Play in Primary Schools: Interviews and Observational Study in Classrooms.

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Abstract

The benefits of play to children's development and academic learning are often discussed in the research. However, inconsistencies in definitions of play and differing perspectives concerning the purpose of play in educational settings make it challenging for teachers to determine how to productively integrate play-based pedagogies into their classrooms. This challenge is compounded by the inclusion of increasingly academic standards in primary school curricula resulting in the need to determine if and how teachers can integrate play-based pedagogies and mandated academic standards. The purpose of this study was to examine three teachers' approaches to integrating play-based learning in their primary school classrooms. Specifically, teachers' conceptions of the purpose of play and their role in structuring play-based learning were explicitly examined. This paper concludes with a discussion concerning the challenges teachers face in negotiating a balance between academic learning and the use of developmentally appropriate practices such as play, and the need for further research to determine if and how particular play-based approaches support the development of academic, social, and emotional skills.

Keywords Primary School Play-Based Learning Academic Learning Developmentally Appropriate Practice Teacher Practice Early Years

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Introduction

Play is often championed as beneficial to children's development (e.g., Myck-Wayne 2010; Wallerstedt and Pramling 2012). The benefits have been explored in terms of children's social and emotional development (e.g., Bodrova et al. 2013) and, more recently, in terms of their academic learning (e.g., Saracho and Spodek 2006; Van Oers and Duijkers 2013). While many researchers and policy makers alike agree that play is important to children's development (e.g., Miller and Almon 2009; OME 2010), these claims are not without controversy. Lillard and colleagues challenge the role of pretend play in the development of both the social and emotional, and academic domains, stating: ''that existing evidence does not support strong causal claims about the unique importance of pretend play for development'' (2013, p. 1). Despite these challenges, research into the value of play has informed the development of curricular policies that mandate the use of play-based learning pedagogies while maintaining high academic standards (e.g., Ontario Ministry of Education [OME] 2010), extending these challenges beyond the realm of research and into classroom practice. The purpose of this paper is to describe teachers' approaches to the enactment of play-based learning in contemporary primary school classrooms and how this enactment is influenced by teachers' perspectives of the purpose of play.

Literature Review

In the current educational era where academic standards abound and play-based pedagogies are mandated, primary school teachers face the difficult path of determining

how to productively integrate play into their classrooms (Jenvey and Jenvey 2002 ; Martlew et al. 2011 ; Whitebread and O'Sullivan 2012). Considering the proliferation of academic standards in early years curricula, these educators must negotiate a balance between the learning of these academic skills and the use of developmentally appropriate play-based pedagogies (Martlew et al. 2011 ; Pyle and Luce-Kapler 2014). Much of the extant research dichotomizes academic and developmental logics, and reports that this dichotomization results in curricular-instructional tensions in teacher practice (e.g., Goldstein 2007 ; Martlew et al. 2011 ; Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett 2006 ; Stipek 2004). While prior research demonstrates that teachers do not always strictly align themselves with a singular logic (e.g., Pyle and Luce-Kapler 2014), pedagogical decisions are, in part, informed by a teacher's alignment with an academic and/or developmental logic (Stipek 2004). That is, a teacher's beliefs about educational purpose (i.e., the learning objectives for students) often inform their instructional practice, including if and how teachers integrate play-based pedagogies (Gordon 2005 ; Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett 2006). The extant research describes the connection between play and the learning of academic skills. For instance, research has demonstrated that sociodramatic play that occurs in constructed contexts (e.g., doctor's office) can improve vocabulary development (Van Oers and Duijkers 2013). Further, when these play environments are rich in relevant print, children's recognition of high frequency words improves (Vukelich 1993) and the duration and complexity of play increases (Neuman and Roskos 1992). The results of research exploring the benefits of play to the development of literacy skills are mirrored by the results in other curricular areas. For example, the provision of teacher support and guidance during children's play enhances students' acquisition of mathematical skills (Seo and Ginsburg 2004).

A further body of research concerning play addresses the connection between play and the development of social and emotional skills. Play, in this research, is often described as child-directed with contexts and characteristics of play based on children's interests, knowledge, and skills (Wood 2010). This open-ended style of play has been found to support the development of children's creativity, problem solving, and self-regulation (Whitebread et al. 2009). Elias and Berk (2002) found that children's participation in complex sociodramatic play had a positive effect on the development of self-regulation. Stipek et al. (1995) found that students in child-centred classrooms rated their abilities higher, had higher expectations for success, chose more difficult math problems, were less

likely to depend on adults for permission or approval, were less likely to wait to be told to begin a task, smiled more spontaneously, were more likely to call on the adult after completing a task, and were less likely to express worry about school. While research has demonstrated support for both the development of academic skills and social and emotional development though play, these bodies of literature describe differing roles for teachers. For instance, research demonstrating the connection between play and the acquisition of academic skills emphasizes the role of the teacher in this type of play. Researchers have demonstrated that play can contribute to the learning of academic skills when teacher support is provided either through the construction of the environment or through direct guidance during play (Skolinick Weisberg et al. 2013). For instance, when teachers actively participate in children's play by assuming an important role (e.g., student as doctor, teacher as patient), the teacher can elaborate and extend shared activities by directing students' attention to particular objects and contribute to the conversation leading to an improvement in vocabulary learning (Van Oers and Duijkers 2013). Further research has demonstrated that when teachers play with students, guiding their attention to environmental print, student reading of this environmental print increases (Vukelich 1994). Contrary to what research describing the learning of academic skills in play-based contexts says about the role of teachers in supporting and guiding academic learning during play (e.g., Skolinick Weisberg et al. 2013), research concerning the development of social and emotional skills often emphasizes the importance of providing children with the opportunity to direct their own play, minimizing the role of the teacher (Elias and Berk 2002 ; Howard 2010 ; Stipek et al. 1995). For example, Goouch (2008) emphasizes the importance of teachers allowing children to determine the objectives of play and resisting the urge to ''hijack'' or ''subvert'' children's intentions by imposing mandated curricular standards during periods of play. The differing teacher roles in play based contexts compound the challenges teachers face as they integrate play into classroom environments. For teachers must not only determine the type of play to foster in the classroom and the environmental contexts that can support productive play, but they must also determine the extent to which they will involve themselves in these playful contexts.

The extant research and related policies describe the importance of play for young children (e.g., Miller and Almon 2009 ; OME 2010); however, these claims are not without controversy. In their 2013 article concerning pretend play, Lillard et al. conducted an

extensive review of the literature and concluded that there is a lack of evidence that pretend play contributes to development. However, the authors also explicitly state that a move to strictly didactic instructional practices is inadvisable, instead advocating the continued use of developmentally appropriate practices. Whether or not play should be maintained as one of these practices is, as of yet, unclear. Researchers have problematized research about play because of the problematic methods employed by researchers who examine play. As a response to this challenge, Bodrova et al. (2013) emphasize the methodological importance of exploring particular types of play and their potential benefits to child development. While researchers continue to debate the contributions that play can make to child development and student learning (e.g., Lillard et al. 2013), and the role of the teacher during play-based learning, policy makers have forged ahead mandating play-based pedagogies (e.g., OME 2010). These mandates task practitioners with determining how, and to what extent, they should integrate play in a classroom environment. Ontario's Early Learning Program serves as a microcosm of the tension between the use of play-based pedagogies and the obligation to teach mandated academic standards. This program emphasizes the learning of academic standards while mandating a play-based approach to learning (OME 2010). This current curricular context makes Ontario the ideal research setting to explore how teachers' perspectives of educational purpose inform the enactment of play-based pedagogies in primary school classrooms, including the particular types of play teachers perceive to be beneficial and their roles in these playful contexts.

Method

This research used a qualitative methodology including indepth interviews and classroom observations to explore the role of play and how play-based learning was enacted in a public primary school classrooms in Turkey. The schools were selected based on their provision of primary school programming, which, at the time of this research, was in the second year of implementation. Prior to data collection, this research received clearance by the participating school board.

Participants

Three primary school classrooms were selected that were identified as exemplary by teachers and school district leaders. The three teachers had varied teaching backgrounds and the schools were located in diverse communities. Tuba represented the perspective of a novice teacher with 4 years of teaching experience. Her first 2 years were spent teaching in the intermediate grades before transitioning to the primary school program. All of her teaching experience was at one school located in an inner city neighbourhood where the children have predominantly low socio-economic status and all children in the classroom took advantage of the free healthy snack program. Mehmet had been teaching for 22 years within the school district. Four of these years were as a primary school teacher with another 10 years spent supporting the learning of primary school teachers as a school district consultant. During the data collection, he taught in a community with diverse economic backgrounds. Aylin, had been teaching for 19 years, four of these years in a primary school classroom and 10 in a program for children with developmental disabilities. During data collection, she taught in a primarily middle class community.

Data Collection

Over a four month period in 2017, data were gathered through extended classroom observations complemented by interviews with both teachers and students. This multitiered approach provided the opportunity to explore both the purpose of play and the enactment of play within the three focal classrooms and support triangulation of findings. In each classroom, between 56 and 70 hours of observational data were recorded through field notes, photographs, and video of the classroom environment and learning activities including teacher-directed learning periods (e.g., circle time) and play-based learning periods. Semi-structured interviews with teachers were approximately 60 min in length and focused on teachers' perspectives on the purpose of play in a primary school classroom and how play was integrated into their program. We gathered data from students in small groups of between two and four as recommended by prior research (e.g., Einarsdottir 2005 ; Graue and Walsh 1998 ; Parkinson 2001). Each of these groups participated in a three-stage photo-elicitation interview protocol that culminated with the creation of a book about

primary school (Pyle 2013). During the third and final interview, the students were asked questions from a semi-structured interview protocol that focused on their perspectives of play (e.g., What do you play in school? Do you learn anything while you are playing? Are playing and learning the same or different?).

Data Analysis

Data from each individual classroom were analysed as a single set for the relationship between expressed educational purpose, expressed purposes of play, and enactment of play within each primary school classroom. In the initial analysis, the field notes, photographic data, and video recordings of classroom activities were used to construct a typical day narrative for each classroom. The resulting narratives outlined the typical daily schedule of each class including routines (e.g., transitions), instructional times (e.g., circle times), and activity times (e.g., play activities). These narratives were written in the sequence in which they typically occurred and were accompanied by a detailed description of typical daily activities, where the activities took place, and the actions of the teacher and students during this time. These narratives and the teacher and student interview transcripts were thematically analyzed using an inductive method based on data-driven codes (Patton 2002). First, two researchers independently coded the data line by line. Within each classroom, these codes were categorized using a method of constant comparison. For example, the teachers and students described why play was part of the daily routine (e.g., ‘‘It gives them a chance to process, to ask questions about that, to share their knowledge with other people and feel really good about themselves’’ [Esma]) and the educational goals of play (e.g., ‘‘play is extremely important but it’s a chance for them to practice the skills that they’ve been taught’’ [Samantha]; ‘‘when we play we sometimes learn’’ [Arif]). These data were clustered together in a category entitled ‘‘purposes of play.’’ This analysis resulted in three main themes: educational purpose, purposes of play, and enactment of play. The results of this coding were then used to create a play profile of each classroom. This included the purpose of play (as expressed by both the teacher and the students) and the types of play activities that were observed. We present these results through profile descriptions of each classroom.

Results

Three class profiles of play-based learning approaches were created based on the teacher's perspective of educational purpose, the teachers' and students' shared perspective on the role of play in a primary school learning environment, the enactment of play within each classroom, and the role of the teacher in play. These profiles represent three distinct approaches to the integration of play and learning in primary school classrooms. Based on these approaches we have entitled these profiles as: (a) play as peripheral to learning, (b) play as a vehicle for social and emotional development, and (c) play as a vehicle for academic learning. We synthesize our results in Table 1 .

Class One: Play as Peripheral to Learning

The overall focus in classroom one was the development of the academic skills mandated by the curricular standards. Tuba explicitly communicated the culture of accountability in her school, including the requirement to hand in long range and day plans describing when the standards would be addressed: ''I still have to submit long range plans. I still have to submit day plans… with the other teacher we'll work together and develop a plan on how we're going to structure our year in terms of the curriculum''. These administrative requirements resulted in Tuba's strict adherence to the standards: ''We need to be able to cover the entire curriculum.'' Stemming from this stance the class engaged in an average of five teacher-directed instructional periods per day during the observational period. Further evidence of the significant role of academic

Table 1 Summary of play-based learning approaches

	Play as peripheral to learning	Play as a vehicle for social and emotional development	Play as a vehicle for academic learning
Educational purpose of kindergarten	Academic learning of all curricular standards	Socialization Developmentally appropriate academic learning	Academic learning of all curricular standards Socialization
Primary purpose of play	Play provides a break from academic learning	Play provides the opportunity for peer interactions and independently motivated tasks	Play provides the opportunity to internalize new academic concepts
Enactment of play	Child-led play Teacher constructed contexts of play	Child-led play Open access to resources (e.g., toys, manipulatives, etc.) Structured social problem solving tools	Child-led and teacher-modeled play Teacher and student co-constructed contexts of play
Teacher role in play	Supervision of behavior Withdrawing students for teacher-directed instruction and assessment	Model and support social problem solving strategies Join children's play	Extend children's learning Introduce academic concepts to play Facilitate discussions about contexts of play

learning was provided by the students throughout their interviews as they repeatedly described the development of academic skills and chose to include photographs in their book that primarily pictured their participation in academic learning activities (e.g., the calendar, the sight word wall, student writing samples, retell book responses). These pictures were complemented by a simple yet pointed description of the purpose of school: ''because it's school and school is where you learn'' (Tuba). This schedule limited the time available for play while creating, from Tuba's perspective, a greater need for play to serve as a break from the academic learning: I think it's just developmentally sometimes where they're at. And I sometimes have to be okay with the fact that they're going to play and it's going to be about the social interaction that they're having with the other people at that centre or wherever they're playing and about the emotional interaction too. The students in classroom one engaged in child-directed play twice per day totalling between 30 and 45 min. During these periods of play we observed both child- and teacher-directed aspects of the children's play. Tuba selected the materials that would be available for use in students' play including puzzles, magnets, toys (e.g., cars, castles, figurines), blocks, house centre, sensory table, art supplies (e.g., paint, collage materials), and learning materials (e.g., white boards, clipboards, writing centre). The students selected from these materials and directed their own play: ''I play with [the magnets] because I like them'' (Salih). Students were observed

playing with cars and other toys, creating self-directed artwork (e.g., paintings and collages), playing at the house centre, building with blocks, and playing computer games. Tuba did not interact with the students during this play, instead choosing to withdraw individuals or small groups of students for instruction in, or assessment of, academic skills. Learning materials were supplied during play times to provide the opportunity for student engagement in academic learning. This secondary purpose of play was also described byTuba: ‘‘It’s about being able to provide them with experiences to show what you’ve already explicitly taught them and those experiences are through play.’’ Tuba acknowledged that while she provided opportunities for students to integrate play and academic learning, she did not expect students to voluntarily integrate skills taught during explicit instruction into their play: I don’t expect my phonemic awareness study that we do in our morning message, building words and playing with sounds is going to happen at the [house] centre. I really don’t think that they’re going to be like ‘oh phone/f//f/oh it makes that sound.’ No it is not. (Tuba) Despite the availability of a variety of learning materials throughout the observed periods of play, with the exception of the writing centre where children were observed drawing pictures and writing notes to friends, students were never observed interacting with these materials during child-directed play. While Tuba did not expect the students to integrate academic standards in their play, she did extend her definition of play beyond traditional free play contexts to include playful learning: ‘‘Play is reading a book sometimes right? Because they only get to use that pointer sometimes because it’s the teacher’s and then all of a sudden we’re playing teacher. That’s still play.’’ While Tuba defined play in terms of developmental and academic considerations, the students in her class expressed a different perspective. They defined play and learning as dichotomous constructs: ‘‘Play is doing fun stuff and playing with toys and building… Learning is about when you read and you count numbers’’ (Ceylan).

The children’s and teacher’s differing perspectives on the role of play reflect the challenge of both defining play and determining its purpose in the primary school classroom: ‘‘It’s hard. There are so many different opinions’’ (Tuba). This challenge is reflected in the role of play in classroom one: Tuba viewed play as a developmental need but because of her strict adherence to the curricular standards she struggled to integrate this academic learning within play-based contexts. Instead, play was peripheral to learning, enacted as a developmentally appropriate break from the academic learning that was the focus of much

of the primary school program. As a result, while the members of this class valued play and integrated it on a daily basis, despite Tuba's secondary goal of play as academic learning, it remained peripheral to the learning of academic skills.

Class Two: Play as a Vehicle for Social and Emotional Development

Mehmet and his students communicated the perspective that, in their classroom, play provided a vehicle for the students' social and emotional development. This approach aligned well with Mehmet's expressed beliefs that the purpose of a primary school program was: ''fostering the social piece that they can learn at this early age. I think public perception is that they're just playing and we know that it's so much more than that. It's the socialization.''

While Mehmet prioritized social and emotional development, he also clearly expressed the need for the inclusion of curricular standards in a primary school classroom: ''standards are still expected. It's not just free for all play. Having a standardized curriculum I think is critical.'' Despite his support of the standards, Mehmet did not allow the curriculum to guide all student learning. Instead, he explicitly described a flexible curricular stance stating: ''I think you can always make an argument for why or why not something else may be included.'' This flexibility was demonstrated by her decision to omit writing from her program, despite the inclusion of writing standards in the provincial curriculum. He acknowledged that this was not ''necessarily the popular response but pedagogically I believe that.'' Instead Mehmet integrated foundational skills necessary to help children succeed when writing in the later grades such as explicit instruction in phonemic awareness. These examples demonstrate that Mehmet's support of the curricular standards was tempered by a professional belief system that informed her decision making about what was developmentally appropriate for primary school-aged children. One of the criteria of a developmentally appropriate primary school program from Mehmet's perspective was the inclusion of ''one or two good chunks of play during the day.'' These play periods provided support for the development of ''outcomes, for example social and emotional skills are built in the house centre and oral communication skills are built by taking turn situations'' (Mehmet). The development of social and emotional skills was the primary purpose of play in this classroom. This purpose was echoed by the students who described that children at

play are ‘‘learning how to play nicely’’ (Ahmet). The students acknowledged that positive social interactions were not simply behavioural expectations but rather were part of the learning in a primary school classroom. This active learning process was facilitated by instruction in strategies and the inclusion of structures that supported their integration in the classroom environment. For example, this classroom had a peace table covered in a brick tablecloth where ‘‘the children can fix their problems’’ (annotated book). During observations Mehmet modeled problem resolution and the students made regular use of this table developing an advanced understanding of its role in their classroom community: ‘‘It has a brick cloth because it’s really to build friendships’’ (Büsra).

Child-directed play was a valued learning activity in this classroom encompassing between 45 and 60 min of each full day observational period. During these periods of play children were observed playing with cars, dolls and other toys, building with blocks, playing at the house centre, and exploring the sensory table (i.e., sand and water table). Despite investing time in play, Mehmet expressed his struggle to reconcile the connection between play and the development of foundational academic skills: ‘‘My worry about an exclusively play-based learning environment is in the foundation of reading and math development. How do we ensure that all students develop the foundation through their self-guided journey?’’ These academic skills were the focus of teacher-directed instructional periods when children’s communicated role was to ‘‘listen with your ears and turn them up’’ (Melek). These teacher-directed times were in direct contrast with Mehmet’s constructed perspective of play where ‘‘the adult follows the lead of the child.’’ Thus he viewed his role in play as ‘‘sitting down building the castle out of play dough or whatever’’ to ‘‘be a model for the other children to see that someone’s idea is a valuable idea.’’ The students communicated their support of this perspective stating that their teacher ‘‘is awesome to always play with us’’ (Hakan). Mehmet steadfastly resisted the idea that a teacher should guide students’ play stating that this would give ‘‘an adult-directed tone to play’’ that would detract from the student’s intended purpose. This constructed perspective of play inhibited her ability to provide opportunities for academic learning during play periods that, in turn, lead to a diminished focus on play as the school year progressed: ‘‘Our fall focus, was very heavily play and socialization and now that January has hit we’ve gone into a more academic focus where we have centres and less play’’ (Mehmet). In defining play as a strictly child-

centred construct, the focus on play diminished as the development of academic skills took priority.

Class Three: Play as a Vehicle for Academic Learning

In class three, Aylin and the students discussed play in terms of both socialization and academic learning. According to Aylin, socialization prepares students for the learning of academic standards. The purpose for our students in September was ultimately that socialization. That's where their learning curve will be: what is a line, what are indoor shoes, how do I manage my snack, and that increase in independence. But for the senior students, generally they have that under control so their purpose and their focus is then more of an academic focus. Informed by the current accountability structure, Aylin described the role of mandated curricular standards in her planning: ''I have a legal responsibility to the curriculum expectations.'' While she overtly described a curricular stance that was seemingly of strict adherence, accompanying Aylin's perceived curricular obligations was an expressed flexibility in the enactment of these standards: ''I think the curriculum is written in such a way that it does allow flexibility and freedom to meet those expectations at different times through the year, teacher directed or child directed.'' Aylin's instructional planning was guided by the curricular standards and thus she grouped relevant standards and planned teacher-directed activities to facilitate students' learning of these skills. However, not all the learning was teacher centered; observed periods of play totalled 60–90 min per day. During these periods students were observed playing with animals and other toys, building with blocks, writing letters to family and friends, playing at the sensory table (i.e., sand and water), exploring math concepts with math manipulatives (e.g., counters, calendars, play money), and making, throwing and measuring the distance traveled of paper airplanes. This play acted as a complement to the explicit instruction:

Play is extremely important but it's a chance for them to practice the skills that they've been taught. It gives them a chance to process, to ask questions about that, to share their knowledge with other people and feel really good about themselves, and with all that happening through play it comes out in the ways that they're most comfortable. (Aylin)

While much of the observed instruction of academic skills was teacher centered, the contexts of the play, even when explicitly designed to support the learning of targeted academic skills, were collaboratively created by the students and Aylin. For example, guided

by the curricular standards, Aylin was teaching the class about money. This instruction sparked the children's interests and guided the creation of a context of play that would support this learning. Inspired by a student in the class whose mother had recently starting working at a bank, Aylin and the students collaboratively created a class bank where students could explore the use of money in a play-based context: Emine had been talking a lot about her mom going to work at a bank and having to take courses for her new bank job and she had been sharing that all the way along. Then when we were talking about money she offered [a bank] as a suggestion and the kids voted on it and that was where their interests lay. They chose it and they chose what would be in it and [I] helped supply those materials for them. (Aylin)

Throughout the data collection period, students were observed playing in the class bank that was given a dedicated space within the classroom. Further clarifying the significance of this learning experience, every group of participating students chose to discuss the bank in their interviews, communicating their learning within this playful context: ''When we play we sometimes learn. Sometimes in the bank we learn what money is and what the money is called'' (Nergis). It is worth noting that Nergis used the word ''sometimes'' when discussing learning in this playbased context. While academic instruction guided much of the learning in this classroom, play was given priority both as a tool for this learning and as developmentally appropriate practice for the young students. The students clearly communicated the important role of play in their classroom by including pictures depicting play activities in the annotated books (e.g., block play, pretend play, etc.) and describing its role in their experiential learning: ''Because if we don't have toys we only get to read and that's not good'' (Ela). Students also made clear that in their classroom play was a fun activity that did not always result in the learning of targeted academic concepts: ''I just like playing stuff, everything'' (Rasit). The integration of play and learning in classroom two was particularly salient in the learning of mathematical concepts (e.g., money) but students voluntarily engaged in other types of learning by independently writing signs for the bank communicating information such as the hours of operation, the name of the bank, and the values of the coins. Despite this integration of play and academics, Aylin continued to query the role of play in primary school learning: Well with the Ministry's full day play-based inquiry model and go with the kids direction and yet I have the curriculum and the principal wants to see my learning goals and success criteria on the wall… it's hard to really see what

their picture is that they want in my classroom. They seem to be conflicting points of view to some degree. (Aylin)

The connection between play and mandated curricular standards continued to trouble Aylin. She shared the challenge of integrating these standards in the context of child-centered play: ‘‘getting their input is going to keep them interested… I’m looking at ways that I can give them more say and more ownership in the classroom and getting them to develop more play areas that are theirs, their decisions.’’ While she connected academic learning and play-based learning through collaboratively created contexts of play, Aylin continued to question how to ensure that play emerged from the interests of the children rather than dictated by mandated academic standards.

Discussion

These data provide important insights concerning the purpose of play in an early learning context and the various ways in which teachers enact and integrate play as part of the larger curriculum. The three focal teachers integrated play into their primary school classrooms differently. These differing approaches were informed by the teachers’ diverse understandings of the purpose of play in student development and learning. In turn, each teacher’s identified purpose of play informed her understanding of the role of the teacher in students’ play. Tuba described play as a developmental need that was largely peripheral to student learning. As such, she saw periods of play as opportunities to withdraw individual or small groups of students to work on academic skill development in an explicit and teacher-directed manner. Her perceived role as teacher was to ensure that her students learned the mandated academic skills and thus she used play-based periods to facilitate this learning. The expressed purpose of play in Mehmet’s classroom was to facilitate students’ social and emotional development. Informed by this perspective, Mehmet believed his role was to provide opportunities for student-directed play and to support positive student interactions during play periods and thus he opted to enter student-initiated contexts of play without imposing his own agenda. Aylin viewed play as an opportunity for students to internalize and further explore academic concepts and skills. As a result, she infused academic skills into children’s play by co-creating the contexts of play and then engaging with students to support and extend the learning of these skills. In these data, the purpose of the play informed the role of the teacher. At present, there are multiple purposes of play

communicated in the extant research. There is a plethora of research discussing the social and emotional benefits of play, much of which discusses the development of selfregulation (e.g., Elias and Berk 2002). This research is echoed in policy documents: ‘‘Social, emotional, and cognitive self-regulation and the ability to communicate with others are foundational to all forms of learning and have been shown to be best developed in play-based environments’’ (OME 2010 , p. 7). Mehmet’s practice aligned most closely with this approach and thus she enacted a playbased pedagogy that was child-centered and child-led. Other research communicates the value of play to the development of academic skills. For example, teachers who are highly involved in play, guiding and scaffolding the learning, benefit students’ language development (e.g., Skolnick Weisberg et al. 2013). This approach is also discussed in policy documents: ‘‘It has long been acknowledged that there is a strong link between play and learning for young children, especially in the areas of problem solving, language acquisition, literacy, [and] numeracy’’ (OME 2010 , p. 13). This approach to play is aligned most closely with Aylin’s practice and thus she enacted a play-based pedagogy that involved teacher guidance in the creation of contexts of play and teacher extension of play scenarios. These results suggest that each teacher’s perspective of the educational purpose of play informed her enactment of a play-based pedagogy, however, what remains unclear is whether or not these play-based approaches actually supported the children’s development in the targeted areas (e.g., language skills, self-regulation). Each of the three focal teachers was identified as exceptional in her shared field of primary school education. However, the teachers’ integrations of play-based pedagogies were distinct. These differences highlight challenges involved in integrating the learning of academic standards through the use of a play-based pedagogy; the teachers described these elements as ‘‘conflicting points of view’’ (Aylin) that are ‘‘hard’’ (Tuba) to integrate, resulting in ‘‘worry about an exclusively play-based environment’’ (Mehmet). Despite her overtly expressed purpose of play, each teacher was working in an era of accountability where escalating academic standards were mandated (Gallant 2009). This type of context challenges teachers to determine how to balance the learning of academic skills and the use of developmentally appropriate practices such as play. The challenge of negotiating this balance combined with the lack of clarity surrounding the educational benefits of particular play-based approaches
serves as a call for researchers to determine if and how particular play-based pedagogies support the development of academic, social, and emotional skills (Bodrova et al. 2013).

The extant research has problematized the role of play in learning largely due to the challenges associated with researching this construct (Lillard et al. 2013). Further research has called for the examination of the benefits of particular types of play (Bodrova et al. 2013). This paper begins to answer this call by arguing for the categorization of classroom-based approaches to play-based learning. By constructing these three play profiles, this paper begins the process of explicitly describing particular play-based learning approaches, proposing three categories of playbased learning: play as peripheral to learning, play as a vehicle for social and emotional development, and play as a vehicle for academic learning. We acknowledge that the current contribution is limited by the small sample size, and that these play profiles are contextually situated and temporally dependent. However, we argue for continued research that expands upon and seeks to validate these approaches across differing primary school contexts. Ultimately, the categorization of particular approaches to playbased learning will allow for more precise measurement of the impact of play on the development of social, emotional, and academic skills by allowing the measurement of growth continua of students who are learning within classrooms who adopt these categorized approaches. Further, this research would support educators as they negotiate a balance between academic learning and developmentally appropriate practices by empirically validating which play-based approach, or combination of approaches, support child development and the learning of targeted skills.

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