

Exploring Teachers' Experiences using Play to Enhance Learning in the 3-year-old Classroom

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Abstract

Play-based learning has long been recognized as a vital component of early childhood education. However, opportunities for play are increasingly being reduced in early learning environments as children are directed toward structured academic tasks such as early reading and writing, under the belief that these practices will promote greater academic success in the future. Guided by a sociocultural theoretical lens, this qualitative case study explored how teachers' perceptions influence the implementation of play in 3-year-old classrooms in Jamaica. Data was collected from three preschool teachers working in diverse school settings using semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and researcher field notes. The findings indicated that while teachers consistently valued play in children's development, their approaches to supporting play varied. Differences in teachers' perceptions of play contributed to differing levels of willingness to integrate play into daily classroom practices. This study highlights the implications for early childhood teacher education and underscores the contextual factors that shape the effectiveness of learning through play.

Keywords: early childhood, play, learning through play, teacher perspective

Introduction

The formative years of a child's life lay the foundation for future learning and success. For young children to benefit meaningfully from early education, play must be central to their experiences. Play, however, is often viewed as frivolous or expendable. This is further supported by Gray (2011), who states that, "play has been relegated to a position of relative unimportance in many cultures, including our own, and is often seen as a luxury that can be cut from the curriculum when times get tough" (p. 446). This statement reflects the persistent undervaluing of play in modern educational systems.

Educational philosophies surrounding play have shifted considerably over time, from free play

to more teacher-directed skill-based curricula. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 further accelerated this shift by tying school success to standardized test performance (Hannaway & Hamilton, 2008; Pedulla et al., 2003). Bassok, Latham, and Rorem (2016) described this trend as kindergarten becoming "the new first grade" (p. 2). Similarly, Christakis (2016, as cited in Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016) lamented that teachers were pressured to act more like "carnival barkers," emphasizing compliance and academic drills over creativity, relationships, and discovery.

In Jamaica, early childhood classrooms face challenges balancing developmental needs

with academic demands. The Early Childhood Commission supports play-based learning through its curriculum guide, yet many under-resourced classrooms still emphasize rote learning and structured drills. This gap between policy and practice underscores the need to understand teachers' views on play and the factors that influence its use in Jamaican early education.

This study adopts a constructivist perspective, viewing play as a key means by which children build knowledge through active exploration and interaction. Play supports children's cognitive and social development, as noted by theorists such as Piaget and Bruner. Teachers' views on play can either enhance or limit constructivist teaching in the classroom.

This paper explores the experiences of three teachers using play in Jamaican classrooms. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are teachers' beliefs about the role of play when teaching 3-year-old children?
2. What other influences do teachers identify as shaping their beliefs and practices about play in the classroom?

This study also considers how insights can guide planning across settings. Economists stress the value of early education: Clothier and Poppe (2017) found that high-quality programs return over \$17 per dollar invested, especially for disadvantaged children. This underscores the need for Jamaican classrooms to offer high-quality, play-based experiences aligned with research and policy.

As an early childhood advocate and teacher with more than a decade of classroom experience in Jamaica, I have observed that play-based learning is too often absent or treated as a filler activity, rather than as a deliberate pedagogical tool. Teacher-directed, workbook-centered instruction remains dominant, especially in numeracy and literacy. This research, therefore, aims to explore teachers' perceptions of play and their classroom practices, with the intention of informing instructional strategies and policy decisions in early childhood education. By doing so, the findings can encourage teachers to reflect on their methods and equip policymakers,

administrators, and parents with a clearer understanding of how play can support children's holistic development. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of aligning Jamaica's educational policies on play with consistent and meaningful classroom implementation.

Literature Review

Learning Through Play and Development

Learning through play is a critical component of children's development and aligns with children's rights as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Jones, et al. 2011). Play allows children to express their thoughts and feelings, interact with their peers, and actively engage with their environment (Kennedy & Barblett, 2010; Kaizar & Alordiah, 2023). Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) similarly emphasize that play and learning are naturally intertwined in children's daily experiences.

In the Caribbean context, play is increasingly recognized as a natural and effective teaching strategy. DeGrasse-Deslandes and Morgan (2022) note that Jamaican preschool teachers use play to support learning, while addressing classroom realities such as large class sizes and limited resources. Kelly-Williams (2021) highlights how play in challenging circumstances helps children develop resilience and problem-solving skills, emphasizing its social and emotional importance. Kinkead-Clark and Abdul-Majied (2024) further stress that Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) must be contextualized for Caribbean classrooms, recognizing local cultural norms, teacher beliefs, and resource constraints.

The early years are a critical period for cognitive and social development (Cooper et al., 2009). Research indicates that children's brains exhibit heightened plasticity compared to adults, with early experiences shaping neural pathways that influence cognition, language, reasoning, and learning (Hendrick & Weissman, 2007; Klass et al., 2003; Kupcha-Szrom, 2011). Maximizing learning through play requires creating purposeful, process-oriented activities that are embedded in meaningful contexts (Nicolopoulou, 2010). Despite these findings, contemporary practices in many early childhood classrooms continue to

marginalize play while prioritizing structured, teacher-directed activities over child-initiated exploration (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Research demonstrates that learning through play fosters positive social interactions, engagement, and motivation (Raikes & Edwards, 2009). Play-based learning also aligns with global goals such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which promotes inclusive and quality education for all (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2018). Black et al. (2017) found that early play experiences have long-term benefits, including improved academic performance, enhanced social skills, and reduced likelihood of criminal behavior. These studies underscore the importance of integrating play into early childhood curricula to support holistic development and lifelong learning.

In the Jamaican context, the Early Childhood Commission (ECC) and the Ministry of Education have developed policies emphasizing play-based learning. ECC Standard 12 requires early childhood institutions to maintain structured practices that support quality programming, including the provision of play opportunities (Early Childhood Commission, 2007). Despite these policy directives, many classrooms still prioritize rote learning and structured literacy and numeracy tasks over intentional play (Kinkead-Clark & Hardacre, 2017).

Importantly, the Dudley Grant Memorial Trust (2004) provides structured guidance for children at different developmental stages. For 3-year-olds, the curriculum emphasizes exploration, creativity, and social interaction through play. It highlights key domains such as language and communication; early literacy and numeracy; physical development; and socio-emotional growth. Activities are designed to be hands-on and play-based, allowing children to engage in role play, storytelling, block building, art, and movement. By centering the curriculum for this age group on play, the ECC reinforces the principle that learning in early childhood must be experiential, child-centered, and developmentally appropriate. Including this context helps clarify why play is not only encouraged, but mandated within Jamaica's educational framework.

Theoretical Perspective on Play-Based Learning

This study is guided by a constructivist theoretical lens, which posits that children actively construct knowledge through exploration, discovery, and interaction with their environment. Piaget's cognitive development theory emphasizes that children assimilate and accommodate new information as they engage with their surroundings (Krogh & Morehouse, 2020). Bruner extended these ideas, highlighting that play provides scaffolds for problem-solving and symbolic thinking. While Vygotsky's social theory, as cited in Piaget (1952), emphasizes learning through interaction in the zone of proximal development, constructivist approaches focus on the child's active role in knowledge construction. It is important to note that knowledge of the theoretical underpinnings of play may limit the effective implementation of constructivist practices in classrooms. Neuroscientific research reinforces the importance of play, showing that diverse brain regions collaborate during meaningful learning experiences and that early experiences significantly shape cognitive, social, and emotional development (Cusick & Georgieff, 2016; Schiller, 2001).

Benefits and Controversies of Learning Through Play

Despite overwhelming evidence supporting the developmental benefits of play, Nicolopoulou (2010) observes that play is being reduced in early childhood programs worldwide. Teacher-centered approaches focusing on early literacy and numeracy often overshadow play. Piaget's constructivist framework is foundational in early childhood education, highlighting the importance of exploration, discovery, and play. This reduction disproportionately affects children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, for whom play acts as a protective and developmental factor (Han, Moore, et al., 2010).

Parental expectations can also pose challenges to implementing play-based learning. Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) argue that parents' misunderstandings about play may limit their support for play in early childhood settings.

However, when parents are involved and informed, they can enhance children's readiness for school and overall developmental outcomes (Bundy, 1991; Parker et al., 1999). Ethridge et al. (2022) found that teachers experienced a lack of parental support as a barrier to implementing play-based instruction, with some teachers reporting that parents did not understand play-based learning or preferred rote learning. These findings highlight the importance of educating families about the role of play in children's learning and development.

Studies have demonstrated the academic benefits of play-based learning. Miller and Almon (2009) cite comparative research showing that children in play-based settings outperform their peers in literacy, numeracy, creativity, and socio-emotional skills by age ten. Vaisarova and Reynolds (2022) found that child-initiated play particularly enhances problem-solving, cognitive skills, language, and learning in multiple academic domains, strengthening the case for integrating play in preschool education.

In the Jamaican early childhood context, play is increasingly recognized not merely as a leisure activity, but as a vital educational strategy that supports holistic child development. The Early Childhood Commission (ECC) and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Information (MOEYI) have outlined the importance of play-based learning in national policies and the National Early Childhood Curriculum Guide. ECC Standards emphasize that early childhood institutions must maintain structured practices that ensure quality programming, including intentional and well-planned play opportunities (Early Childhood Commission, 2007).

Nevertheless, the realities in many classrooms are different. Teachers often face the pressures of overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, and an increasing focus on literacy and numeracy, which can inadvertently marginalize play. Despite this, studies such as those by DeGrasse-Deslandes and Morgan (2022) reveal that Jamaican preschool teachers creatively incorporate play as a tool to engage children meaningfully, showing that play can thrive even in challenging educational environments.

The Jamaican experience also highlights the deeper social and cultural value of play. Kelly-

Williams (2021) notes that children in difficult circumstances often turn to play as a way to cope, explore, and solve problems, showing its role in building resilience as well as learning. Kinkead-Clark and Abdul-Majied (2024) argue that Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) must reflect Caribbean realities, considering local culture, community expectations, and the practicalities of the classroom. Together, these studies present play in Jamaica as a dynamic, culturally grounded practice that supports not only academic learning but also social and emotional growth. Understanding how teachers perceive and implement play provides critical insights into how early childhood education can better serve children while staying true to both policy and local context.

Research Methodology

A qualitative design was used to explore teachers' beliefs and experiences with play in the 3-year-old classroom. This approach supported the collection of rich, narrative accounts that captured the complexity of the phenomenon (Gay et al., 2011). The study was grounded in a constructivist philosophical stance, which emphasizes how individuals interpret and make meaning of their experiences within social and cultural contexts (Merriam, 1998). Drawing on Piaget and Vygotsky, the constructivist lens positions play as a central pathway for children's cognitive, social, and emotional development rather than as a recreational add-on.

A case study design was employed to allow for an in-depth examination of teachers' experiences in a natural classroom environment (Gay et al., 2011; Merriam, 1998). The study focused on Grandville Infant (pseudonym), a government-owned preschool in St. Catherine, Jamaica, that has served children aged 3–5 for more than 40 years. The site was selected because it catered to the target age group and offered a supportive environment for conducting research.

Located in an urban community, the school serves families from both the immediate area and surrounding districts. The facility is secure, well-ventilated, and equipped with amenities that promote holistic development, including trained care staff; a sickbay; a library centre;

two outdoor play spaces; a resource room; and a multipurpose room. The outdoor area is fenced and fitted with child-friendly play equipment, reflecting the school's emphasis on learning through play. The institution employs 17 staff members, including a principal, a guidance counsellor, 11 trained teachers (10 with bachelor's degrees), and 4 caregivers. The 3-year-old classroom, which formed

the focus of this study, enrolled 25 children (12 boys and 13 girls).

Participants

Three female teachers were purposively selected based on their experience and knowledge of the phenomenon being studied, consistent with recommendations by Palinkas et al. (2015) for information-rich sampling.

Table 1

Description of Participants Demographics

Participant by Pseudonym	Age Range	Gender	Educational Attainment	Years of Service
Maria	35–40	Female	Diploma in Early Childhood Education	10 years
Jessica	30–35	Female	Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education	13 years
Ann	25–35	Female	Bachelor's Degree in Education	Seven years
Total Participants		(3)		

The participants' teaching experience ranged from 7–13 years. All held formal qualifications in early childhood education, including Diplomas in Teacher Education and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degrees from accredited teacher-training colleges and universities. Their demographic information, professional backgrounds, and openness to participate provided diverse yet relevant perspectives for the study.

By selecting these three teachers, the study gained insights from practitioners with significant classroom experience who could clearly articulate their beliefs and practices regarding learning through play.

Instruments and Interview Guides

Following Gay et al. (2009), the primary data collection instruments were field observation notes and semi-structured interviews.

1. Observation field notes captured teachers' interactions with children, classroom organisation, and instances of play-based learning. These notes helped contextualise teachers' narratives and enabled data triangulation.
2. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide developed from the research questions. This guide contained broad, open-ended questions such as:

3. "What are your beliefs about the role of play in learning for three-year-olds?"
4. "Can you describe examples of how you have used play to support children's learning in your classroom?"
5. "What challenges, if any, do you face when implementing play as a learning tool?"

This format allowed for probing while maintaining flexibility to explore emerging issues (Keller & Conradin, 2018).

Data Analysis Procedures

Data were analysed using an inductive thematic approach consistent with qualitative case study research (Merriam, 1998). Interview transcripts and observation notes were reviewed repeatedly, coded for key ideas, and organised into themes that reflected teachers' beliefs and practices. Triangulation strengthened credibility (Patton, 1999), and member checking allowed participants to confirm interpretations (Harper & Cole, 2012). Rich descriptions and participant quotes were used to illustrate each theme and link teachers' experiences to constructivist ideas.

Researcher Positionality

My background in early childhood education and familiarity with the school could potentially have shaped data collection and interpretation. To minimise bias, I used reflexive journaling; triangulated interviews and observations; conducted member checks; and maintained professional boundaries and pseudonyms. These strategies enhanced the study's trustworthiness (Lincoln, 1995; Guba, 1981).

Research Ethics and Trustworthiness

Institutional ethical approval and informed consent were obtained, and participants were assured of confidentiality and voluntary participation. Trustworthiness was supported through triangulation, member checking, and rich description (Creswell & Miller, 2000), with themes compared across transcripts and observations.

Limitations

As Gay et al. (2009) note, some limitations fall outside the researcher's control. The small sample of three teachers from one school restricted generalisability, and the open-ended

nature of qualitative inquiry limited replication (Wiersma, 2000). However, the findings offer valuable insight into teachers' perceptions of play within one Jamaican preschool context.

Findings

Teachers' Beliefs About the Role of Play

This study examined teachers' beliefs about play in a 3-year-old classroom at a large preschool. All participants recognised play as essential for children's development, yet they differed in how they conceptualised it. Jessica defined play as requiring "some form of interaction — whether structured or unstructured," and noted that it should include "even imaginative play, which adds another dimension of self" (Jessica, personal communication, December 2019). She valued exploration and experimentation, drawing on her experience of teaching in the United Kingdom:

In that experience, I noticed that they had learned so much more because it was sort of a play curriculum, so the children had to use their motor skills cutting through eggs and they were using mathematical skills and stuff ... they were using analytical skills as they observed ... the children were like, wow! (Jessica, personal communication, December 2019)

Ann and Maria expressed more teacher-directed perspectives. Ann explained:

The children in my class are brilliant, and if I just let them play all day, I will be holding them back, I have to push them a little more. I would not want a teacher to hold back my child, so I push them, and the parents do not have a problem with how I do things. (Ann, personal communication, December 2019)

Maria similarly emphasised structure and focus on learning:

"I let them play, but learning time is a serious time ... My kids are usually very focused and know their letters and sound their numbers and all the things" (Maria, personal communication, December 2019).

Across participants, play was often positioned as a reward or filler, rather than as an integral part of instruction. Maria explained:

I know play is important, but as a teacher, I have to ensure that they are learning, so I allow them to play ... but I also have times when I have to direct them to ensure that they are learning. (Maria, personal communication, December 2019)

Jessica, while supportive of play, noted environmental constraints:

"Learning through play is allowing children to explore, experiment, and make the meaning of the things in their environments ... although I am familiar with the concept, I do not always do it because of my environment" (Jessica, personal communication, December 2019).

Ann similarly explained:

"I know that play is important, but I cannot just allow them to play all day long, that does not make any sense" (Ann, personal communication, December 2019).

Jessica highlighted the cognitive benefits of play:

"It is like it triggers something. I do not know what it is, but it triggers something inside their little brains ... well, it's definitely more fun for the children" (Jessica, personal communication, December 2019).

These responses indicate a dichotomous view: teachers saw learning as teacher-led and play as secondary, reflecting broader institutional and societal expectations.

Structural and External Influences on Play

Teachers' implementation of play was shaped by curriculum, schedules, and parental expectations. All participants described operating within a culture of accountability. Maria noted: "I have to submit lesson plans outlining what I will be teaching to my senior teacher, and I have to evaluate each of the lessons" (Maria, personal communication, December 2019).

Jessica described adapting activities to fit planning requirements:

I usually give them something that they can do on their own, like play dough and colouring. If I wanted them to look at some stuff and tell me what they see later on, I'd put out some stuff (like for one activity I did when we were making the senses) — that's part of play too for me. (Jessica, personal communication, December 2019)

Maria described schedule constraints:

"The schedule that we have to follow is almost impossible to follow because the children are small. At the end of the day, parents need to see writing in their children's book" (Maria, personal communication, December 2019).

Curriculum demands and parental expectations often limited play. Ann explained:

"Sometimes by the time we do circle time and then guided learning it's lunchtime, and we already gone into playtime ... I do everything except play" (Ann, personal communication, December 2019).

Maria confirmed:

My parents want to see what their children are doing because they believe they are wasting time if the kids are only at school playing. They even want to know if they play too much when they pick them up" (Maria, personal communication, December 2019).

Jessica emphasised the importance of parent communication to support play:

"When you communicate with them and engage them in their children's school experience, they are less resistant ... you have to get them on board" (Jessica, personal communication, December 2019).

She also described attempts to extend play to the home:

"I have given my children busy bags and sent them home ... most times, we have to explain the reasons to the parents. I try to work it more into the schedule" (Jessica, personal communication, December 2019).

These accounts illustrate that teachers' practices are not determined solely by belief; external expectations and structural limitations heavily shape how play is incorporated.

Summary

All three teachers recognised the developmental benefits of play, yet implementation was constrained by curriculum, schedules, and parental expectations. Jessica embraced child-led play and its cognitive potential, while Maria and Ann prioritised teacher-directed instruction and structured learning. Play was often secondary, occurring as a reward, filler, or during limited free time. These findings highlight a persistent

dichotomy between play and formal learning, revealing that teachers' beliefs and practices are negotiated within institutional pressures and social expectations. Communication with parents emerged as a key strategy for reconciling these tensions, underscoring the importance of partnerships in supporting play-based learning.

Discussion of the Findings

The data provide valuable insights into the use of play in early childhood education, particularly highlighting teachers' beliefs and classroom practices. The findings revealed that although teachers acknowledged the importance of play for children's holistic development, this belief was not consistently translated into practice. Teachers often separated play from learning, privileging academic achievement as the true measure of success. This reinforces what emerged in the literature review: in the Jamaican context, early childhood education is still heavily influenced by accountability measures, parental expectations, and cultural norms that equate education with formal instruction (Tortello & Minott, 2015).

Standardized testing, accountability frameworks, and parental expectations reinforce these historically-rooted priorities. Teachers in this study described parental pressure to see concrete evidence of learning, often equating children's progress with worksheets, completed activities, or observable skill acquisition. These expectations, coupled with administrative oversight and rigid curriculum standards, create a context where play is perceived as peripheral or as a "reward" rather than as an integral learning medium. Jessica's attempts to integrate exploratory play (such as sensory or imaginative activities) often clashed with scheduling constraints and parental assumptions about effective learning, highlighting the structural challenges teachers face.

This perspective reflects Samuelsson and Carlsson's (2008) argument that play is frequently seen as child-initiated while learning is adult-initiated, leading to the scheduling of distinct learning and play times in the classroom. This reflects the broader context in Jamaica, where early childhood education is heavily influenced by accountability measures, parental expectations, and cultural norms that equate

education with formal instruction (Tortello & Minott, 2015). Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) similarly note that play is frequently seen as child-initiated, while learning is adult-directed, resulting in classrooms where learning and play are scheduled as separate activities.

Extensive research underscores the benefits of play for children's development. White (2012) emphasises that play promotes self-regulation, scientific and mathematical thinking, social relationships, and creative problem-solving. Despite this, and while able to articulate play's value, teachers in this study tended to default to traditional, teacher-led methods. This tension mirrors findings by DeGrasse-Deslandes and Morgan (2022), who observed that Jamaican preschool teachers struggle to integrate play fully due to parental and policy pressures. Similarly, Escayg and Kinkead-Clark (2018) highlight that Caribbean early childhood practices often oscillate between developmental ideals and curriculum demands, prioritising early literacy and numeracy over holistic, play-based experiences. In this research, the three participants' practices illustrated how systemic pressures (curriculum demands, administrative oversight, and societal expectations) shape the enactment of play, suggesting that these tensions are structural rather than individual.

Teachers' perceptions of a dichotomy between play and learning contrast with children's experiences. Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) found that children perceive play and learning as intertwined, yet teachers often maintain a separation between them. In this study, Maria and Ann's accounts reflected the challenge of balancing structured, teacher-led activities with opportunities for playful exploration. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2011) similarly reports that while policy promotes play, classroom realities in Jamaica often reflect teacher-directed methods reinforced by parental desire for measurable academic outcomes. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2018) notes that misconceptions about play as "frivolous" stem from a limited understanding of its educational value — a tension evident among the teachers in this study, who valued play in principle but restricted it in practice.

The participants' reservations about play's effectiveness for learning highlight a broader misunderstanding of its potential. Miller and Almon (2009) emphasise that play-based programmes yield long-term academic and social benefits, while Zigler (2004) observes that the drive for academic rigor to close achievement gaps often sidelines play. In Jamaica, this global debate manifests locally: teachers are caught between research advocating play and national systems that prioritise measurable outcomes. Tortello and Minott (2015) note that although play is rhetorically supported in policy, classroom practice is aligned more closely with academic achievement. Standardised assessments have become the dominant currency of accountability, shaping timetables, resources, and classroom interactions. Without broadening assessment to value processes such as inquiry, collaboration, and self-regulation alongside products, play risks remaining peripheral. This raises a critical question for Jamaican early childhood education: how can play be legitimised in a system where success is often equated with early literacy and numeracy? One pathway is recalibrating accountability measures so that teachers can "teach to what matters," not only to what is easily measured. Tortello and Minott (2015) argue that assessment practices should extend beyond children's final products, such as completed worksheets, written work, or other observable outcomes, to recognize learning processes such as inquiry, collaboration, and self-regulation. When assessment emphasizes products alone, play may be perceived as less academically valuable because many of the competencies developed through play occur during the process rather than in a tangible final outcome.

This tension is reflective of a broader cultural and historical context in which formal schooling, heavily influenced by colonial legacies, continues to shape perceptions of "real learning." Colonial education systems in the Caribbean were historically designed to produce compliant, literate citizens capable of fulfilling administrative roles rather than nurturing creativity or critical thinking (Escayg and Kinkead-Clark, 2018). Consequently, formal, teacher-directed

methods and standardized assessment practices remain entrenched in Jamaican early childhood education, constraining the integration of play into daily practice.

Parental expectations emerged as a significant influence on the integration of play. Teachers described pressure to provide visible evidence of academic learning, echoing Tortello and Minott's (2015) observation that Jamaican parents often equate "real learning" with seatwork, workbooks, and rote memorisation. This alignment between home and school expectations reinforced teacher reliance on didactic methods, limiting the scope and duration of play. Constraints of classroom space and time further restricted opportunities for play, highlighting the need for context-specific research on play pedagogies in Jamaica. When administrators require frequent documentation of learning, teachers gravitate toward countable outputs, sidelining open-ended, exploratory play.

UNICEF (2018) highlighted teachers' crucial role in facilitating play-based learning; supported by Kennedy and Barblett (2010) and Cutter-Mackenzie et al. (2014), who argued that structured, planned play enhances early childhood education. However, parental expectations remain a persistent barrier (Lynch, 2015), compounded in Jamaica by cultural norms associating serious education with teacher-led instruction (Escayg and Kinkead-Clark, 2018). Without educating and engaging parents about the value of play, teachers face ongoing resistance in implementing playful learning experiences. Clear communication and home-school collaboration are therefore essential for aligning expectations and fostering understanding of play's developmental role. Epstein (2002) and Cox (2005) emphasised that such partnerships enhance children's educational experiences, supporting shared ownership of learning. When families observe children planning, negotiating, problem-solving, and documenting their thinking, play becomes legible as meaningful learning.

At the system level, the Early Childhood Commission (ECC) sets standards and conducts inspections for early childhood institutions,

including basic schools. While these standards recognise child-centred practices, three gaps were evident in this study's context:

1. financing and resources (such as insufficient materials, space, and trained support) constrain sustained play;
2. workforce development would be affected by limited pre-service and in-service training on play pedagogy and assessment; and
3. accountability alignment (as it relates to monitoring tools) prioritises easily quantifiable outputs over process-rich evidence from play.

Addressing these gaps could empower schools to implement play as a core pedagogy rather than as an add-on. A robust early childhood policy could guide this process, signalling the value of play in inspections, subsidising resources, lowering pupil-teacher ratios, and embedding exemplars of play-based assessment in national guidance.

Recommendations

The sample size for the case study was relatively small, and data were gathered at only one school. Future recommendations would be to increase the sample size and the number of participants, and to draw from a wider variety of early childhood institutions, mainly because there was limited literature on play-based learning in the Jamaican context and its impact on students' overall development. The findings had implications for further research to inform decisions on learning through play for optimal student success. Longitudinal studies should focus on the value of play within the Jamaican context, following teachers in training through an entire early childhood programme of research or immersion in play-based schools, and following children through a whole early childhood programme of study. More research is needed on play pedagogy in early childhood teacher education programmes that include an immersion programme for teachers-in-training. This programme would be vital to continued

advocacy for and inclusion of play in early childhood spaces.

These recommendations are in keeping with the implications listed above.

- Provide practical resources (centre kits, loose-parts libraries, outdoor equipment) and short, job-embedded planning tools that help teachers design, observe, and document learning through play.
- Establish ongoing professional development that goes beyond "exposure." Prioritise coached cycles (plan-teach-reflect), with model classrooms and video exemplars from Jamaican settings.
- Strengthen families' understanding of play via school-based showcases, brief videos/newsletters highlighting learning outcomes, and parent participation days.
- Create a shared vision across ECC-regulated providers by embedding play-based indicators into inspection and school self-evaluation tools, so that accountability and pedagogy align.
- Use a collaborative home-school approach supported by simple communication routines (weekly learning stories and photo captions linked to curriculum goals) that make play outcomes visible.
- Pilot assessment reforms that value process: adopt portfolios, learning stories, and observational rubrics for self-regulation, language, and problem-solving; recognise these artefacts in school reviews and reports.
- Address colonial legacies explicitly in teacher education—units on culturally sustaining, play-based pedagogy; classroom talk that legitimises children's voices; and reflective practice to interrupt compliance-only classroom norms.
- Improve enabling conditions: reduce pupil-teacher ratios in early years classes; protect daily blocks of uninterrupted play; and schedule outdoor play as a curricular, not discretionary, activity.

- Resource leadership: train principals and supervisors to coach for play (how to look for learning in play, how to timetable and resource it, and how to communicate its value to parents).
- Commission Jamaican-based studies that track outcomes from play-rich classrooms over time (literacy, numeracy, executive function, attendance, and wellbeing) to build a local evidence base that speaks to parents and policymakers alike.

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