She spoke of "gauging" what the class could handle and then altering various commercially produced curricula to suit a teacher's and the class's needs. She did not implement a single pre-made curriculum in which all instructional choices had been pre-decided as a single curriculum could not do what she needed. Blending multiple curricula forced her to make numerous professional choices.

Teacher autonomy required a thorough process of research, practice, and professional decision-making by participants, but it led to a strong connection between individual philosophy and the professional choices participants made. For example, many participants mentioned how and why they implemented daily routines such as "soft start" in their practices. All participants described soft starts as activities scheduled at the start of each school day. These soft starts were often involved in play. In explaining why, she used soft start in her teaching practice, participant 4 uncovered a Vygotskian perspective through identifying the specific need for students to have extra time to develop problem-solving skills because of a decline in social learning opportunities during the pandemic (Vygotsky 2016/1966). She described her decision to implement a play-based soft start each day as part of a process of collaborating with a mentor, looking at play-based and social-emotional learning research, identifying the level of need with her students and then experimenting with implementation until she started to see positive results. Other professional and justified choices included having students perform schoolwork independently, in small groups or as a whole class; when she scheduled daily snack time; when she included free play time; and when she brought students indoors or outdoors.

Decisions about daily routines were not the only example of careful attention to intentional detail and philosophical, professional decision-making. As in Campbell's (2015) Australian study, participants were making curriculum decisions under the pressures of their own teaching philosophy, access to the curriculum itself and because of pressure from colleagues and family members. All participants referred to thoughtful choices regarding commercially produced curricula: how they chose it and how they scheduled it into their instructional year, week, and day. For example, Participant 2 gave a detailed explanation of why and how she chose to use the Daily 5 (Boushey & Moser, 2014) program in her early primary classroom. She explained her history with the program: she had heard colleagues discuss it in past before deciding she wanted to learn more about it. Several years prior to our interview she went with a colleague who was also interested in the program to observe it being used in another classroom outside their school. While this inspired her to learn more about the program, she did not yet feel equipped to implement it. She felt ready to launch it only after observing its implementation again, this time in classrooms at her own school, and watching videos of it being used online. She said "it's really important, let me think about my wording here" when explaining her rationale for using it, then listed its virtues including that it "sparks" joy in reading, is accessible to all levels of readers, is motivating, supports stamina and independence, targets several areas of literacy development, and makes literacy learning relevant to learners. It became clear that the decision to use this program both initially and in subsequent years was a careful choice that she kept considering and re-making each school year. She referred to this one program many times throughout the interview. This example of careful curriculum choice demonstrates the experience of being a play-based educator, integrating literacy instruction.

The trend towards carefully choosing a curriculum, developing one's practice with it and re-using it year after year appeared across interviews and demonstrated a continual decision-making process to adopt curriculum or programs to best meet student need. Through a Vygotskian lens, this is the process of readjustment to keep students within their ZPD (Vygotsky, 1935/1978). The frequency with which this theme occurred uncovers a challenge in finding the ZPD for each learner and then continuously adjusting it to create an optimal learning program. It was my sense that this process was impacted not only by the needs of the students but also by the style and capabilities of each teacher participant. Each participant had a unique method of going through this process.

It may be difficult to understand how complex teacher autonomy can be without first-hand experience, but the freedom it gave these educators to adapt throughout the day or school year led to time-consuming processes. While the concept of teacher autonomy does not necessarily connect directly to play-based instruction, it demonstrates how complicated it is to implement. Participant 2 described a painstaking process of developing an instructional plan for a specific group of students: first getting to know the students, then identifying the class's strengths before deciding how to set up a learning schedule. Participant 2 noted that classes could become "out of control" without taking time to get to know students first. This same participant also noted that she constantly referred to the provincial curriculum to check that planned activities continued to address prescribed learning outcomes once identifying activities that worked well for a class. Participant 2 also believed that the environment impacted different groups of students in different ways.

> if you compare the play indoors with the play outdoors it's a very different type of play. Outdoors is …free and running games and …blowing off steam and it's very good if

> they've got a lot of wiggles in the afternoon and it's a nice day it's …nice to take them out to … burn that energy off…There's a lot of stress involved in play because we have a very crowded school. It's very – not all the areas are crowded but the grass field and the playground and the basketball courts, all the places where they want to gravitate to, are very full …I'll find that they'll come in and … more problems have occurred than anything. It causes so many problems because they get into arguments, or they get upset about little things. I feel like they didn't get a break, you know what I mean? So that's why I really like to take them out when it's just us or one other classroom because that environment is not very natural and it's kind of scary for some of them. So definitely, the environment is super important. And play inside, if [it] was wild – if I allowed it to be wild when they're playing inside that would also not be a very nice environment to play in. So, it's important to me to set up a calm environment.

She realized that some groups needed frequent shifts from indoors to outdoors which led to changes in her initial day plans. Without set direction to implement a specific schedule and plan for instruction this teacher also asserted that it could be a challenge to adapt to learning needs of individuals within the group. Some of Participant 2's students began the year knowing all the letter sounds and beginning to read while others could not yet speak any English. Her advice to other educators faced with similar complex challenges was to "start small" and avoid trying too many new instructional strategies at once.

Participant 4 spoke about how the freedom teacher autonomy gave her made her feel unsure of her choices regarding literacy instruction:

> I feel literacy is …interesting because it's … my favourite thing to teach but I also struggle with like what am I offering - what is most beneficial for my students? So, literacyfor me right now has shifted a bit and it's not where I would like it to be yet.

Participant 4 spoke of "flexibility." Teacher autonomy allowed her to make changes to adapt to the needs of students in the moment, but it also meant that plans were constantly cancelled or re-made and her flexibility allowed her to adapt. In this case flexibility seemed to mean that she felt that she was easy-going and could adapt without emotional reaction. Sometimes her flexibility meant stopping in the middle of a lesson and leading everyone out of the room due to a student's emotional outburst. Her instructional choices were also impacted by her access to resources like Play-Doh, letter magnets or tiles needed to support literacy activities. Sometimes necessary resources were not available, and her flexibility allowed her to make changes to plans accordingly. Some resources that she planned to use, although used by other BC educators, were not approved by the school district and needed modifications to be adopted. Sometimes she would not learn until the last minute that the resources were not approved and once again her flexibility allowed her to adapt. She noted that she often wished she had a resource that told her exactly "where to start and where to end" when planning for the year, suggesting that being flexible is not easy.

During interviews teachers often demonstrated that they were already thinking about the next school year and how they would teach or organize something in a different way next time. Below, Participant 5 reflected on how if she had started a specific self-regulation program earlier in the school year that her students would likely be struggling less with self-regulation in the final term of the school year.

> I just started the zones as part of a collaborative school thing just after the break…It was my plan to do feelings and to do Zones... this is what I'm feeling, and this is how I can react. I think if I would have started that in September it would have been very different right now. I even have a lot of kids who cry all the time still and can't verbalize their feelings.

The above quote demonstrates the continuous process of adapting instructional practices and how it is an annual, ongoing, reflexive process.

School Experiences

The next most-occurring theme was "school experiences." As part of a hermeneutic phenomenological cycle, I chose this theme to isolate moments during interviews or parts of survey transcripts when participants explicitly mentioned experiences of physically being at school by specific people groups: themselves, their students, or their students' caregivers. This excluded experiences specific to play, literacy and English-language learning as those themes were addressed separately to address research questions more directly. This theme also does not connect directly to play-based learning but instead represents a theme that was very evident in the data and demonstrates the experience of being a play-based, early primary educator in the suburban BC context.

Learners' and their caregivers' experiences were perceptions by classroom teachers through the lens of this researcher and not first-hand experiences for those parties, although I argue that this layered perspective is part of what it means to be a teacher: teaching, supporting, and working with both students and their caregivers. An interest in the happiness of young children at school has been documented in literature (Leung et al, 2021). Similarly, participants in this study demonstrated interest in the comfort level and feelings of their learners. For

example, Participant 3 discussed how using stations in her teaching practice helped learners feel more comfortable. In this example, the use of stations meant offering students the choice of which activity they wanted to work on in order to practice skill(s) pertaining to a specific learning outcome. Students could choose to change stations or stay at the same one for a longer period.

> I think utilizing stations has been very helpful because each station can be different levels. And also pairing kids together who can be at the same level or even sometimes a higher student with some kids who maybe need that extra support …when they have that friend that needs that little bit of extra help, I've seen it help both of them. So, the child who needs little bit of extra help that really helps them feel more confident and more comfortable in what we're doing …And then that also gives me an opportunity to work with kids who maybe need a little bit more one-on-one with me once everyone's a little bit more independent and able to work at their specific station.

At another point in the interview, Participant 3 relayed that she wished her students would just not feel frustrated because when they are frustrated it's "hard for their brains to learn" and Participant 1 stated that her top priority was making sure that all her students felt "comfortable and safe." This pattern of noting and arranging for student comfort was evident in all interviews. Participants also discussed levels of student fear, enjoyment, motivation, stress, confidence, creativity, empathy, and flexibility among many other states of student states of being.

The theme of the importance of supporting student learning at home (Heath, 1982; Lang et al, 2020) continued throughout interviews as teacher perspectives on caregivers and their relationships with those caregivers. As with the Lang et al (2020) study, teachers placed great import on the relationship between themselves and student caregivers despite notable challenges

and impediments to these relationships. Participants mentioned problems with interacting with caregivers as well as the need for and value of interaction with caregivers, particularly following the restricted physical access families had to schools during the pandemic. Participant 2 described caregiver perceptions of school as a "poor interpretation" of what was happening in her classroom that did not include current educational practices. Teacher participants described a desire for school events during which caregivers could come into the school and watch teachers demonstrating current teaching methods or to see what their children have learned or created. However, Participant 2 feared that the caregivers who needed to come into the schools the most were too busy to do so. Participant 3 mentioned usage of a digital portfolio system for communicating student learning through "showing" instead of using a traditional text-only format as a useful strategy for connecting with caregivers:

> I appreciate the video feature because then parents can see, families can see, and I can also see what they can do whether that be explaining something that we're working on or reading and I'm able to look back because I have that evidence that's not just a worksheet or a paper or just even just my notes.

Physical aspects of school experiences are also presented in the interviews including resources, materials, and physical environments of schools. Many of the resources teachers spoke of in this study included instructional books, student books, letter manipulatives such as magnets and tiles, student whiteboards, Play-Doh, toys, imaginative play centers such as child-size pretend kitchens, loose parts, and technology such as student iPads. Teachers often spoke of resources as inter-connected with their instructional choices: their availability, their cost, and access to them were all prominent aspects of the educators' school experiences. Some resources

teachers shared with other teachers at their schools, either informally or in a more official way when resources were owned by the school and were expected to be shared equitably.

Loose parts (Nicholson, 1973) were mentioned throughout several interviews. Teacher participants spoke of the importance of access to school-owned loose parts to use in literacy activities. Participant 4 explained that if they "didn't have to go out and buy" the resources in their classroom that students would have access to exploratory play constantly as they valued this activity. Participant 1 stated that they had purchased almost all resources in their classroom. Teacher-owned resources present another challenge to these educators as they inferred that it was expected that they purchase their own materials. There was never an explicit explanation of why they purchased them or if the school or district was willing to purchase them. This is an area for future, further inquiry.

Teachers spoke of their own feelings and personal experiences with school in a very direct way. Participant 2 summarized their feelings about their profession: "I enjoy teaching. I think that would be part of context. I find it very rewarding and I'm very passionate about what I do." It was notable that participants consistently and across all interviews, made note, often critically, of their own reactions and feelings not unlike the Madrid, Baldwin & Frye (2013) study. Teachers did not avoid discussing personal weaknesses, fears, and insecurities. Participant 4 summed up her insecurities about their practice saying, "I'm rethinking *everything* I do." However, they also highlighted their positive experiences including student learning successes and teaching tasks they took enjoyment in. Participant 2 shared a story that highlighted her pride in student success:

> I have this one student who came into my class with zero words in English – zero. And within a month she's speaking almost in full sentences and she's starting to understand

> what I'm saying. I'm just so blown away. And she raises her hand to answer questions. It's so good. I'm so proud of her.

General challenges with teaching an early primary class included not having enough time to work directly with individual students; addressing gaps or varying levels in student ability or understanding within a single classroom; combating negativity about teaching from people not working in public education; using a specific literacy method such as Story Workshop that they did not yet understand; teaching multiple grade levels and not knowing how to offer age appropriate play activities to all ages in the class; working in a complex class or school environment; managing a high-stress job; and staying calm and present for students when feeling stressed. They also noted challenges specific to student groups: students entering early primary classrooms not equipped with age-appropriate play skills; students unable to communicate in English; and students with problematic or aggressive behaviors.

Expressed insecurities were generally associated with a teacher's feelings of inexperience. The participants who felt that they were still new to their roles were more likely to express their insecurities and often mentioned that they were planning on modifying their teaching methods for the next school year. Insecurities reported by participants included sharing their experiences as a participant in this research study. They also described feeling insecure when seeing activities and lessons other teachers were doing online, at their school site, or even through a mentorship program and feeling inadequate in comparison. They had insecurities regarding specific subject areas such as math, writing or play. Participant 4 described the inadequacy she felt when realizing she had been doing something in her classroom the wrong way all school year while listening to another teacher discuss out-of-date teaching practices:

> This teacher was sharing that the research is coming out for students with dyslexia that these strategies that we're teaching, which are strategies that I'm teaching like "eagle eye" and looking at the picture that these are not benefitting our learner and we're teaching them to memorize you know a picture instead of having the decoding skills. So now I'm like "ahh! I've been teaching eagle eye and these strategies all year and I shouldn't be doing that."

Participant feelings were a key component of school experiences overall, a theme supported by the Hagenauer et al. study (2015). Teachers expressed feeling overwhelmed by commercially produced literacy programs; the need to teach everything in the provincial curriculum; the weight of responsibility to offer play times to learners at school when they may not be exposed to it anywhere else; and the pressure to produce a student-created artifact to demonstrate learning. At the same time, much of what they felt was positive. One teacher made the phenomenon of their feelings sound as though it were contagious: "you have the challenges but you also have that sense of excitement to be there because you get to be around these kiddos that are excited to be there;" delight in playing with learners as they learned; enjoyment of a specific teaching task such as guided reading; pride in learner progress; and pride in challenging one's self and trying out a new teaching method or technique. One teacher detailed h passion and curiosity for learning about new education methods such as giving learners the ability to choose their learning environment within a school. She also highlighted her passion for teaching literacy and the rewarding nature of teaching in general.

A large factor in *school experiences* was the pandemic (O'Keefe & McNally, 2021; Cox-Dunman, 2022). O'Keefe and McNally's Irish study in some ways mirrored this sub-theme as the

participants in their study were concerned with the necessity of compensating for a lack of social development by promoting play at home during the lockdown. They planned to use play at school after the lockdown ended to support their learner continued social emotional development. In this study the pandemic was sometimes mentioned very casually. Other times it was the focus of a participant's answer to a prompt. Participant 6 noted that it had made collaboration with colleagues difficult and changed the way she laid out play materials for learners.

Two participants explained that due to the pandemic, school had become the only place where learners experienced social interaction and social skill development, making social development at school more important than before. Participant 4 described a noticeable change in learner ability to regulate voice volume during play following the start of the pandemic. Another consequence was the way the pandemic had limited participants' ability to connect with student families and the ability of families to connect with school and classroom communities. For example, restrictions on food at school: Participant 6 mentioned that pandemic restrictions had limited immigrant families' ability to share about their culture in a tangible way as they could no longer bring food to school for events like potlucks. Participant 4 expressed sadness at not being able to host families in her classroom for events like noisy reading (a time during which families are invited to come into the classroom and read to and with their children). Since completion of this study many of these restrictions have reversed but participant concerns regarding enduring impacts on all members of school communities were evident throughout many of the interviews.

Play

Participants were all vocal proponents of using play for instruction and learning, likely because the recruitment poster for the study advertised an investigation of play. Many of the interview prompts directed a discussion of play, but participants often mentioned it even when unprompted. This is how play developed into its own theme. How it was described, defined, and implemented was different for each participant although there were commonalities I address below.

Definitions of play emerged as a sub-theme worth noting. Development of an individual or academic definition of play is a theme found in published literature as well. Definitions of play have been shown to direct the way that play is implemented in a teacher's practice (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016) making it worthwhile to pay attention to how an individual educator perceives play. In this study a participant described play as "allowing kids to be kids," another defined play as allowing students to solve problems and develop problem-solving skills. One participant described it as time for students to talk and work together while the next described it as an opportunity to role-play specific scenarios as a way of preparing for challenging social situations. Each of these descriptions reflects Vygotsky's assertion that sociodramatic play is the best way for young learners to find their own ZPD (1935/1978). Through peer teaching and learning, young learners are able to practice social situations in a developmentally appropriate way in sociodramatic play.

Two teachers described play as diverse, cross-curricular and a part of every activity in their daily classroom routines. Participant 6 described it as a part of the way students learn in every curricular area:

> Like … story workshop I see as a kind of play, and I often do a lot of stuff with playdoh … and fun things to count sounds and count syllables and games and all of those pieces and elements to encourage students to participate in those activities. And I find when you give a chance for kids to be kids and you engage in those types of activities it develops a confidence in them. They're talking to their partner and they're sharing ideas and they're having a conversation about the literacy focus we're working on. And I think it just really helps to develop an understanding.

This perspective is likely why play became evident in all sections of the interviews. To describe how they implemented play-based learning they grouped types of play into categories (see Table 5 below). Some participants categorized play as free or structured. Other play categories included environment, and positive or negative. Most teachers spoke about which type of play to implement based on the time of the school day. Free play tended to happen at the start of the day, during recess, and near the end of the day while structured play tended to happen during or following time blocks dedicated to instruction of specific subjects such as literacy or numeracy.

Generally, interview participants appeared eager to talk about the successes and benefits they and their students had with play-based instruction and learning. They described successes with setting up dramatic play scenarios for children to develop social skills; guided play that allowed students to practice and develop social skills; freedom to demonstrate student learning through play even when they could not speak English; play that made learning in all curriculum content areas fun and engaging; learning from peers during play; ELL students developing oral language skills through social play; teachers playing with students to demonstrate play skills; ability of young students to work independently through play; ease of play assessment through use of digital portfolios; and flexibility of scheduling as students could free play while other

students arrive late in the morning, while the teacher is working in small groups, or as unexpected events occur.

Five of the interview participants described situations in which students struggled during play or their play behaviors had negative impacts on others. These included an inability to invite peers to play; an inability to use play materials; throwing or breaking play materials; playing out aggressive scenarios with or against one another; conflict with peers, particularly during free play; dysregulated or "out of control" play; rough or careless play leading to injury; and loud yelling or screaming during play. These described difficulties were usually accompanied by an expression of teacher curiosity, reflecting the current shift in teacher education and pedagogy towards inquiry (Katwijk et al., 2022). Katwijk et al. (2022) demonstrated a shift in educator attitude in regard to problem-solving instead of just problem-identifying. Teachers spoke of the issues as ongoing problems that they were continuing to try to solve. One teacher stated that they were not problems at all and insisted on describing them as "puzzles" instead. This positive approach to difficult situations made it seem as though the experience could be enjoyable.

Other literature-supported concepts teachers frequently associated with play included offering students' choice (Patall et al., 2008) and explicit modelling of play (Terpstra et al., 2002). Interview participants emphasized the value of giving students choice and of using it as an opportunity to teach young students how to make positive choices. They talked about offering choices in terms of which play materials students wanted to use, which peers students wanted to play with, and Participant 3 valued choice so much that she described encouraging students to suggest to her that they take their learning outside whenever students felt that that would benefit their learning. She described the process of honoring that choice as best as she could, and when it was not possible to move learning out of doors due to the weather or schedule, she described

taking that as an opportunity to explain her thinking to her students so that they would never feel that she was making random decisions regarding their learning. Modelling play involved getting directly involved in play with students, sometimes demonstrating for students how to play outside during recess. During recess there is typically less adult oversight and guidance which can lead to challenges for students surrounding problem-solving associated with peer conflict. For one participant this meant going outside at times other than recess and setting up a scenario like the free play setting of recess but with only her class on the playground. During this time, she helped students one-on-one with problems they encountered on the playground including safe usage of playground equipment and conflict with peers. One teacher repeatedly described modelling play in her interview as getting down on the floor and playing with students. During this time, she would vocalize her thinking to demonstrate how to safely use play materials, organize play with other students, problem-solve in conflict and avoid aggressive play with peers and play materials. In this way she employed a Vygotskian method to her play instruction by helping her student find their ZPD to maximize their learning through play. The above examples demonstrate that implementing play-based learning both aligns with academic literature and is a complex process.

Literacy

This theme is tied to language as literacy is language recorded. Vygotsky (1987) asserted that language is how all thought is completed: language is complex and not just the product of meaning-making but the mode by which meaning is generated. Finding the ZPD in language learning for students is highly individualized as young learners develop their view of the world and interpret it while learning to read and write.

The complexity of language and its instruction is not without practical classroom dilemmas. Managing an inclusive literacy program within the school schedule with available resources and materials that meets the requirements of the school district and province is challenging. This challenge is documented in literature (Kersten & Pardo, 2007). The Kersten and Pardo study demonstrated the immense pressure on educators to adapt and innovate in response to the prior listed factors. In this study, teachers frequently discussed their individual literacy programs. Participants referred to literacy instruction methods they had used in past, what they were using presently and what they were planning to change or adjust about their literacy instruction methods in future. Participant 1 integrated literacy instruction in every part of her daily instructional schedule. For example, here she explained how she included a writing lesson into the part of the day where students write in their agendas: “We do our planner which kind of involves a little mini like how-to-write-a-sentence lesson and printing so we discuss a little bit about that during our planner message.”

Teachers listed reading instruction strategies including guided reading; specific commercially produced reading instruction curriculum; noisy reading; teacher read aloud books; buddy reading; explicit reading strategy instruction; small group reading instruction; one-to-one reading instruction; exposure to books with topics that are of specific interest to students; variety of reading activities; integrating reading instruction into every part of the curriculum; word instruction; letter and letter-sound instruction; and vocabulary instruction. It was evident that reading instruction was a constant presence in their teaching practices.

Writing instruction was described through usage of several instructional strategies as well: in conjunction with drawing or as labelling; in journals; as part of a commercial curriculum; as a collaborative project such as interactive writing; using the write-the-room

method (see below); writing in a student planner or agenda; one-to-one writing instruction; using a sentence-starter or prompt; and in creating stories. Write-the-room refers to a method in which teachers posted words around the room on walls and students walked around with paper and pencil and copied them down (https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Write-the-Room-Kindergarten). The words may have been posted as pictures that students had to interpret and there may have been a specific way or order in which they were instructed to copy words onto their papers. Teachers also mentioned components of writing, like the way they included phonics and vocabulary instruction as part of their reading instruction: word work (see below) and letter work (see below) or letter formation. Although these two components are often not considered "writing" in older grades, in kindergarten and grade one it is developmentally appropriate for a child to write a single word to represent an entire concept or sentence (BC Ministry of Education, 2023). For the purposes of this study "word work" refers to any activity in which a child is practicing creating or identifying specific words and "letter work" involves any activity in which a child is practicing identifying individual letters. Writing activities and strategies were diverse and used in conjunction with one another.

English Language Learning

Ellis' (2005) description of the complexity of language learning was uncovered in the challenges participants found when instructing young language learners. It is a difficult process to define and unique to each learner's experience. While ELL students learn a new language, they simultaneously meaning make through the languages they use fluently, layering on top of that the bits of English they are coming to understand and use.

In this section I describe a deep commitment amongst participants to understand and meet the complex needs of ELL students. This commitment presented most poignantly in the

expression of admiration participants had for ELL students and their families. Participant 6 described a noticeable level of motivation amongst her young ELL students to learn and be successful. Her tone as she described these little learners was inspiring. Her excitement about her students' excitement was in turn, exciting for the listener:

> it's really interesting working with ELL students because you can get a range of confidence with kiddos coming into the classroom. Some are super excited to be there. They're super eager. They are driven. Like they want to do well. They're chatty. They want to try. And it's not that other students aren't like that, but I find that there's a bit of hesitation. Possibly with like the oral component. Sometimes with the perfectionist idea they really want to do well, and it almost hinders them because they don't want to get started because it seems like they want to do it perfectly the first time and it seems like that's not what's expected of them at that time. So, I get a wide range of students. I've had some students come in my classroom that don't speak which is fine where they're at that point in their learning and then I have some are super chatty and it's super hard to understand them.

For educators in this study English language learning as a theme represented the complex nature of adapting instruction to meet the needs of English language learners, the experience of the English language learning students themselves and, by extension, the experiences of their families.

Academic literature surrounding English language learning at school includes inquiry regarding immersion versus dual language instruction (Angelova et al., 2006; Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Toohey, 1998). In the context of this study all participants did not speak the home languages of all of their ELL learners and an immersion model of language instruction

was employed because that is the standard for most public schools in BC. Patterns in the interviews related to English language learning often had to do with translation, a necessity in the immersion-style English-only schools participants worked in. Participant 5 described using Google Translate, Google's service that instantly translates word, phrases, and web pages between English and over 100 other languages, to support communicating with both students and their caregivers. In this quote Participant 5 describes needing to use this translation service in order to assess:

> I have two that don't even speak English, so I've gotten really good at google translate and it seems like they understand when I use Google Translate and to be honest, I have one that's not very verbal and using Google Translate I'm able to assess her on certain things like for example we did natural and man-made. I put an "n" and I put an "m" – this is natural, and this is man-made, and she points and tells. When I sit with her and do Google Translate, I can get a lot more out of her, and I am actually able to assess more obviously more than I would be if I wasn't using google translate. So even for something as simple as journals we're not just doing a journal, I say draw me what you were doing this weekend I can very easily see oh she was with mom, she was bike riding and she's actually able to start label some of her pictures. So, I think that's been the biggest change for me, Google Translate.

Participant 6 described depending on colleagues at the school to translate for caregivers. In the final section of the interview many participants expressed a wish for more and easier access to translation services to meet the needs of ELL students and their families.

Teachers mentioned at times modifying teaching strategies to make learning accessible to young English learners. Not unlike Banarjee et al. (2016) they saw play as a way for students

who spoke little or no English to begin learning English and engage with learning in the absence of the ability to use English fluently. They also employed drawing as a strategy for ELL students to demonstrate understanding and begin to engage with learning in an English-speaking immersion classroom. Students who were not yet ready to write in English were sometimes able to draw to record meaning in their journals or other writing assignments. Participants commented that ELL students new to English needed time to be immersed in an English-speaking play-based classroom, exploring, and observing even when how they were engaging was not in the way the teacher intended when originally planning the activity or lesson. New ELL students also needed repeated and explicit vocabulary instruction and lots of one-on-one support to check for comprehension. These teachers used exaggerated body movements and signaling along with visual signage to support their students' learning, like the strategies described by Gersten and Geva (2003). In the final section of the interview participants were given the opportunity to express their wishes for access to supports for ELL students and they listed better access to books that would support these students, more access to translation for students who could not yet communicate in English and more staffing to provide one-on-one support for ELL students.

English language learner inclusive teaching practices also require acknowledgment of the complex immigrant experiences within class systems (Theodorou, 2011). Participants described addressing not only the language component of supporting ELL students but also the immigration and cultural immersion aspects. Teachers recognized that the level of support a student needed because they were ELL often had to do with how recently the students' families had immigrated. Newly-immigrated students were often offered more options for translation including support from a peer who spoke their home language and was able to translate even though speaking home languages at school is often discouraged by students' families. Teachers

also noted that classes with greater numbers of ELL students often did not progress as far with literacy outcomes in the span of a school year as expected. One teacher described the experience of discovering that a student who was never following her instructions was not understanding anything she was saying. When she described the resulting frustrating behavior to parents in reporting documents, the child's parent explained that the child did not understand anything the teacher was saying. This was why the child was often off-task.

A wholistic teacher view of ELL students includes ELL student families and their caregivers because the well-being of the family unit directly impacts the success of the child (Heath, 1982; Wassell et al., 2017). All participants noted that in recent years families and caregivers of ELL students had less opportunity to enter the school and physically experience what is happening in the school due to both the pandemic and the increasingly demanding schedules of working parents. One teacher reminisced that in the past caregivers had had the opportunity to witness what it meant to teach and learn literacy and numeracy in this context through parent nights at the school. These kinds of events had demonstrated to ELL families the process of learning in this context in a way that newsletters could not. Another participant noted that families of ELL students often held perceptions of what school is like based on their own experiences from other countries. This had led to many surprising miscommunications regarding expectations for homework, disciplining students exhibiting negative behavior at school and the value of reading comprehension. She noticed that ELL families were placing more value on decoding than on comprehension. The participant explained that especially during a pandemic, it can be challenging to overcome those perceptions and demonstrate that educational philosophy can be quite different in this context than what ELL caregivers had experienced with their own early education. This challenge was exacerbated by the demanding schedules of many new

immigrant families making it impossible for them to come into the school for parent-teacher conferences or parent nights.

Despite pandemic challenges, many participants noted that they were again beginning or planning to begin to host “noisy reading” in their classrooms to connect ELL families to the classroom and support ELL caregivers with reading with and to students at home. This practice had been unused during the height of pandemic restrictions as it increased the amount of people in a classroom. All participants described the process of translating for caregivers and offering families multiple forms of communication to suit their levels of comfort. Some participants found caregivers relied heavily on text-based forms of communication while others found ELL caregivers would only communicate during brief in-person interactions at school drop-off and pick-up times. One participant worried that much of the text-based communication the school sent home in newsletters was not understood by ELL families and that families were not even aware of how much school information they were missing. The above difficulties with communication added complexity to the experience of being a play-based educator in this context.

The Intersection of Play, Literacy and English Language Learning

Once I identified the above themes, my inquiry led me to next look for the point where play, literacy and ELL instruction intersected. Through reflection on my journal entries and theme-development I believed that this next step would allow me to locate conclusions and recommendations amongst my data for Chapter 5. The Washington-Nortey (2022) study uncovered a strong link between social interaction and language acquisition for young English language learners, but what does social interaction and language acquisition success mean for play among my participants’ students? Across all interviews in this study two strategies emerged

as methods that used both play and literacy to support students with English language learning: free play and story workshop. In this study, "free play" refers to an instructional choice in addition to the free play offered to all students' school-wide during recess. Free play was described by all participants as a daily part of their schedule, often referred to as "centres" or "centre time." For the purposes of this study, I will refer to this concept as "centre-time." Centre-time was described as a time when students played with various toys and manipulatives of their choice in the classroom with less structure than at other times during the school day. Usually, participants scheduled it near the end of the school day. Centre-time was described as a method of intersecting play, literacy, and English language learning through allowing students to teach one another and through teacher-set-up scenarios at centres in the classroom with the purpose of encouraging language and / or literacy development. Some participants described how students would also choose literacy games, reading or literacy manipulatives during their centre-time. One participant described a free style version of a story workshop during centre-time in which students were asked to make a story but given no specific guidelines. Several participants also mentioned free play as a support for literacy development through encouragement of oral language use. Several participants explained that during free play students appeared highly motivated to speak with peers as they played. The above listed strategies offered the possibility of conclusions about the experience of teaching through play-based instruction in an early primary classroom.

A second strategy used by five of the six participants was a more formal story workshop method originally developed at OPAL School (Mackay, 2021). Participants described this method as having students play with loose parts to create a story and then having them record the

created story in drawings and / or writing. Participant 5 described her reason for using this method:

> it's the opportunity to – gosh how do I say it – like for their oral language skills and the opportunity to work with materials and build a story, use their imagination, and talk about the elements that's within their story. And then connect with friends and tell stories to their friends or to an adult and kind of verbalize their thoughts.

The Story Workshop strategy was more purposeful than centre-time and participants described their method of implementing it in varying ways and with varying levels of instructional experience. No participants described implementing this strategy at the same frequency as they employed centre-time.

Within this method, some teachers set up specific scenarios with loose parts and emphasized making the scenarios visually appealing to students. Other teachers gave students freedom to choose loose parts freely without pre-set-up scenarios. Two participants described story workshop as a method they were still learning to implement in collaboration with colleagues at their school. One participant described the process as working particularly well for ELL students as they could complete the process successfully without having to write words down. They could instead create a detailed drawing along with an oral retelling to represent the story they created through play and oral social interaction that showed elements of a fully developed story. Participants described some students as able to demonstrate the ability to create a narrative without any drawing or writing at all but rather through re-enacting the story with the provided loose parts. All these methods included the freedom, creativity and choice often associated with play; with explicit literacy outcomes of creating a narrative, developing printing and writing skills, and oral language development through retelling.

Chapter Summary

The interviews and surveys in this research study produced a large overview of experiences of teachers supporting young students with learning literacy through play. Viewed through a Vygotskian lens, language and literacy instruction are complex, and the complexities were reflected in the continuous process of reflection and adaptation of study participants. Discussing play as a developmentally appropriate ZPD for young ELL students revealed a layered approach to teaching and learning in this context. Uncovered themes *included teaching philosophies and practices*, *school experiences*, *play*, *literacy*, and *English language learning*. Added to these were the subthemes of student caregiver experiences as well as teaching and learning during a pandemic.

The first and largest theme revealed the complex nature of teacher autonomy in British Columbia early learning classrooms. The goal of helping students each find their individual ZPD was presented in the discussions around curriculum, schedule, and activity choices. Participants described these as complex and highly important aspects of their teaching practices. They discussed building relationships with students before making choices regarding how to teach required learning outcomes within the restrictions of schedules and available materials. Each participant relayed this experience as a process that was constantly changing as they developed their own pedagogy and adapted to each group of students they taught.

The school experiences of students, their caregivers, and the teacher participants themselves as relayed by those participants uncovered a diverse set of factors in BC early primary classrooms within this context. Teacher experiences were developed out of their perceptions and concerns for the experiences of students and student caregivers. Participants conveyed a strong sense of desire that their young students feel comfortable and successful, and

they generally believed that this sense of well-being was vital to finding a student's ZPD, although they never used the term "zone of proximal development." They associated student well-being with teacher relationships with student caregivers and the well-being of those caregivers. Some teachers conveyed a sense of inadequacy in the face of what they believed to be a high-level task in instructing young learners while others had adopted a sense of wonder towards teaching, approaching it as one would an interesting puzzle.

Participants defined play in multiple ways ranging from it being the very definition of a child to the method by which all things were taught in their classroom. Teachers discussed the ways in which they intentionally taught play, how they categorized different kinds of play and the challenges that play presented for both instructors and learners. Sub-themes that arose included student choice and teacher modelling of play. All participants conveyed the sense that they were continually exploring and enhancing their play-based teaching practices.

Through a Vygotskian lens, literacy appeared in both interviews and surveys as a large factor in the plans teachers made and implemented for instruction. Teachers were concerned with various commercial curricula and detailed their methods for adapting the curricula to meet the provincial government's prescribed learning outcomes of, their own teaching styles, and the needs of their students. This theme was largely made up of very practical discussions regarding activity choice and scheduling in developmentally appropriate ways.

The English language learning theme demonstrated a participant approach to teaching that viewed learners holistically, taking into consideration the student's family unit and their immigration experiences. Educators often had to depend on translation tools such as Google Translate to communicate with both students and their caregivers as human interpreters were not always readily available. Teachers also described miscommunications surrounding ELL student

caregivers who had perceptions of school that were related to their own school experiences in completely different contexts. The language barrier made conveying the realities of this context challenging. Despite challenges, participants described a sense of joy in watching young ELL students learn and grow as English language speakers.

This inquiry found two strategies that encompassed the last three themes and provided a Vygotskian ZPD for young ELL students in this context: free play and story workshop. Participants demonstrated how they were able to harness their students desire to socialize through play towards developing language skills as a base for future literacy development. Students were challenged by their peers in a Vygotskian model of expert teaching novice while engaged in age-appropriate play. This created feelings of comfort during learning. The second strategy was a more formalized method of story creation described by participants as “story workshop” likely based on the OPAL Schools model. This method involved playing to create a story followed by steps towards recording the story in drawing and writing. These strategies lead to the possibility of further inquiry discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In the last chapter I discuss final conclusions, implications, and recommendations that were developed from this research study. The final section of this chapter is dedicated to lessons I learned throughout the research process and is meant to continue to demonstrate my bias in the study as part of a phenomenological methodology.

Conclusions

I have drawn four conclusions from which to create recommendations: participants defined and implemented play-based learning in different ways; teachers noticed positive impacts of play for language development on ELL students; teachers used two strategies in this context that intentionally addressed the needs of early primary ELL students to develop language and literacy skills; and the pandemic had many impacts on teachers of young students, students, in general, and ELL students, specifically. These conclusions emerged through careful reflection on the themes discussed in Chapter 4.

Participants Defined and Implemented Play-Based Learning in Different Ways

Teacher autonomy allowed participants to make instructional choices regarding how they implemented the provincial curriculum which meant that their beliefs about play informed their decisions regarding how they implemented play-based learning. Play was defined by participants through categorization and comparison. Some examples included free play versus guided play or structured play, outdoor versus indoor play, and play associated with specific subject areas. Participants demonstrated a strong connection between personal educational philosophy and practice including how they organized play within daily classroom routines; how and why they chose to adopt specific play-based curricula, materials, and strategies; and why they chose to adapt and modify their plans for play during instruction.

Teachers Noticed Positive Impacts of Play on ELL Students for Language Development

Participants adopted play-based learning for ELL instruction alongside other educational strategies such as teaching drawing, providing extra time for learning, repeated explicit instruction, and one-on-one support. They described high levels of ELL students' motivations to practice oral language skills during play while they socialized with peers. Teachers also praised play as an instructional strategy for all students to learn social skills, make learning fun, support independence, and simplify assessment.

Strategies for ELL Language and Literacy Development

Specific play-based strategies that participants used to address the learning needs of ELL students included story workshop and time for free play. Story workshop provided a structured method for teachers to support literacy development for students who did not yet speak English fluently. The method used play, drawing and oral language to practice and develop many Language Arts learning standards from the provincial curriculum without requiring the ability to write. It also challenged students who were fluent in English to practice and develop writing skills. This meant that story workshop could be used to differentiate Language Arts instruction with ease.

Participants praised free play as a strategy that supported oral language and social skills development. Students were highly motivated to participate in free play even when not fluent in English. They described free play as effective when combined with teacher-modelling. Teachers described modelling play skills in various environments in which students play including on the playground. Other effective play instruction strategies included creating dramatic play scenarios and providing students with choice.

Pandemic Impacts on Teachers, Students and Caregivers

Participants reported that students needed more time to practice problem-solving skills in play than they had before the pandemic. Teachers felt more pressure than they had before the pandemic to teach students social skills through play as school was the first routine social experience for many young children outside of their own homes. Many of their students had not been able to attend preschool or other extra-curricular activities as they were only 3 or 4 when pandemic restrictions began. Participants believed that as a result, students lacked many age-appropriate social skills such as the ability to regulate voice volume.

There were also negative impacts on the relationship between teachers and student caregivers. Teachers were considering hosting events in their classrooms that had not occurred since prior to the pandemic in which caregivers would be invited inside classrooms. The events were to address the challenge of communicating with caregivers who did not speak English fluently. Participants felt that many ELL caregivers did not understand what was happening in their child's classroom because they had not been allowed to view play-based learning at school in-person. Written or digital communications alone did not seem to replace in-school interactions effectively. This led to challenges with communicating the value of play to student families. Teachers felt that pandemic restrictions around food had also negatively impacted ELL students and their families. Students and their caregivers had been given opportunities to share food with their classes to demonstrate cultural identity in the past. During the pandemic this was no longer allowed, and teachers felt that this was a great loss in that it was a missed opportunity for students to teach one another about their cultural identities.

Implications

There were three areas of implications from this research study: pedagogical, methodological, and theoretical.

Pedagogical Implications

Part of the experience of the participants was their uncovered pedagogy. The theme *teaching philosophies and practices* isolated a deep commitment to pedagogy among participants. Overall, the pedagogy of participants showed a connection between student well-being and academic success. This is likely in part due to the Core Competencies in the BC curriculum that direct instruction toward long-term, over-arching, and achievable goals for all students (Province of British Columbia, 2021). It demonstrated that play-based instruction develops over time with experience, confidence and continuous professional development and collaboration. Participants were keenly aware of the importance of pedagogy, and some revealed insecurities about their ability to live up to their expectations for educators. The participants who seemed more confident were able to explain their pedagogy, how they developed it over time through professional development and collaboration, and the theory behind it. They all considered play an important part of their pedagogy even when they had trouble identifying play within the provincial curriculum. They discussed how they employed it as a carefully chosen component of their teaching practice grounded in personal philosophy if not government-mandated curriculum. They all described strategies that they employed that encompassed their play-based pedagogies: story workshop and free play, except for one participant that did not mention story workshop. Further research into both strategies would be helpful to determine how effective they are.

Methodological Implications

A phenomenological method allowed participants to engage in meaningful conversation through interviews. They often needed encouragement to express their thoughts near the start of each interview, sometimes asking “does that answer your question?” as though they required my affirmation, but they all eventually demonstrated comfort with the process. Through acknowledging my own bias as an early primary educator, we could discuss the topic with ease. I provided meaningful examples from my practice to them to seek clarification regarding specific descriptions they offered. This process of comparing our experiences led to a sense of understanding between us that would not have existed had I not had the freedom to express that I had worked in a similar context. The minimal amount of data produced by surveys is confirmation of the importance of the phenomenological method.

Surveys confirmed what interview participants conveyed but they did not add new ideas or concepts to the study. Interview participants gave similar answers to survey participants after the initial prompt. It was only through further prompting that they gave examples to explain their thinking or uncover how an experience made them feel. If I were to employ a survey method again, I would ensure that survey participants have the opportunity to answer individualized follow-up prompts to better reflect the interviews.

The phenomenological method allowed for investigation of play-based learning for ELL support through uncovering participant experiences. Participants were given the opportunity to discuss the topic of each research question but if they did not provide discussion that directly answered the research question at hand, I did not ask them to, because that would have interfered with the phenomenological methodology. For example, research questions focused heavily on assessment, but participants did not spend much time talking directly about assessment. I am confident in the phenomenological method because it uncovered the experiences of the

participants in an authentic way than if I would have pushed participants to give direct answers to research questions.

Theoretical Implications

Vygotsky's (1966/2016) socio-dramatic play as a means for learning was evident throughout all interviews and some surveys. Participants included it in descriptions of how their students, particularly ELL students, learned best. They described creating sociodramatic play scenarios for students by providing props and modelling so that students could practice and find success in social situations. Sometimes there were detailed lessons involving a play center designed for students to practice a specific scenario and sometimes they were impromptu lessons to address a specific social problem that had just developed. Elements of this kind of impromptu teaching existed throughout some interviews as participants explained how they individualized instruction.

Recommendations

The study produced three recommendations for educators: get directly involved in student play strategically and regularly; teach play strategies explicitly; and employ story workshop and free play to support ELL students in literacy development.

Get Directly Involved in Student Play Strategically and Regularly

The first recommendation is for teachers to get directly involved in study play strategically and regularly. One of the benefits listed by participants of teaching students to play independently was that it allowed teachers to conduct small group or one-on-one lessons while the rest of the class played. This was an important benefit as participants were busy and found it challenging to ensure each student was getting proper academic instruction. However, it presented a problem: teachers can be too busy with small groups or one-on-one instruction to

play with students. To avoid this problem, the recommendation is to schedule a specific time during each school day or week to play with students. This time can be used to formatively assess students in many learning areas including social development. It is also an excellent time to scaffold learning by providing student-specific instruction. For example, if a teacher observes that a child has isolated themselves from playmates by collecting all available play materials and not sharing with peers, the teacher might have that child pause in their play and lead a quick discussion on why it is beneficial to share. Then the teacher might provide the student with language to use to invite a peer to play such as "would you like to play Lego with me? Which pieces of Lego would you like to use?" As the two peers begin to play, the teacher would join them, providing ideas of what to build together and continuing to mediate discussion around sharing materials. This might sound like "isn't it fun when everyone has a Lego character? This way the characters can play together too! If only one person has all the Lego characters, it is difficult for the characters to play because we don't have enough hands to play with all of them at the same time." This exchange would demonstrate benefits of positive play behaviours to students and help develop social skills to be used in other social situations.

Teach Play Strategies Explicitly

The second recommendation is for teachers to teach play strategies explicitly. Participants described teaching specific play strategies to students which included instruction of skills children are commonly expected to know prior to Kindergarten. Some examples of play strategies to be taught explicitly include inviting peers to play, sharing play materials, and moderating voice volume. The recent social isolation of pandemic restrictions makes this recommendation more important than it might have been prior to the pandemic as students experienced few opportunities to socialize for several months or years. That experience may

have led to a higher need for explicit play strategy instruction in classrooms. It is worth considering this explicit play instruction strategy for older students too as all students experienced periods of extended social isolation. A more in-depth study into the benefits of explicit play strategy instruction would be helpful to gauge effectiveness on students of all ages.

Employ Story Workshop and Free Play to Support ELL Students in Literacy Development

The third recommendation is for teachers to employ story workshop and free play to support ELL students in literacy development. Participants described story workshop and free play as effective in supporting ELL students with literacy development through play. Five of the six interviewees described story workshop as effective and all interviewees believed that free play was an intentional part of their teaching practice for ELL students. The story workshop was described as effective for supporting all students with language and literacy development. The tactile, oral, and drawn components of the method were particularly invaluable for their ELL students as they could participate without being fluent English-speakers. Free play can be described as unstructured play time during which students have a lot of choice in what they play, how long they play, and who they play with. All participants mentioned free play as a regular part of their teaching practice and described ways to help students develop language and social skills through it.

Include the Above Recommendations in Teacher Education Programs and Professional Development

The final recommendation is to include all prior recommendations in pre-service teacher education programs and ongoing professional development. Participants described struggling with how to implement play in accordance with the BC provincial curriculum and one participant incorrectly suggested that play was not a part of the curriculum although she implemented it

because it was part of her personal pedagogy. This suggests that further education in this area would be helpful to teachers.

Lessons Learned

This last chapter is the story of my journey as a researcher: what I learned from the process and my own bias as an early primary ELL educator. Behind the planning, methodology, interview and survey results, theory and conclusions drawn, there are hours of sitting at a computer after hours of teaching. My uniform of leggings and loose dresses was evidence that, like my participants, I too "got down on the floor" daily and played with students. I learned many lessons over the course of this research study. I learned humility as I had to accept that I was much like my young students, doing something entirely new. I learned to ask for help and take critical feedback from my supervisor objectively, apply it, and move forward. I continue to have weaknesses surrounding writing in an active voice and I have learned to accept that this is who I am as a writer, and I will always need to ask for help when it comes to that.

I also learned that planning a study requires careful thought around my own limitations. For example, offering interviews in noisy cafés resulted in extra hours of transcription as the background noise of the café made transcribing difficult. Giving participants as much choice as possible when scheduling interviews also led to some long days for me. I had days in which I taught for 6 to 7 hours, then held an interview, then transcribed well into the night, and then got up early in the morning to teach again. There was paint and glitter under my fingernails as I transcribed – remnants of each school day. This schedule was an error on my part that I would avoid in future as it led to a high level of exhaustion, which made deep reflection and reflexive-journal entry writing difficult.

There were also skills that I developed that continue to help me daily. After the data collection phase I became a vice-principal, continuing to practice as a teacher but now a formalized leader in my school. Learning to conduct interviews, interpret discussion into meaning, and take critical feedback more objectively are invaluable skills that I employ daily in my role. As an administrator supporting early educators, I have gained a stronger understanding of the literature that supports play-based learning for early primary students and for ELL students specifically. I have used my knowledge of play-based learning to convince teachers to try play-based methods including story workshop through providing the necessary materials and resources. I can now confidently explain the value of play-based learning to student caregivers. It was also helpful to me to reflect on the data from the perspective of a new administrator to remind myself of the concerns of early primary teachers such as resource procurement and management.

Chapter Summary

This investigation of the experience of using play-based learning to support ELL students in suburban BC led to four main conclusions: play is defined by teachers in this context in different ways; teachers are noticing positive impacts of play on young ELL students; there are play-based strategies being used to support ELL students; and pandemic restrictions have impacted teachers, students, and caregivers in this context.

There were pedagogical, methodological, and theoretical implications. Pedagogical implications included the existence of carefully thought-out and implemented pedagogy in play-based pedagogy and practice. Methodological implications included the successful uncovering of data through allowing participants to reveal their experiences, but this led to an absence of clear answers to some of the research questions. There was also the issue of the survey data which did

not add a lot of meaning to the development of themes, because they did not reflect the phenomenological process of the interviews. Although participants did not discuss Vygotsky explicitly, his theories were presented in the data through participant descriptions of sociodramatic play, and expert/novice learning.

Conclusions and implications led to three recommendations for early primary teachers: get directly involved in student play, teach play strategies, and use story workshop and free play to support ELL students. These recommendations were based largely off the successes of teacher participants in the study and are all supported by the BC provincial curriculum. While they may appear simplistic, the experiences of participants demonstrate that they are valuable and effective.

Through the process of developing a proposal for this study, conducting the study, and writing the thesis I have learned many lessons. Some of these lessons include the practical reality of conducting a study while working fulltime in the education system and my own limitations on my time and energy. But I also learned many skills that continue to apply in my current context as teacher and administrator.

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Appendix A

Interview Schedule

Key Words or Terms Leading to Use of Appropriate Prompting Questions.	Question / Prompt EQ = Essential Question PQ = Prompting Question	Completed
consent	Did you receive the consent form? Do you have any questions regarding your consent?	
Section One: Context		
EQ 1 - Tell me about your context as an educator.		
ELL/immigrant/refugee	PQ - You mentioned that your context involves teaching _____. Describe having _____ in your school community. What is that like?	
	PQ - It sounds like _____ are an important part of your context. Can you talk a bit about that/them?	
EQ 2 - Describe an average day in your classroom.		
translation / ELL/refugee(s)	PQ - I noticed that a part of your average day involves translation / supports for ELL students. Can you unpack that a bit for me? What does that look like in your classroom?	
literacy routines	PQ - You mentioned that you do (name of literacy task here) daily. Explain what that looks like.	
	PQ - Can you tell me about your rationale for employing (literacy task).	
for clarification	PQ - Use example from my life – "In my own classroom we/I have _____ in past. How would this compare to your experience? Is it similar to what you're describing?"	
Section Two: Play		
EQ 3 - You mentioned play tell me about play in your classroom. or In the initial survey you identified yourself as using play-based learning in your classroom. Tell me more about your experience with that.		
EQ 4 - I'm interested to know if you have a system for ensuring that the play-based learning in your teaching practice aligns with the provincial curriculum.		
success with play	PQ - You mentioned you have found success _____. Can you talk more about that?	
	PQ - When you talked about _____ I sensed that you feel some pride. Can you unpack that so we can focus on that success for a bit?	
	PQ - I noticed that you have been finding success with _____. If you were supporting a colleague new to this	

	technique, what advice would you give them so that they could find success with it too?	
problems or challenges with play	PQ - It sounds like you've encountered a challenge with _____. I'd love to hear about strategies you've tried when encountering this problem…	
	PQ - It sounds like you solved the problem. Can you speak more to me about what that was like for you?	
	PQ - I'm curious to hear about other problems you've had in your classroom with play-based learning.	
	PQ - Having had this experience with _____ do you have any advice you could give other educators going through something similar?	
assessment	PQ – You mentioned how you assess _____. Can you talk about how that works with more detail?	
collaboration with colleagues to support play	PQ - You talked about collaboration with colleagues / a colleague on _____. I'm interested to know if you've collaborated with colleagues in other ways to support play-based learning…	
engaging families & caregivers with play	PQ – I noticed that you engage parents / families / caregivers when you described _____. Can you talk a bit about how connecting play with student families works in your classroom?	
specific play curriculum, methods, or programs (i.e.. story workshop or Reggio)	PQ - You mentioned _____. Could you talk about how it looks to use that system in your classroom?	
	PQ - Could you talk about how you learned about _____ and what motivated you to implement it in your practice?	
	PQ - You said you've been using _____. I'd love to hear what it is about _____ that has led you to use it in your teaching practice.	
play and social-emotional learning (i.e.. getting along with others, empathy, self-regulation)	PQ – Could you talk more about how you use play-based learning to teach social-emotional learning?	
play environments (i.e.. outdoor play, playgrounds, indoor play, gyms)	PQ – I noticed you mention that your students play is impacted by their environment. Can you explain that in more detail?	
If a specific play resource / material / toy is mentioned	PQ - I'm intrigued by your use of _____ in your classroom. Can you talk a bit more about that?	
	PQ - _____ is an interesting choice. Can you explain what led you to include it in your classroom?	

	PQ - You mentioned that you use _____ in your class. Can you describe how you organize that resource?	
	PQ - I am wondering about the _____ that you use. Can you talk a bit about how you accessed/funded that resource in your school/classroom?	
for clarification	PQ – I have _____ in my own play-based learning practice. Is that similar to what you are describing?	
Section Three: Literacy		
EQ 5 - Tell me about your experiences with literacy in your classroom.		
EQ 6 - can you talk about your process of aligning your literacy practices with the provincial curriculum?		
success with literacy	PQ - You mentioned you have had success with _____. Can you describe that program/method/resource further?	
	PQ - You talked about having success with _____. If you were to support a colleague using that literacy program/method/resource for the first time, what advice would you give so that they can experience similar success?	
problem or challenge with literacy	PQ – It sounds like you regularly encounter problems with _____. It would be interesting to hear about strategies you've tried when encountering these problems…	
	PQ - It sounds like you solved the problem/challenge. Can you describe more about what it took to deal with that …	
	PQ - It sounds like you addressed the problem of _____. I'm interested to hear about other problems you've had in your classroom with literacy.	
	PQ - Having experienced challenges with _____ do you have any advice you could give other educators going through something similar?	
assessment	PQ – I noticed you do _____ for literacy assessment. Can you talk about that in more detail?	
collaboration with colleagues to support literacy	PQ - You collaborated with colleagues / a colleague on _____. I'm interested to know if you've collaborated with colleagues in other ways to support literacy.	
families & caregivers	PQ – I noticed that you engage parents / families / caregivers when you described _____. Can you talk a bit about how connecting literacy with student families works in your classroom?	

specific literacy program, method or curriculum (i.e.. jolly phonics, Heggerty, etc.)	PQ - You brought up _____. Would you mind explaining how you use that program in your classroom?	
	PQ - Could you talk about how you learned about _____ and what motivated you to implement it in your practice?	
	PQ - You said you've been using _____ for a long time. I'd love to hear what it is about _____ that keeps you using it.	
specific literacy materials (i.e.. flash cards, big books, alphabet line, individual whiteboards, literacy centres…)	PQ - _____ sounds like an interesting addition to your literacy program. Would you describe this resource and how it works in detail?	
	PQ - You've mentioned _____. Can you talk a bit about other literacy resources that you use in your classroom?	
	PQ - That sounds like a really helpful addition to your literacy program. Can you talk a bit about the process of accessing literacy resources at your school.	
For clarification	PQ – There have been times when I _____. Would you say that this is similar to your literacy program?	
Section Four: English Language Learners		
EQ 7 - you mentioned in the survey that you have ELL students. Tell me about your experiences working with ELL students.		
adapting instruction for a(n) ELL student(s)	PQ - you mentioned before that you adapted your instruction for the needs of (an) ELL student(s). Tell me more about how you adapt for your ELL students.	
ELL families & caregivers	PQ - You brought up (an) ELL family/families/family member. It would be helpful if you could talk about some adaptations that you have made to your practice to support the families of your ELL students.	
	PQ - You mentioned struggles that you had communicating with a family / families of your ELL student(s). Can you describe some of the challenges you find with supporting families of your ELL students?	
assessment	PQ – You mentioned how you use _____ to assess your ELL students. Can you talk about how that assessment works for you?	
For clarification	PQ – In my classroom I have experienced _____. Would my experience be similar to what you have described?	
Section Five: Intersecting Literacy, Play & English Language Learning (ELL)		
EQ 8 – I am interested to know how all of the elements we discussed intersect in your context. Thinking of your ELL students – describe how literacy is taught to them through play-based learning in your classroom.		

success with intersecting literacy, play & ELL	PQ - You mentioned you found success with _____. Can you describe in more detail how you assessed this to be a positive or successful method for your ELL students?	
	PQ - The success you found using play to support literacy for your ELL students could be valuable for others trying to do the same thing. What advice could you give to other educators trying to use play in this way to support ELL students?	
problems & challenges with intersecting literacy, play & ELL	PQ - I noticed that you (or a student or family) had difficulty _____. Can you unpack that a bit for me?	
	PQ – How you _____sounds complex. I would love to hear how you manage to balance all of that simultaneously.	
	PQ – It's inspiring to hear you talk about _____. Would you break down in a bit more detail how you manage to do all of that at the same time?	
For clarification	PQ – At one point I _____. Would you say that what you are experiencing/describing is similar?	
Section Six: Miracle Questions		
Choose one or two:		
If you had unlimited resources at your disposal to support your students with play-based learning, what would you do?		
In an ideal world, what would best support your ELL students in literacy learning?		
If you could do anything to make things easier for the families of your ELL students struggling with communication with the school, what would you do?		
If money was no object, what resources or staff do you think your school could use to better support the staff there with using play-based learning?		
If you could eliminate one obstacle that your ELL students face in developing their literacy skills, what would it be?		

Appendix B

Recruitment Poster

UNBC UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

This research is a part of a thesis research project for the MEd program in special education at UNBC

K & Gr. 1 Teachers Needed

To participate in a research study on teacher experiences with using play-based methods to support ELL students.

Who is eligible to participate?

Any kindergarten or grade 1 teacher currently employed as such by SD #36 who has ELL students.

What does participation involve?

Completing a digital survey (approximately 30-60 minutes) or an interview (approximately one hour). The interview can be done in-person, virtually or over the phone.

How do you sign up?

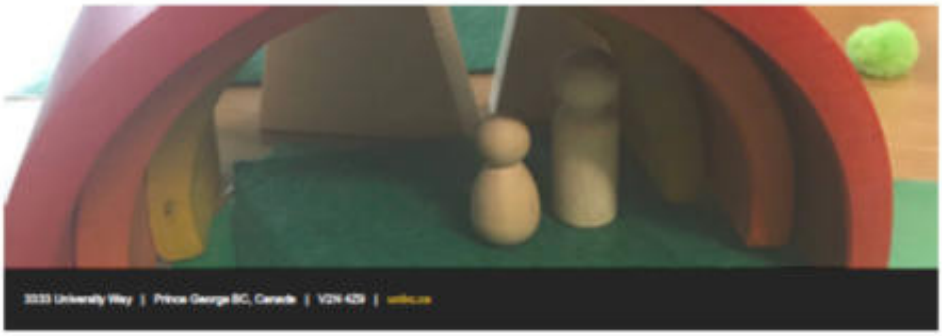
If you are interested in participating in this research study please send an email to **mstregger@unbc.ca** expressing your interest. Please indicate whether you prefer to complete a digital survey or participate in an interview, or if you have no preference.

+ Contact

Name: Mary Stregger
Email: mstregger@unbc.ca

What will you receive in return?

As a small token of gratitude for your time, each participant will be given a $10 gift-card to starbucks.



Appendix C

Survey Schedule

Digital Survey Questions EQ = Essential Question PQ = Prompting Question

1. EQ - Tell me about your experiences with play-based learning in your classroom.
2. PQ - Explain how you engage student families and caregivers with play-based learning.
3. PQ - Tell me about collaboration with colleagues that you have participated in surrounding play-based learning.
4. PQ – Discuss any play-based learning resources, materials, and toys that you regularly use.
5. PQ – If you have a method of assessing your students' play, please describe it here.
6. PQ – Describe successes that you have found with play-based learning in your teaching practice.
7. PQ - Discuss problems that you have had employing play-based learning in your classroom.
8. EQ - I am interested to know about your system for ensuring that the play-based learning in your classroom aligns with the provincial curriculum. Please tell me about that.
9. EQ - Tell me about your experiences with literacy in your classroom.
10. PQ - Explain how you engage student families and caregivers with literacy learning.
11. PQ – Tell me about collaboration with colleagues that you have participated in surrounding literacy instruction for early primary students.
12. PQ – Discuss any literacy resources or materials that you regularly use.
13. PQ – Describe how you assess play-based literacy learning.

14. EQ - Please tell me about your process of aligning literacy in your classroom with the provincial curriculum.
15. PQ – Describe successes you have had with literacy programs that you use in your classroom.
16. PQ – Discuss problems that you have had aligning literacy instruction with the provincial curriculum.
17. EQ - Tell me about your experiences working with English language learning (ELL) students.
18. PQ – How do you engage ELL families and caregivers to support student learning?
19. PQ – Discuss adapting your instruction for ELL students.
20. PQ – If you have a method of assessing ELL students specifically, please describe it here.
21. EQ - Tell me about your experiences using play-based learning to support your ELL students.
22. PQ – Discuss successes that you have found using play-based instruction to support ELL students with literacy.
23. PQ - Talk about problems you have had using play-based learning to support ELL students with literacy learning.
24. MQ – If money was no object, what resources could you or your school use to better support kindergarten and grade one ELL students with play-based learning? Why?