BRIDGING BELIEFS AND PRACTICES: A STUDY OF HONG KONG KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF “LEARNING THROUGH PLAY” AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF “PLAY” IN THEIR PRACTICES

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Abstract

The importance of education is being emphasized as it is believed that human beings learn through their lifespan. Since early childhood was viewed as a fundamental stage of life, the investigation of pedagogy has been conducted in kindergarten. In Hong Kong, the importance of play has been stressed for over 30 years; however, government reports and research reflect that learning and teaching in early childhood settings are still deviated from the government’s expectations. Therefore, this research aims to explore Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ perceptions toward “learning through play” and their experience in implementing “play” in their classroom. The central research question is “What are the experiences of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers with play-based learning?”, and the research questions are shaped around the experiences of teachers employing play-based learning and the construction of their perception toward play. To explain and understand the dynamic of play and the play behaviors in young children, Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory is used as the theoretical framework. The interpretivist paradigm frames the study, and “basic qualitative study” is used to conduct the study. The participants comprise seven trained Hong Kong kindergarten teachers with at least three years of teaching experience at a local kindergarten. Research findings reveal that kindergarten teachers view play-based learning as an effective approach to teach young children, and that they recognize the benefits of adopting play-based learning in class. However, the lack of knowledge about adopting play-based pedagogy, of time and space, and of support from school and parents, all were identified as affecting the implementation of play in kindergarten practice, which causes a deviation between teachers’ beliefs and practice.

Keywords: learning through play, Hong Kong, kindergarten, pedagogy, kindergarten teachers.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Education and learning start the moment we are born and continue throughout our lifespan. Humans develop at a rapid rate from birth to around age six, and early childhood is viewed as a fundamental stage of life in terms of physical, intellectual, social, and emotional development (Russell, 2011). With high quality and positive early learning experiences, young children develop life skills and values that lay the foundation for later school success (De Bilde et al., 2015). Play is viewed as a central pedagogy in kindergartens of many countries, and educators have stressed the importance of play in early childhood development (Lu & Montague, 2016; Lynch, 2015; Rushton, 2011). While the expectations for children entering kindergarten are greater than they were years ago, there is no doubt that kindergarten teachers are playing a critical role in children’s learning environments. The quality of teachers and their teaching strategies have impact the long-term success of students, both academically and emotionally (Gehris, Gooze, & Whitaker, 2015; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). Hence, unless kindergarten teachers’ beliefs and practices toward play-based learning are aligned, teaching efficacy and young children’s early learning experiences could be negatively affected.

Research Problem

Throughout history, many psychologists and educators have stressed the importance of play in early childhood development, and this notion is still embraced by them. In fact, play-based learning is often viewed as a fundamental pedagogy in the pre-primary classrooms of many countries (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Lynch, 2015). Educators propose that play not only creates a child’s zone of proximal development, it facilitates the separation of thought from actions and objects, and enhances the development of self-regulation (Beatty, 2017; Bodrova & Leong, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, the connections between play and acquiring foundational skills such as self-regulation, social skills, and oral language abilities are inseparable (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Lu & Montague, 2016; NAEYC, 2009; Rushton, 2011).

The Hong Kong Government imposed “learning through play” as the central pedagogy for pre-primary education, and there has been an increasing demand on upgrading the practical skills of kindergarten teachers to meet this need. However, with the imposed policy and programs aiming to upgrade teachers’ skills in implementing play in their classroom, the Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI) annual reports have reflected the
reality that learning and teaching in this sector were still teacher-centered and deviated from the government’s expectations (Cheng, 2012). If kindergarten teachers’ views toward play-based learning and their practice could be better understood, then early childhood education program designers and education leaders might be able to fill the potential gap between beliefs and practice by providing relevant training and support for kindergarten teachers. Front-line teachers might be better able to serve young children by providing kindergarteners with quality learning experiences. Therefore, the beliefs and practices related to “play-based learning” were explored by interviewing current kindergarten teachers and having them describe their views and experiences in implementing play in their classroom. Such information can inform a plan for how education leaders can facilitate play-based learning and make it happen in kindergarten classrooms.

**Justification for the Research Problem**

There are scholarly studies confirming the connection between play and children’s learning and development (Bergen, 2009; Rushton, Juola-Rushton, & Larkin, 2010), the role of teachers in teacher-facilitated play (Nicolopoulou, 2010), and the complexities in promoting play-based kindergarten curriculums (Fung, 2009; Leung, 2012). However, similar research in the Hong Kong context appears to be underexplored, and pre-primary education seems to focus on the outcomes of play activities rather than play itself (Cheng, 2004; Huang, 2013). Following the global trend of implementing play in pre-primary classrooms, the Hong Kong Government has adopted “learning through play” as their central pedagogy for pre-primary education since 1986 (Education Commission, 1986; Lau & Grieshaber, 2010; Leung, 2012; Poon, 2008). To meet the expectations for teachers to develop children’s basic skills through a variety of play activities instead of forcing children to learn through teacher-centered activities (Curriculum Development Council, 2006), kindergarten teachers’ qualifications and their professional development has increased dramatically (Cheng, 2012). Having grasped the importance of play in childhood development and the role of teachers in children’s learning environments, the investigation of beliefs and practice toward play-based learning is thus critical.

**Deficiencies in the Evidence**

Numerous studies have explored the beliefs and practices of kindergarten teachers, and those that focus on the conceptualization and implementation of play are mainly focused on the challenges teachers faced (Cheng,
In the Hong Kong context, limited research has been conducted with regards to exploring the gap between beliefs and practice on the “learning through play” concept and deliberating the limitations when implementing play in kindergarten classrooms. Therefore qualitative inquiry with practicing kindergarten teachers helps to gain an understanding of their beliefs, practices, and any challenges they face when they put play into their classrooms.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this research is to explore the perceptions of “play-based learning” among Hong Kong kindergarten teachers and the implementation of “play” in their classrooms at Hong Kong kindergartens that are privately run by voluntary organizations.

**Relating the Discussion to the Audiences**

By exploring and identifying the potential gap between the beliefs and practices of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers toward “play-based learning,” we gain better understanding of the phenomena in current pre-primary education. This research can enable researchers to cultivate an understanding of and identify the elements that widen or narrow the gap between kindergarten teachers’ beliefs and practices. It raises the general awareness in improving current pre-primary practice so as to meet the requirements of the Hong Kong Government. Moreover, kindergarten principals can better understand the difficulties front-line teachers are facing, and enhance their skills and strategies in implementing play in their classrooms. Front-line kindergarten teachers can recognize their own strengths and weaknesses and make adjustments accordingly. Because this research draws on the insights of both theorists and practitioners, it is hoped that more researchers will conduct studies in related fields; that more practitioners could be expected to refine their practices; and that Hong Kong kindergarten teachers can better align their beliefs with practices so that children can learn and grow in a fun-filled environment.

**Significance of the Research**

To children, parents, and educators, kindergarten is viewed as a time of play and transition from home to school. Studies showed that children who attend kindergarten derive many benefits from the experience (Brownell et al., 2015; De Bilde, 2015). Children’s success in adjusting to elementary school as well as their success in later years can be predicted through attending quality kindergarten programs. With the implementation of a 15-year free
education in Hong Kong beginning with the 2017 school year, pre-primary education has become more accessible, affordable, and accountable. In 1984 the curriculum development committee in Hong Kong first stressed the role of play in children’s physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development (Education Commission, 1984). Pointing to the variability in kindergarten classroom practices, scholars highlight the inconsistency and muddled image of a play-based pedagogical approach and the urgency in exploring teachers’ perception and experiences in adopting play in their classrooms (Chan, 2016; Cheung, 2012; Leung, 2012).

The continued use of pedagogical approaches that stress academic skills and the exclusion of play-based learning are becoming the critical concerns in early childhood education. In the Hong Kong context, which has a culture that embraces Confucianism, kindergarten has been included as the foundational year during which academic skills are stressed and taught. The curriculum, daily schedule, and teaching strategies are very academically focused. This reality contradicts the expectations of the Hong Kong Government, which aims to get teachers to adopt play-based learning as the central pedagogy in kindergarten classrooms. Different factors such as expectations from parents, curriculums stressing academic subjects, and cultural belief in the success of academic achievement can create a pressurized classroom environment and affect teachers’ practices, resulting in insufficient time and effort for implementing play-based activities at school, which is characterized as developmentally appropriate learning for young children (Cheng, 2004).

Focusing on kindergarten teachers’ beliefs and practices in implementing play activities in the classroom, this study will be beneficial to young children, teachers, education leaders, and early childhood training program designers. Having understood the challenges front-line teachers face when implementing play in their classrooms, program designers can revise existing training curriculums to better prepare teachers in utilizing play-based learning as their teaching approach. By aligning teachers’ beliefs and practices toward play-based learning, young children will be able to learn in a fun-filled, stimulating, and developmentally appropriate classroom.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this research was therefore to explore the perceptions of “play-based learning” among Hong Kong kindergarten teachers and the implementation of play in their classrooms at private Hong Kong kindergartens run by voluntary organizations, in order to promote educational concerns for early childhood education in Hong
Therefore, the central research question was: What are the experiences of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers with play-based learning?” The sub-questions include: (1) What is the conception of play and “play-based learning” as understood by Hong Kong kindergarten teachers? (2) How does the conception of “play-based learning” develop with the experience which Hong Kong kindergarten teachers receive in his/her course of teacher education program? (3) What are Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ perceptions of the benefits and challenges of creating play-based learning in their classrooms? and (4) What are the factors affecting Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ implementation of play and play-based learning in their classroom?

Positionality Statement

Many psychologists and theorists emphasize the benefits of incorporating play into children’s everyday learning experiences. There is a general belief that “play” has multiple functions in enhancing children’s intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development; and that high-quality early childhood programs should include a safe and nurturing environment which facilitates play activities (NAEYC, 2009). In fact, ever since the Hong Kong Government imposed “learning through play” as the central pedagogy for pre-primary education, the government has aimed to enhance children’s “knowledge,” “skills,” and “values and attitudes” through catering for children’s interests to stimulate their interest and motivation in learning (EDB, 2017). Therefore, there is an increasing demand for upgrading kindergarten teachers’ practical skills. As an educator at a university invested in “growing” potential kindergarten teachers, a former assistant director and preschool teacher at different schools in the United States, a mother of two, and a determined woman, I find that teachers’ practices can often be very different from what they believe is right. Moreover, the Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI) annual reports reflected the reality that learning and teaching in pre-primary education remained teacher-centered, thus deviating from the government’s expectations (Cheng, 2012). Given that teachers are those who come into close contact with young children every day and that their teaching affects how and what children learn, I find it both interesting and essential to investigate the potential discrepancy between Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ beliefs and practices toward “play-based learning.”

Previous knowledge about my topic. From an early age I always wondered why teachers in Hong Kong seemed to make learning so boring. I did not realize the real problem until I finally got to explore more by
studying and working in the United States, where I got to know different aspects, theories, and research in the education field. Moreover, through working in different preschools and kindergartens, I learned how others use different pedagogies to teach children. Professors at the university were very supportive and the coaching teachers at preschools were willing to let me try rather than telling me what to do. These approaches were more student-centered than teacher-directed, and I found out that there is no single teaching method that fits everyone. Through using various kinds of student-centered teaching strategies, students learn happily and effectively.

Throughout my undergraduate years, I learned basic theories and practices related to the early-childhood education field; yet, it did not really prepare me to work in a real setting. After working for a year, I decided to know more about child development and eventually started my journey toward my master’s degree in Childhood Development. Those years of studying in the United States opened my mind when dealing with children-related issues.

Years after I received my master degree, I thirsted for new concepts in the related field. I then took several classes about playwork offered by Common Threads in the UK and eventually earned an Associate of Arts in that field. Through these courses I have gained an interest in knowing more about the importance of teacher-parent cooperation. More importantly, I got to investigate how play affects children in different aspects. There developed, for that reason, my desire for learning more about the implementation of play in Hong Kong kindergartens.

**Personal experiences that influences me about this topic.** As a former preschool educator who was also a proponent for the integration of playful curriculums into the classroom, I appreciate the work that is done by practicing teachers in planning for a fun-rich classroom. From my experience, increased use of play-based curriculums in the classroom can enrich the educative process and eventually affect children in the long run.

In my role as a lecturer at the Hong Kong Education University, I work with other lecturers and professors to provide training for pre- and in-service kindergarten teachers. I aim to provide opportunities for them to discuss the theories they learned in class and to share the experiences they have in kindergarten. In general, positive feedbacks were given by most of the adult students. Even adults might be bored with a traditional, one-directional teaching method; for young children, I could see how a play-based classroom provides exciting stimulation for them.
Last but not least, as a mother of two children aged eight and four, I observe how play increases their intrinsic motivation in exploring the world around them. I grew up in a healthy family where my dad worked very hard every day for a living and my mom basically just took care of the family. My parents were not born in a time when people could get education easily. Therefore they tried very hard to transform me into a very talented person. As I was born in Hong Kong, a place where academic achievement is highly valued, my mom tried very hard to push me to stay on top of the class. On top of that, I had to attend many extracurricular classes so that my parents could make sure that I would become a strong competitor in the society. Yet I never really enjoyed whatever I did when I was young, and I had no idea what was going on around the world other than the knowledge I learned from books. Having such unsatisfactory experiences when I was studying in Hong Kong, I sought a better way for my sons to learn the essential skills needed to survive, and I believe that play-based learning might be the better way I have been looking for. While I expect Hong Kong kindergarten teachers have sufficient knowledge about child development theories, I want to know if other factors such as teachers’ cultural backgrounds and work contexts would affect their actual practices.

My beliefs, bias, and opinions about my topic. To a large extent, my beliefs, biases, and opinions are shaped by my heritage, my parents’ parenting style, and my experiences. I spent a good amount of time living in a western country where I experienced culture shock in the beginning. Quickly, however, through assimilation and adaptation, I started to understand certain practices and values that individualists embrace; and I was influenced by such beliefs in a certain way.

I believe that other than academic achievements, education is also a preparation for life. The education process includes acquiring skills and knowledge in interpersonal areas. Therefore, educators should aim to provide numerous experiences and chances for young children to achieve their fullest potential. Traditional formal schooling in Hong Kong provides a single experience for children. There are many factors that could enrich the classroom in order to make it fun-filled and unique. Play-based learning includes the use of a variety of teaching methods and materials. To a certain extent, I tend to believe that play-based learning can fill the educational gap.

Moreover, I believe that all children are capable of learning, but not everyone needs to learn the same materials through the same settings. Learning should be about children acquiring new skills or knowledge to
prepare them for life in the future. Given that everyone has different abilities, formal school settings and teaching methods simply cannot fit everyone’s needs. Based on my very different learning experiences in Hong Kong and in the United States, I tend to believe that adding play-based learning within the classroom is one of the good ways to facilitate the traditional classroom experience.

Above all, I believe that teachers are playing an important role in facilitating young children’s development, because they are the ones who come in close contact with children. Therefore, if their practice aligns with their beliefs, such consistency helps to stabilize what and how children learn.

I achieved my higher education in a western county and my bias also arose at that time. Sometimes I believe that the western way is a “better” way for children to learn; but that is not always the case, given that everyone is unique in some aspects. The other bias lies in a possible assumption that there is a discrepancy between teachers’ beliefs and practice. I believe that some cultures emphasize direct teaching rather than real life experiences, and that Hong Kong kindergarten teachers are affected by traditional Hong Kong culture in some way. Hence, staying alert to my biases is necessary when studying my research topic.

**My predisposition towards certain conclusions about the topic.** My experiences, knowledge, beliefs, and bias mentioned above predispose me to certain conclusions about my topic. My assumptions are that a majority of young children are learning from school and teachers are playing an important role in assisting children’s development. I also expect that Hong Kong kindergarten teachers have sufficient training and knowledge regarding how to assist children’s learning, but their actual practice might be altered by external or internal factors such as cultural background and working context. Lastly, I assume that adding play-based learning experiences could make young children’s classrooms more appealing and exciting.

My new role as a scholar-practitioner enables me to start viewing things through different lenses. Although there is hardly any way to totally avoid being influenced by bias and personal opinions, learning to stay alert to potential bias is the issue I have to learn throughout the whole doctoral study. Briscoe (2005) mentioned that critical researchers tend to create a fair judgment toward different social groups in ideological positioning; however, in reality, researchers are still largely influenced by their experiences. The role of factors such as race, class, gender, and sex are critical, and researchers might embrace those ideas and use them as a guideline to
interpret the world around themselves (Carlton Parsons, 2008). In order to preserve a neutral position, cultural awareness must be increased, binary thinking reduced, and we must constantly rethink our position as researchers (Fernnell & Arnot, 2008). According to Machi and McEvoy (2012), researcher bias is not always a bad thing because such interest and passion are needed for conducting research. Researchers just need to control bias and opinion by inspecting the topic carefully, and also by being open minded and considerate when gathering related information to avoid reaching preferred conclusions (Machi & McEvoy, 2012).

**Theoretical Framework**

There are a variety of useful theories that help explain and understand the dynamic of play and play behaviors in young children; they also serve to explain how play facilitates children’s cognitive development. While the Western world has viewed individuals as separate from their social and physical environments, a number of social belief systems have challenged this view (Miller, 2003). Of these the most influential seminal author is Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky.

Lev Vygotsky was born in 1896 and his systematic work in psychology began in 1924. At the beginning Vygotsky extended Marx and Engels’ ideas about economics and politics to psychology, hoping to transform citizens’ thinking from a feudal mentality of helplessness into a socialistic mentality of self-directed activity and a commitment to a larger social unit based on sharing and support. Later, this belief further developed into a socio-cultural view, which held that humans are embedded in a socio-cultural matrix and that human behavior cannot be understood independently of this ever-present matrix. Culture defines what knowledge and skills individuals need to acquire, and gives them tools such as language and strategies needed for functioning in that specific culture. This idea aligns with my study well, and it is assumed that children’s learning has a direct and close relationship with their surrounding environment. Development is never an individual’s activity. Therefore, as an element in children’s surrounding environment, it is essential to explore what kindergarten teachers do with children at school.

Vygotsky translated his extended work on Marx into developmental psychology and concluded three main things. First, children’s interactions with others in social settings and the use of psychological tools such as language help to shape children’s thinking. In other words, Vygotsky believed that interaction with objects directs cognitive development, and that social interaction is the key to this kind of development as it requires the use of the
social tools. Second, adults and/or more knowledgeable people are responsible for sharing their knowledge with children and other less advanced members in society in order to advance their cognitive development. Third, all phenomena constantly undergo changes and move toward a synthesis of conflicting elements, and this process initiates development. Human thought can thus be understood by examining its history as well as how children learn when they keep experiencing conflicts between currently held concepts and the new ones (Miller, 2003).

Again, kindergarten teachers have numerous interactions with children every day; and according to Vygotsky, such interactions initiate children’s cognitive development. Therefore, for my study, Vygotsky’s theory not only helps with the development of the problem of practice but also explains the needs for conducting this research.

**Play and Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development.** Vygotsky emphasized how adults and more knowledgeable peers play an active role in helping children learn. In his view, both physical interactions with objects and with other individuals are equally crucial for development. Therefore, play not only helps to develop abstract thought in young children, it presents opportunities for social and emotional growth (Lillemyr, 2009). Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that children have two levels of development: independent performance and assisted performance. Independent performance refers to what children can do on their own, and assisted performance refers to what children can do with assistance from more knowledgeable peers and/or adults. This distance between a child’s “actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving” and the higher level of “potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” is considered as the zone of proximal development (ZPD) in Vygotsky’s view (1978, p. 86). He further explained, “learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers” (p. 90). The ZPD is not static but shifts as children learn and understand more. As a child reaches independent performance, new and more advanced levels of ZPD will emerge, and the cycle will begin again.

Vygotsky proposed that adults and peers provide assistance or scaffolding to help a child reach a level of independent performance. Scaffolding includes different kinds of support such as questioning, demonstrating, modeling, providing opportunities for children trying, etc. This support takes children from their current skill to a new one (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Vygotsky’s theory establishes that scaffolding is more helpful when it targets a
child’s emerging skills. If an adult aims far beyond a child’s skill level, the child may simply ignore or fail to use that skill. Therefore, it is essential to observe the child and assess if the assistance is outside of the child’s ZPD.

In fact, play is a source of development and creates a ZPD. According to Vygotsky, “the child performs above his usual behavior, as though he were a head taller than himself” (1978, p. 102). The play-development relationship is similar to the instruction-development relationship when focusing on how adults scaffold the child’s learning; but the activities and consequences of play are much broader than those provided by peers and adults (Vygotsky, 1966). Bodrova and Leong (2007) echoed Vygotsky’s view and proposed that children actually seem to perform ahead of themselves during play, and they stretch themselves to attain more advanced levels of language use, cognitive skills, and cooperation with others. It is to note that children may not be able to demonstrate the same level of skill in more formal settings; however, their new level of skill becomes apparent earlier while they are engaged in play. Play has a meaningful and important position in children’s development in Vygotsky’s view. Given that children spend a good amount of time in kindergarten and have many opportunities for interacting with their teachers and peers, kindergarten teachers’ perception toward play and their classroom practices become critical areas for further exploration.

Contemporary scholars and applications. Many scholars find Vygotsky’s argument that play is a developmental zone, in which the child can do more than he/she can under normal circumstances, to be supportive of play as an education activity such as language development (Bodrova, 2008; Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Whitebread, 2010). They stress that children strive for social connection and social activities from which their development springs. From these social experiences, children not only acquire culturally-valued practices, but also modify and transform those practices (Nelson, 2007; Rogoff, 2003). In fact, Vygotsky’s book Thought and Language was published in 1934, the year of his death. Because he died at age 37 and only had 10 years of professional work in psychology, his followers and scholars continue to extend his work. Luria and some other scholars, such as Bernstein, Lebedinsky and Zankov, formed the Vygotsky-Luria circle in order to continue research into Vygotsky’s ideas of social and interpersonal relations and the practices of empirical scientific research (Akhutina, 2003). Later, such scholars as Barbara Rogoff and Michael Cole helped to make Vygotsky’s ideas more accessible to the English-speaking world (Miller, 2003).
Barabra Rogoff (1990) extended the notion of Vygotsky’s ZPD, and stressed that adults need not explicitly instruct children through face-to-face interaction; children can learn from skilled adults at a distance, by observing everyday activities in which there is no intention to teach the child. That is, learning is a natural by-product of involvement in tasks with adults or more competent peers. Moreover, interactions in the ZPD do not have to be verbal, and guided participation involves children and adults collaborating in everyday problem-solving activities. Both children and adults have an active role in learning. For adults, they guide children’s participation in everyday activities, help children to adapt their knowledge to a new situation, and encourage them to try out new skills. For children, they share the views and values with the more knowledgeable partners, offer their own views, and engage “in the process of stretching their concepts to find a common ground” (Rogoff, 1990, p. 196). After all, Vygotsky’s notion of ZPD has important implications for how one assesses a child’s ability and for what educators should do to facilitate children’s learning. Schooling is important for human development, and it is a way that a culture turns children’s intuitive concepts into formal, abstract ones. Based on this theory my study, exploring teachers’ perceptions toward play and actual practices, is both essential and critical to children’s overall development.

While research generated by Vygotsky’s theory reveals that children in every culture develop unique strengths, his emphasis on cultural and social experience neglects the biological side of development. He mentioned little about the importance of heredity and brain growth in cognitive change. Moreover, he placed less emphasis on children’s capacity to shape their own development. Focusing on the notion of ZPD, knowing the width of children’s zones does not provide an accurate picture of their learning ability; moreover, the zone has problems of measurement. Vygotsky measured the zone in terms of age, but that is a global metric and one cannot assume that the difference between different age ranges is the same (Miller, 2003).

Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory helps to shape the purpose of the research and research questions. The purpose of the present research is to explore the perceptions of “play-based learning” among Hong Kong kindergarten teachers and the implementation of play in their classrooms at local kindergartens that are privately run by voluntary organizations in order to promote educational concerns for early childhood education in Hong Kong. The focus is on the element “play” because play has a critical position in childhood development.
Vygosky’s theory also emphasized the importance of play, and how play involves the use of language and social awareness and thus facilitates cognitive development.

While Vygotsky’s theory helps to frame the study, there are some limitations using only one theory to frame the study. For example, how other scholars critiqued Vygotsky’s theory and stated that socio-cultural theory lacks emphasis on how an individual processes information obtained from others. In other words, this theory places less emphasis on individual abilities, characteristics, and the role of physical maturation.
Chapter II: Literature Review

All human beings must negotiate the transition from total dependence on others at birth to independence later on in life. Other than academic knowledge, skills such as internal control, self-regulation, and attention start to develop at early age. Young children develop the capacity to manage strong emotions and keep attention focused (Gordon & Browne, 2014). Throughout the early childhood years, adults play significant roles in helping children learn. Most importantly, through constant interactions with others, children start to represent and reconstruct their experiences and knowledge (Berk, 2013; Sluss, 2015; Wood, 2013). Kindergarten experiences are proven to provide numerous chances for children to interact and social with others. Kindergarten teachers, who have many different roles through every school day, are responsible for facilitating such experiences in a meaningful way to enhance children development. In fact, studies have shown that children who attend kindergarten gain different developmental benefits and can better adjust themselves when transitioning later to elementary school (Cheng, 2012; Hayes & Kernan, 2008; Leung, 2012; Wong, Wang, & Cheng, 2011). In kindergarten years, these valuable interactions can be found easily through play activities.

Play has been given some visibility in recent legislation and guidance, because research findings have identified play as an indicator of high quality programs. However, the concept of play and play-based learning are ill-defined in current government documentation, and the extent to which play and play-based learning have been valued in the curriculum has changed over time (Dockett, 2011; Wood, 2013). Recent research has shown that there is tension between the ideology and practice of kindergarten teachers in relation to play. This has been attributed to an overemphasis on attainment targets and testing (Cheng, 2012; Santer, Drifiths, & Goodall, 2007). With these findings, it is worthy to investigate kindergarten teachers’ perceptions and practice toward “learning through play.”

Many psychologist and educators have stressed the importance of play in early childhood development, and play is often viewed as fundamental pedagogy in the pre-primary classrooms of many countries. Since 1986, Hong Kong government followed the global trend in education and adopted “learning through play” as a central tenet for kindergarten pedagogy (Education Commission, 1986; Liu, Yuen, & Rao, 2017; Wu, 2013). Yet, the seven Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI) annual reports all reflect the fact that the quality of its enactment has been
problematic. Learning and teaching in kindergarten was mostly teacher-centered, which is deviated from the government’s recommendation (Cheng, 2011). When kindergarten teachers’ beliefs and practices are being understood, educations leaders and early childhood programs designers might be able to provide support for front-line teachers in order to fill the potential gap.

The purpose of this research is, therefore, to explore Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ perceptions of “learning through play” and the implementation of play in their classrooms at Hong Kong local kindergartens that are privately run by voluntary organizations. With such knowledge, there may come a better understanding of the misinterpretation of play-based pedagogy and better ways to prepare teachers for further exploration in the early childhood field. By aligning kindergarten teachers’ beliefs and practices toward “learning through play”, young children are expected to learn in a fun-filled, simulating, and developmentally appropriate classroom.

This literature review is organized to provide readers first with an understanding of the importance for kindergarten teachers to implement play in their classroom, and then with the role of play in contemporary early childhood programs and the Hong Kong education system. To investigate these topics, the body of the literature reviewed includes the relationship between child development and play, foundations for learning through play, and an examination of education in Hong Kong. Focusing on child development, physical, cognitive, language, and social-emotional development of young children would be discussed to examine what kinds of pedagogy best fit kindergarteners’ needs. Focusing on the foundations for learning through play, several working definitions of play are included and contemporary programs in the early childhood education field discussed. Lastly, education in Hong Kong would be discussed so that readers get in depth understanding about current issues and trends in Hong Kong kindergarten education system.

**Child Development and Play**

According to Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group (2005), children are very different from adults, and one of the differences is the need for children to play and be playful. Since being playful is a biological drive that is intrinsically motivated, suppressing such want can affect children’s development in many ways. Many classic theories emphasized the importance of play and how it affects children’s lives. For instance, Vygotsky (1978) noted that play helps to shape how children make sense of their worlds, learn thinking skills, and acquire language.
Piaget also mentioned the importance of play through his theory of assimilation. As children assimilate new experiences, they reflect on the new knowledge and practice such skills through play (Smith & Lillard, 2012). Montessori regarded play as “the child’s work” and that working with toys and objects helps children to develop cognitively, socially, and emotionally (Lillard, 2013; Miller, 2003). These pioneers proposed that children show what they know and what they are thinking through play. Following the logic, children’s play behavior could be used to evaluate their knowledge, and play could thus be an effective pedagogy in assisting children learn and develop. Kindergarteners spend a lot of time playing every day. While they are inventing games and dramatizing fantasies, they develop their bodies and minds through the playing process. During free play, kindergarteners develop well-being because they need to pay attention and affiliate with other children continually (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015; Pyle & Deluca, 2017). Therefore, the relationship between development and play as described within the physical, cognitive, language, and social domains of development will be explored in the following sections.

**Physical development and play.** The kindergarten years are the period when young children acquire basic fine and gross motor skills. Fine motor skills involve the use of hands and fingers, whereas gross-motor skills are the movements that allow the individual to become mobile and engage in skills requiring body movement. Gallahue (1993) proposed that children move through a developmental progression in the acquisition of motor skills. Although the sequence of the appearance of these phases is universal, the rate of acquisition of motor skills varies from child to child. Gallahue (1993) warned that maturity and physical activity do not necessary ensure that children will acquire fundamental movement skills in the kindergarten years, and children who do not master these skills are frustrated and will experience failure in recreational and sports activities. Play, especially outdoor play, is commonly associated with physical exercise. In general, educators and parents may not distinguish among free play, teacher-directed motor skills activities, and adult-directed sports. Although each type of activity provides opportunities for physical exercise, play is different in that it is initiated by the child (Helm & Boos, 1996; Lynch, 2015). Myers (1985) found that the children engaged in significantly more motor behaviors in free play than in the structured physical education classes. Frost (1992), therefore, suggested that the most effective teacher might be the one who provides a balance between directed and free-play activities. In fact, children need time to mess
around and do nothing (Wood, 2013). Although a full range of motor skills can be nurtured through adult-directed activities, there is also a need for an opportunity for children to engage in physical movements related to spontaneous, natural play (Wortham, 2010).

**Cognitive development and play.** Children make major strides in cognitive development in the kindergarten years. They get more opportunities to explore the surrounding environment and learn new information. According to Piaget (1962), kindergarteners are in the preoperational stage of development, where children are able to represent objects and events mentally, thus permitting more complex symbolism. However, they are controlled by their perception, which means that they understand concepts in terms of what they can see. Here Piaget (1962) described that preoperational children are egocentric. They are concerned more with their own thoughts and are unable to consider the point of view of others. Egocentrism results in the child’s inability to distinguish between her own perspective and the perspective of others. In play, kindergarteners may assume that other children share the same feelings and thoughts. In fact, play is considered necessary for cognitive development and learning (Ellis, 1973; Gordon & Browne, 2014; Piaget, 1962). Researchers have found that preschoolers who spend more time engaged in socio-dramatic play are advanced in intellectual development. In addition, children who enjoy pretend play score higher on tests of imagination and creativity. Novel play with objects may also enhance children’s ability to think inventively (Freyberg, 1973; Dockett, 2011; Gordon & Browne, 2014; Pepler & Ross, 1981). Wood (2013) identified the involvement of thinking processes and the repetition of social interactions as two essential ingredients of play. For instance, pretend play fosters young children’s ability to reason and assists children in separating meanings from objects (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Liu, Yuen, & Rao, 2017; Sheridan, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978; Yawkey & Diantoniis, 1984). Dramatic play, moreover, permits kindergarteners to imitate human relationships through symbolic representations (Lynch, 2015; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Smith & Lillard, 2012).

Vygotsky (1978) focused on representational play and fantasy play rather than on stages of play. Representational play permits kindergarteners to deal with unrealizable desires (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Gordon & Browne, 2014). At the same time, it allows children to separate objects and meaning. When the child substitutes one object for another, the representation helps the child separate an object’s real meaning from a pretend meaning.
Pretend play, then, represented in the separation of meaning from objects, serves as preparation for later abstract thinking and use of symbols, such as letters, for reading and writing (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Lynch, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). Fantasy play appears when children must learn to follow approved behaviors and delay gratification. As children mature, more rules and routines are expected, and fantasy play expands. For Vygotsky (1978), the essential feature of play is self-restraint. During play kindergarteners subordinate desires to play roles; and they are willing to follow set rules, which in turn enables them to follow more general rules and develop culturally accepted behaviors in real life.

**Language development and play.** The kindergarten years are significant for language development in young children. They learn about 10,000 words between ages 2-6. Language development is related to advances in cognitive development, follows rules of language, and is characterized by development in vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatics (Berk, 2013; Gordon & Browne, 2014). Children in general achieve major milestones in language development by the age of 6, with some differences occurring in language achievement. When children enter kindergarten, the individual gap in language development can be great. The differences in families and cultures can determine how much and what type of language is used. For that reason, differences in language acquisition can be documented. According to Berk (2013), some groups such as girls, middle-class children, single-born children tend to be more proficient and advanced in language than boys, children from low socioeconomic status families, twins, and triplets. Researchers who have studied familial and cultural differences in children’s language development explored various reasons for the findings. Some adults use strategies that foster language development, and such actions reflect Vygotsky’s ideas on scaffolding, in which more knowledgeable people interact with children in order to develop children’s zone of proximal development (Genishi & Dyson, 1984; Sheridan, 2011). When the relationship between language development and play is described, it is essential to explore how children play with language and how language is used in play. Cazden (1974), Pyle and Bigelow (2015) proposed that children explore the elements of language and develop a meta-linguistic awareness, or understanding of the rule system, through play with language. There is a hierarchy in how children play with language. According to the research, the categories do not develop independently, nor do they imply that one precedes the other.
According to Heidemann and Hewitt (2010), kindergarteners collaborate in play they use language by telling jokes and using chants. When language is used in play, it is in essence a social event. Language is therefore used as a tool in their play. It is used to plan play episodes, carry out roles, and talk about play events. When planning for play, children must use persuasive language if they are to take charge during the play event that follows. There are also times when children must use tones and expressions that are representative of the roles being played. The language that children use when playing pretend is similar to the language they have heard from books, and this language is like the language in a story when they narrate their play with small toys (Davidson, 1998). During play, children might give instructions to each other as to what should be said and how the children should express their part of the dialogue or conversation in play. Therefore, play not only facilitates language development in kindergarteners, the use of language in it also reflects children’s cognitive development (Davidson, 1998, p. 181).

Socio-emotional development and play. During the kindergarten years, children increasingly understand themselves as individuals; in addition, they understand themselves as a part of a social world (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2013). They are becoming more autonomous, and their cognitive abilities permit them to understand how they fit into different social groups. Important characterizations of social and emotional development are self-concept, self-esteem, and self-regulation of emotions. Relationships with others are exhibited through the development of empathy and social competence; and the nature and direction of social-emotional development are affected by their relationships with others. According to Erikson’s stage theory (Berk, 2013), kindergarteners are in the stage of initiative versus guilt. If they can feel secure after separating from their parents and feel competent in their abilities, they can develop autonomy and eagerly participate in new tasks and experiences. Wood (2013) characterized the kindergarten years as the play years. This description is particularly appropriate for social development because much of the progress occurs through play. Piaget’s cognitive-developmental theory, Erickson’s psychosocial theory, and Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory all have significant contributions toward understanding the relationship between play and social development. Piaget (1962) felt that play has a primary role in the child’s development. Although he placed little emphasis on play as a factor in children’s responses to the social environment, he emphasized the role for peer interactions within play for social-cognitive development.
Interactions during playtime helped children understand that other players have perspectives different from their own. In Piaget’s view (1962), play provides children with opportunities to develop social competence through ongoing interactions. In Erikson’s view (1963), there is a relationship between the make-believe play and the wider society, because this kind of play permits children to learn about their social world and to try out new social skills. Moreover, play facilitates the understanding of cultural roles and the integration of accepted social norms into their own personalities. Lastly, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory has a significant role for play in that he proposed that make-believe play in the preschool years is vital for the acquisition of social and cognitive competence (Berk, 2013). Vygotsky suggested that make-believe play requires children to initiate an imaginary situation and follow a set of rules to play out the situation; and in it the child is able to act separately from reality. This type of planned pretend play helps children to choose between different courses of action (Creasey et al., 1998). Make-believe play also forces young children to control their impulses and subject themselves to the rules of play. Vygotsky believed that all imaginary situations devised by young children follow social rules. Through make-believe play, children develop an understanding of social norms and try to uphold those social expectations (Berk, 2013).

There is a close relationship between play and child development. Through play activities, kindergartners develop skills needed for future success in the society and in life. Therefore, investigating play in kindergarten and in early childhood programs becomes essential. In the following section, play will be further defined, and some contemporary pedagogies in early childhood education will be discussed.

Play in Early Childhood Programs

How young childhood educators approach the education and care of young children depends on what they believe children are like. Programs and the pedagogies used for young children are often structured around certain assumptions about the nature and development of children. A belief that children learn actively through play and exploring their environment would result in a different type of education program than one based on a belief that children need control so they learn appropriate behavior. The above section confirms the rapid development in early childhood and the importance of play in the child’s all-round development. In this section the definition of play will be explained and six contemporary pedagogies in early childhood education discussed, so that the role of play in early childhood education field is further revealed.
The definition of play. A lot of time, play is considered as a behavior. However, what is play and how does it differ from other types of behavior that are commonly observed in young children? In fact, because of its complexity, it is proven problematic when people try to decide on an agreed definition of play (Moyles, 1989; Sheridan, 2011). Considering the difficulties to define play, however, some literatures provide an important narrative that reveals the complexity of play as a behavior, a process, and an approach to task. In particular, the freedom and choice inherent in play make it a vital ingredient for children’s healthy development (Santer, Griffiths, & Goodall, 2007).

When people talk about play, it often has the characteristics of frivolous and fun; however, when children play, a deep seriousness can also be apparent (Lillemyr, 2009). Focusing on play as a behavior, some theorists have suggested that for an activity to be regarded as play, there must be observed the presence of certain characteristics such as voluntary participation, enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, pretence, and a focus on process over product (Krasnor & Pepler, 1980; Santer, Griffiths, & Goodall, 2007). One problem with this type of approach to define play is that in some situations, these characteristics are more difficult to identify. Researchers proposed that the more characteristics that are present, the more like play the activity becomes (Pellegrini, 1991; Lillemyr, 2009). However, problems occur when researchers or observers hold different beliefs toward play and when they regard certain characteristics as more important to play than others. For instance, one might believe that an activity being voluntary is far more important than it not having an end product. On the other hand, one might make their decision based on signs of fun and enjoyment. While there is hardly any concrete definition of play and what play is also depends on how children view it, these highlights how seeing play from an observational perspective can be problematic. In fact, the observational approach to defining play is often based on the adult’s views of what play looks like rather than taking the child’s perspective. This neglects the reality that play could mean different things to different people at different times (Howard, 2009). For instance, the “play” of the professional basketball players will be very different from the “play” that occurs between friends at an after-school basketball play (Saracho, 1990). Therefore, to understand play, there is a need to find out what players think about the nature of their activities and to understand what makes children approach activities in a playful way.
When focusing on play as an approach to task, the research focusing on children’s own perceptions of their play is gaining increasing attention recently. Studies that have investigated what play means to children have led to deeper insight as to what separates play from other types of activity. Research demonstrated that preschool children define play as an activity that is freely chosen and self-directed. Surprisingly, children do not often define play as being something that is necessarily fun (Keating et al., 2000; Pyle & Deluca, 2017; Robson, 1993). In addition to choice and control, activities that occur on the floor rather than at a table, and outside rather than inside, are more likely to be seen as play (Howard, 2009; Parker, 2007; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015; Pyle & Deluca, 2017). The nature and degree of adult involvement are also important (McInnes et al., 2009). Bundy (1993) and Lynch (2015) argued that the way children approach an activity may be far more important than the actual activity itself. The same activity might be described by children as play or non-play, depending on the freedom, choice, and control they are afforded.

Play is not only a behavior and an approach to task but a process. Children join in and move out of play according to their own need and other elements within the environment such as location, the availability of materials, time, and the involvement of other people. Sturrock and Else (1998) suggested that play is a cycle of activity. They proposed that children communicate the desire to play using a series of signals or sending play cues. For play to maintain its momentum, these signals must be responded to promptly and appropriately. One example is that a child throws a ball to another child. The throwing action might be viewed as a cue or an invitation to play. When the other child responds to the play cue and throws the ball back, play will continue. If not, the flow of play would come to an end. In order to maintain a state of play, there needs to be some negotiations between players’ wishes, where choice and control over activity lead to concentration, pleasure, and satisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010; Sheridan, 2011).

Contemporary pedagogies in early childhood education. “While play can be educational in the school sense, we should never forget its much more vital role in learning has to do with child culture, not with adult culture” (Sutton-Smith, 1998, p. 34). Many educators advocate a play-based curriculum for young children; however, there is a lot of disagreement in the field about why and how play should be integrated in kindergarten
classrooms (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Roopnarine & Johnson, 2013). Thus this section will explore some contemporary pedagogies and will investigate how play is founded in kindergartens.

**Project approach.** The project approach is grounded in a constructivist approach as well as in the belief that children construct knowledge as they interact with their world. Social constructivism is influenced by the writings of Lev Vygotsky that emphasize how interaction with the more knowledgeable others can facilitate children’s knowledge construction. Vygotsky’s (1978) socio-cultural theory serves as a basis for project approach, and it is believed that children move from a point of knowing with the assistance of others so that they appropriate the information as their own. During the project, inquiry will develop hand in hand with critical thinking skills and creativity. The project approach provides chances for facilitating social development and cognitive development. The project is divided into three phases (Helm & Katz, 2011). The first phase is getting started on a project. Here the teacher is supposed to act as a facilitator and encourage children to share experiences regarding the selected topic, and then to review their knowledge of it using different expressive competencies such as dramatic play and drawing. Teachers can learn special interests of children and their parents through these initial activities. Moreover, the sharing helps to establish a baseline of understanding for the whole group involved in the project. Parents can also play an important role in this phase. They may be able to contribute to the project by arranging places to visit, lending items for display, and being interviewed by the children. Children have an active role in this phase. When they raise questions about the topic that reveal gaps in knowledge, there formed the basis for planning the second phase of the project. During phase 1, teachers are not expected to correct misconceptions that emerge, because these can be the resources for learning as the children investigate and test their predictions and theories. Phase 2 is developing a project. Since the main thrust of this phase is to gain new information through real-world experience, the primary source of information includes field trips to real settings and events. Interviewing people who have direct experiences related to the topic also provides such experience. Compared to the teacher-centered approach where teachers are directors rather than facilitators, the project approach provides chances for young children to inquire, explore, and investigate through various activities based on children’s interests. The last phase is concluding a project. Teachers can engage children in a discussion about what aspects of the project they think
might be of most interest to them. This last phase aims to review what has been learned and what more they might want to learn about the selected topic in the future, through various ways that are based on the children’s interest.

**HighScope approach.** HighScope was originally developed as a preschool program that can support its approach with longitudinal research, but it has been adapted for kindergarten in many systems. The HighScope program is based on Jean Piaget’s work and therefore was designed as a cognitively based program and stressed cognitive development rather than social and moral development. Moreover, it is to provide action-based activities for children that foster the development of key experiences. Compared to traditional academic approach, research supports the legitimacy of HighScope approach, and children seem to make significant gains. (Belfield, Nores, Barnett, & Schweinhart, 2006). Many kindergartens structure their programs around this approach. HighScope program has a consistent daily routine that maximizes opportunities for learning. For instance, the plan-do-review sequence in the morning is a framework for organizing play. First, children plan what they are going to do and discuss how they will accomplish their task. During the “do” part, children start to act out their plan. Teachers then act as facilitators and are supposed to use questions to scaffold play and monitor interactions among children. Moreover, clean-up is dominant in the “do” part. Children should pay attention when replacing materials on the shelves. Materials are organized in a way that children can learn mathematical concepts during the cleanup time. Lastly, during the “review” part, children review what they have accomplished in a variety of ways such as showing pictures and telling about their work. Thus, the review part provides an opportunity for children to develop their language and literacy skills.

Other than plan-do-review, large group and small group time provide chances for children to get together to play and learn. The key experiences in the HighScope program include many aspects such as language and literacy, movement, music, and mathematics. Although the HighScope program does not consider itself as a play-based program, the “do” part of plan-do-review is very much a time for play. It is essential to note that one key to effectiveness is to maintain a staffing ratio of no more than 10 children per staff member and to ensure that group sizes are limited to 20.

**Reggio Emilia approach.** Reggio Emilia is an approach based on the principles of social constructivism. Its philosophy is based on the work of Dewey and Vygotsky as interpreted by Loris Malaguzzi (New, 2005). The
program may look like a traditional kindergarten schedule at the beginning, but is different in fact, because children are not following a routine but their interests and research. In addition, interactions between teachers and children are very intense, and children in Reggio Emilia program receive more scaffolding when completing projects than is typically observed in most kindergarten classrooms (Helm, Beneke, & Steinheimer, 2007). For instance, the patio door may be open to provide indoor and outdoor play together during center time, and children are encouraged to look and capture the reality of the flower if they want to paint a picture of a flower. Additionally, children in the Reggio Emilia program work in groups and every child does not necessarily have to participate in every activity. The focus is then more on the completion of the final project by the group. Assessment in the Reggio Emilia-influenced schools is also very different from other approaches, which includes portfolios and documentation panels that contain samples of children’s works. For Reggio Emilia program believes that every child has a hundred languages and ways of knowing; and henceforth there are also many ways to assess, document, and illustrate how children are constructing knowledge. This represents a social constructivist approach to assessment and illustrates the difference with traditional kindergarten, which focuses on developmental norms.

Montessori education. Maria Montessori contributed to professional and parental ideas about young children’s needs and growth. She established schools for children—called the Houses for Children—in Rome first and then around the world. Her idea was to provide appropriate activities for children who are impoverished. These activities were based on a belief in children’s spiritual goodness, motivation, and propensity to act constructively in a free yet planned environment (Lillard, 2013; Wolfe, 2002). In fact, Montessori viewed education as a vehicle for “giving help to the child’s life” and “helping the mind in its process of development” (Montessori, 1967, p. 28). She aimed to follow the child’s development because that helps educators to match among instructional methods, curriculum, and the child.

Montessori’s approach to education was impressive in its philosophical and pedagogical richness. First, Montessori teachers should prepare a planned environment where children can freely choose their involvement with Montessori learning materials. When children grow and develop, they learn to choose learning materials more purposefully. At this stage children no longer play with materials but prepare for lessons, which helps them to refine different senses and create order. Acting freely was necessary; however, the purposes of education and
development could only be reached when children put their play impulses on hold and receive demonstrations from teachers first. The role of teachers, therefore, is to observe children closely as observation inform their instruction. When teachers observe how children use materials, they get to understand the children’s level of knowledge in using them. Then teacher can help enhance children’s development by matching their own readiness with the materials that are available. In fact, Montessori believed that ongoing assessment is needed as it helps teachers to use information to develop rich portraits (Gutek, 2004; Sluss, 2015).

Second, planned environment is needed in a Montessori school, and it is associated with child-size materials. Furniture and other learning materials should be designed according to children’s developmental needs and competence. For example, small glasses, miniature mops and brooms are suggested for children to use. Yet children are not playing with these materials but learning to master real-world skills with objects crafted to their size. Although Montessori schools existed worldwide, not all agreed with the approach; and instead of occupying a central role in her view of education, play seems to be only incidental to her curriculum and beliefs (Wolfe, 2002).

**The Waldorf approach.** The first Waldorf school was opened in 1919 at the Waldorf Astoria Cigarette Factory, and the Waldorf approach is founded by Rudolph Steiner (House, 2013). This approach highly values early childhood because it is believed that the future development of individuals as a whole depends on health-giving experiences in childhood. Therefore, it is the educator’s responsibility to provide a loving and warm environment for children’s healthy growth and to set examples for children’s imitation. The Waldorf approach takes the age-specific developmental needs of young children into account; and teachers would design the curriculum according to children’s development, the culture they reside in, the class size and many other aspects. In general, its early childhood curriculum emphasizes hands-on and experiential learning in order to foster children’s critical thinking skills and their ability to grow fully in the context of a community with healthy relationships among family and others in the society. Instead of having a fixed curriculum, teachers usually incorporate a variety of activities in order for children to understand certain subjects. Play is definitely at the heart of the Waldorf early childhood curriculum. Not only is play fundamental to developing social, physical, emotional, and cognitive growth, it promotes early language development and emergent literacy skills. Creating an
environment that supports the possibility for healthy play and also the growth it nurtures is always an essential task of Waldorf teachers (House, 2013; Nicol & Taplin, 2012).

**Thematic approach.** Thematic approach is a way of teaching and learning where a theme is identified and different areas of curriculum are connected and integrated. Because different subjects are inter-related, learning is less fragmented and children get to notice the connections between different subjects. The content of each lesson is related so that children can link the knowledge learned (Herrera & Murray, 2016). Teachers who adopt the thematic approach first select the theme as it shapes the lessons taught in class. They have to consider children’s interest and level when they select the theme. Teachers also need to consider how different areas can be integrated under the picked theme. After that, teachers need to use the context to help build children’s knowledge about the theme. Lastly, group activities and discussion are needed so that children have opportunities to explore the theme and share their perspectives with others. It is also noted that the role of the teacher is that of a facilitator, who is supposed to provide adequate real-world experiences and hands-on activities for children to master the skills needed for survival in the society (Mumford, 2000).

It is believed that thematic teaching helps to increase children’s motivation in achieving their learning goals because they help to choose the learning direction of a thematic unit. Furthermore, through collaborating with others and contributing in different tasks, children get to develop a sense of community and become a critical part in the curriculum. Learning, therefore, is a continuing process which emphasizes on the process rather than the outcomes. According to Mumford (2000), children’s awareness of the real world would be enhanced as they continue to make connection between subject content and different dimensions of their world. Children will then be able to transfer the learned knowledge to other appropriate situations.

Play in kindergarten settings is always structured to varying degrees, and teachers are expected to justify play in relation to learning goals and outcomes (Wood, 2013). However, kindergarten teachers can definitely develop their own understanding of a quality education program through adapting provision in ways that are responsive to diversity and to children with different needs, because focusing on goals and outcomes is not the only way of understanding how play can contribute to quality programs. This section highlights some contemporary programs in the early childhood education field and investigates the role of play in each program. Education in
Hong Kong will be discussed in the next section with a special focus on kindergarten and teacher training programs.

**Education in Hong Kong**

Once administered by the United Kingdom, Hong Kong education was modeled on the UK system. Since the handover to China in 1997, though, the education system has experienced a series of changes, including the different languages used as the medium of instruction and curriculum. The new model, according to The Unique Hong Kong Schools Guide (2016), is starting to align with those found in the United States. In this section, more about Hong Kong education system will be explained with a special focus on kindergarten education. Education reform in kindergarten, curriculum, qualification and training of kindergarten teachers will also be explored.

**Hong Kong education system.** As Hong Kong was following a British education pattern, since 1970s, all students in Hong Kong were entitled to 9 years of free public education, including a six-year primary education and a three-year junior secondary education. From the 1980s to the 2000s, after the nine years compulsory education, students can select to continue the two-year senior secondary education, which leads to a certificate of education examination, and a two-year matriculation course, which leads to an advanced level examination. Starting from the 2008-2009 school year, the free and compulsory education was upgraded to 12 years. Under the new secondary system, after the three years of junior secondary education come three years of senior secondary education, which leads to the diploma of secondary education examination. Based on the result of the examination, students will get entry to different courses offered by a variety of institutions (EDB, 2016). Starting from the 2017 school year, there is another upgrade from 12-year to 15-year free education, which means that pre-primary education becomes more accessible. People from the early childhood education sector believe that with the implementation of 15-year free education, no child will be left behind; moreover, a quality publicly funded kindergarten system, once developed, can help to support the changing nature of Hong Kong society (Fong, 2014; Li & Fong, 2014).

**Kindergarten education.** Kindergarten education in Hong Kong is offered to children of three to five years old. In the past, the government adopted the market approach; so Hong Kong kindergartens are privately run by voluntary organizations or private bodies. These kindergartens, however, still need to register with and be
supervised by the Education Bureau (EDB) in order to maintain the quality of their programs. In September 2015, there were about 185,400 children enrolled in 1000 kindergartens or childcare centers (UNESCO, 2016). For some non-profit making kindergartens, the government provides such assistance as rent, rates, and government rent reimbursement.

Aiming to enhance the quality of kindergartens and to make pre-primary education more accessible, starting from the 2007-2008 school year, the government introduced The Preprimary Education Voucher Scheme, which provides direct fee subsidy for parents. Up till now, eligible families can apply for a voucher worth HK$16,800 a year and use it to put their children through any participating non-profit kindergartens. Additionally, fee remission under the Kindergarten and Child Care Centre Fee Remission Scheme (KCFRS) was upgraded in order to enhance financial assistance to needy families starting with the 2012 school year (EDB, 2016).

However, the voucher subsidy is not enough to cover the tuition fees of half-day kindergarten programs; and whole-day schools are even at more risk because the funding is allocated per child rather than according to the hours. On top of this, with the increasing demand for whole day kindergarten programs, parents and people who work in the early childhood education sector had been urging the government to provide free preschool education to all children. Finally, starting from the 2017-2018 school year, a 15-year free education is implemented; and the government aims to stress more on improving the quality of education rather than on extracurricular interest.

**Kindergarten education curriculum guide.** In order to match the momentum of the Hong Kong education system, curriculum reforms, and the trends in the early childhood education field, the Curriculum Development Council (CDC) revised the old “Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum” published in 2006 and promulgated the new “Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide” in 2017. The new guide provides the basic principles and direction for people who work in the pre-primary education field to develop their school-based programs and for parents to understand that children’s growth and learning are gradual processes (EDB, 2016).

Similar to the old Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum (2006), the new Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide (2017) also emphasized that early childhood education is essential because it lays the foundation for life-long learning and whole person development. Moreover, the core value of early childhood education should be child-centered, which implies that kindergartens should formulate their curriculum according to the basic
principles of children’s development and learning. While it was emphasized that children’s interest, needs and abilities should be taken into consideration, the new guide proposed that play should be the central pedagogy in early childhood education and that joyful learning through play is the ideal. It is believed that from a diversified learning environment, children gain valuable learning opportunities and experiences that facilitate the development of multiple intelligences in them. Play is viewed as essential because children’s holistic development can be fostered through meaningful life experiences as well as different kinds of play activities. With play and joyful learning experiences, children have balanced development all the way.

The guide identifies five developmental objectives for early childhood development—“Moral Development,” “Physical Development,” “Cognitive and Language Development,” “Affective and Social Development,” and “Aesthetic Development.” To help children achieve these objectives, six learning areas should be incorporated into kindergarten curriculum. They are “Physical Fitness and Health,” “Language,” “Early Childhood Mathematics,” “Nature and Living,” “Self and Society,” and “Arts and Creativity.” In general, parents pay particular attention to academic achievements, but the guide suggested that special emphases should be placed in developing children’s basic skills too. Moreover, building up basic concepts, positive values, and attitudes are the primary goals in early childhood education. To maintain and nurture a balanced development of children in different aspects such as ethical, intellectual, physical, social, and aesthetic, all kinds of learning in kindergarten should include the three key elements: “knowledge,” “skills,” and “values and attitudes” (CDC, 2017). With a nurturing environment, caring teachers, and child-appropriate programs, children will be well prepared for life and life-long learning.

**Qualification and preparation of kindergarten teachers.** Since the handover in 1997, there have been a lot of changes in professionalizing early childhood educators. The minimum teaching qualification for kindergarten teachers and principals has been imposed since then. In the past, the minimum academic requirement for kindergarten teachers is five passes including Chinese and English in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination. Yet, starting from 2003, all newly appointed teachers must acquire a Qualified Kindergarten Teacher (QKT) qualification or its equivalent, and principals must acquire a degree in early childhood education and a certification in a principalship course. From the school year 2012-2013, there was a further upgrade in which
kindergartens under the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme had to employ a sufficient number of teachers who had obtained the Certificate in Early Childhood Education qualifications. In fact, the percentage of teachers attaining education certificate qualifications has increased dramatically since 2007. The professionalizing in the field reflects the government’s aim to improve the quality of pre-primary education.

In Hong Kong, there are a couple of institutions providing related training for pre-service and in-service kindergarten teachers. The Hong Kong Education University (HKEDU), formerly known as the Institute of Education, aims to develop the professional knowledge, pedagogy, and attributes of teachers. As the key provider of teacher education in Hong Kong, and under the sponsorship of the University Grants Committee (UGC), HKEDU offers a range of sub-degree, degree, and post-graduate programs for pre-service and in-service teachers. In the 2015-16 academic year, there were approximately 4400 full-time and 4400 part-time students enrolling for the UGC-funded programs offered by the HKEDU (EDB, 2016). Other than HKEDU, the Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU), the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), and the University of Hong Kong (HKU) also offer UGC-funded degree and postgraduate programs for pre-service teachers and in-service teachers. The Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK) is another option for those who want to get an entry to early childhood field. Although OUHK is self-funded, it offers certified degree and postgraduate programs for pre-service and in-service teachers. To cater for the demand of Hong Kong society and to maintain the quality of pre-primary education programs, these teacher education institutions also offer numerous certified short courses for in-service education practitioners.

**Quality Assurance Framework.** All kindergartens that participate in the Pre-Primary Voucher Scheme (PEVS) must conduct continuous evaluation for the sustainable development of the kindergarten programs. Quality Assurance Framework, which comprises School-Self-evaluation (SSE) and Quality Review (QR), is imposed starting from school year 2012-13. Before that, Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI) was used (EDB, 2016). It is believed that improvement measures have the greatest impact when owned and conducted by schools; therefore, under SSE, kindergartens are expected to adopt a whole-school approach and conduct annual self-evaluation. With the findings of the year-end evaluation, kindergartens would be able to investigate the effectiveness of work plans and set up plans for the upcoming school year. During the implementation process, school management is
supposed to monitor and provide support when needed. The planning-implementation-evaluation cycle helps kindergartens to understand their strengths and weaknesses and then draft their work plan accordingly. While SSE is initiated by schools, QR is conducted by EDB’s review teams. Using the performance indicators, the review team make professional judgments on the overall school performance. And there would be investigations on areas such as “education ordinance and regulations,” “guidelines and circulars issued by the EDB,” “aims of curriculum,” “planning and organization,” “learning and teaching,” “assessment,” and “relation with parents.” It is hoped that with continuous school improvement and accountability, quality school education would be achieved.

Hong Kong education system has been undergoing tremendous changes since the handover in 1997. Pre-primary education is one of the sectors that has experienced holistic changes. At this point, kindergartens are all privately run in Hong Kong. From not being included in the free education to finally become part of it, kindergarten education is drawing more attention these years; and those who work for early childhood education field strive to find ways to improve kindergarten programs. Understanding Hong Kong kindergarten education system and its contents helps education professionals, parents, and practitioners to gain knowledge about what have been imposed and to think about what should be imposed in order to maintain the quality of pre-primary education.

Conclusion

Within early-years education there are claims that emphasize how play facilitates children’s development, including physical, cognitive, language, and social-emotional aspects. Through engaging in playful activities, children’s gross and fine motor skills develop. They have to actively think of ways to solve play-related problems and therefore cognitive development will be enhanced. Because a lot of play-activities involve others, children get opportunities to develop their social skills; and language development is also pumped when they use language as a tool to communicate, to express feelings, to exchange ideas, and to maintain the play status. It may be hypothesized that young children learn more effectively and holistically while learning through play. In fact, play has been viewed as a central pedagogy in many countries, and many contemporary early-childhood approaches emphasize the play element in children’s daily activities.
In fact, children spend a good amount of time in kindergartens, and they come to close contact with their teachers. For that reason, the quality of teachers and the teaching strategies they embrace have a substantial impact on the long-term success of students, both academically and emotionally. Embracing both the Chinese roots and the culture brought to it during its time as a British colony, Hong Kong is often described as a place where “East meets West.” Focusing on Hong Kong kindergarten education, it has been undergoing critical changes since the handover in 1997. Therefore, it is worthy to explore how Hong Kong kindergarten teachers view “learning through play” and investigate their actual practice when implementing play in their classrooms. Given that both play and teachers are critical elements in young children’s learning environment, unless kindergarten teachers’ beliefs and practices toward “learning through play” are aligned, both teaching efficacy and young children’s early learning experiences would be negatively affected. Hence, continuous teacher training is at once essential and unavoidable.

From this discussion, it is apparent that one should explore more fully the links between Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ perception toward “learning through play,” their actual practice, and children’s learning. Qualitative research should be undertaken to look more closely at both Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ perception and practice toward “learning through play.” Therefore, this thesis is underpinned with the aims to explore the conception of “learning through play” by Hong Kong kindergarten teachers, to investigate how such a conception develops with the experience teachers receive in their course of teacher education program, and to examine how their working experiences affect the implementation of play in their classroom. It is expected that, with the research findings, program designers would understand the challenges front-line teachers face when implementing play in classrooms and revise existing training curriculum accordingly. It is also hoped that education leaders would provide adequate support for their teachers so that children can really learn in a fun-filled and nurturing environment.
Chapter III: Methodology

Introduction

Play-based learning is viewed as the fundamental pedagogy in the pre-primary classrooms in Hong Kong. It is believed that children can acquire various life skills such as self-regulation, social skills, and oral language abilities (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; NAEYC, 2009). The Hong Kong government has imposed “learning through play” as the central pedagogy for pre-primary education since 1983; however, the most recent Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI) annual reports still reflect the use of the teacher-centered approach, which is deviated from the government’s expectations (Cheng, 2012). It is then essential to understand kindergarten teachers’ views and practice toward play-based learning, so that early childhood education program designers and education leaders might be able to fill the potential gap between beliefs and practice by providing relevant training and support for kindergarten teachers.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this basic qualitative study is to explore perceptions of “play-based learning” and the implementation of play of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers at local kindergartens that are privately run by voluntary organizations. At this stage in the research, play will be generally defined as such behaviors that children are actively engaged in and, at the same time, feel intrinsically motivated in doing.

Research Paradigm

The constructivism-interpretivism paradigm was chosen for the study. This research paradigm acknowledges that facts and values cannot be separated, and that knowledge is definitely prejudiced as it is based on the individual and the event (Ponterotto, 2005). Moreover, all participants, including the researcher, are involved in the research so that they all bring their own view of the world or of the situation to the research. Researchers should be open to the attitudes and values of the participants and try to suspend prior cultural assumptions (Merriam, 1991; Ponterotto, 2005). This paradigm focuses on the social, and that knowledge is created by people in interaction with their environment, which includes other people. Therefore, knowledge is co-constructed between researchers and participants (Ponterotto, 2005). The relationship between researcher and participants is subjective, interactive, and interdependent. There are multiple and complex realities, and they are
not easily proven by pure scientific methods; the research product is therefore context-specific (Ponterotto, 2005). The constructivism-interpretivism paradigm is chosen as the present study; it is based on the argument that all knowledge is contingent upon the interaction between human beings and their world, and the researcher’s goal of using this paradigm is to understand multiple realities (Merriam, 2002).

**Research Design**

According to Merriam (2002), qualitative research lies in the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their surrounding environment. It is rooted in the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm and that meanings are constructed by individuals as they engage with the world they are interpreting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In other words, qualitative research is descriptive and inductive, focusing on uncovering meaning from the perspective of participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative researchers, therefore, are interested in “how people interpret their experiences,” “how they construct their worlds,” and “what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 46). Although these understandings characterize all qualitative research, different types of qualitative research designs afford an additional dimension. Basic qualitative research design can be found throughout the disciplines and in applied fields of practice, and its primary goal is to uncover and interpret how meaning is constructed and how people make sense of their lives and their worlds (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). That matches with the purpose of this study, which aims to gain an insider perspective of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ personal opinions and experiences toward play and implementing play in their classrooms.

In fact, the purpose of educational qualitative research is to improve current practice, and the basic qualitative research design is particularly well suited to obtaining an in-depth understanding of effective education process (Creswell, 2013; Worthington, 2017). For example, a basic qualitative study can be used to uncover strategies and practices of teachers and administrators. Such an insight is not possible with some qualitative approaches such as phenomenological research, as it is not used to examine processes (Worthington, 2017). The central research question of the present study is “what are the experiences of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers with play-based learning?” It aims to understand how teachers make sense of their usual practice implementing play in their classroom and their experiences with play-based learning. The central research question matches with
the core idea of the basic qualitative research design, thereby attempting to uncover Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ experiences, the meaning they ascribe to those experiences, and the process by which they create a play-based classroom.

**Research Tradition**

Basic qualitative research design was chosen as it is suited for studies aiming to uncover the unique experiences of individuals (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The focus of this study was placed on retrospective descriptions of how Hong Kong kindergarten teachers perceive their specific experiences, using semi structured interviews. The interview questions were broad and open. The central research question focused on exploring participants’ experiences with play-based learning. All sub-questions were descriptive and open up a space for participants to reflect on how they make sense of their experiences with play and play-based learning. Since basic qualitative research is concerned with individuals’ idiosyncratic engagement with their life-world, kindergarten teacher-participants are assumed to be able to reflect upon experiences and to give a coherent account of them (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For that reason, through adopting basic qualitative research design, the key aim of the research is to get as close as possible to the experiences of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers, focusing upon communicating, exploring, and analyzing their meaning making (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Research is producing knowledge about the world, and educational research is about obtaining knowledge about educational practice. Linking research and philosophical traditions therefore helps to illuminate the characteristics of different research paradigms. It is often believed that constructivism and critical paradigm is related to qualitative research. In fact, qualitative research is a concept covering several forms of inquiry; it helps to understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena. While qualitative research is a general concept, depending on the researcher, there are numerous variations; and basic qualitative study is identified as one that is the most common form of qualitative research in education (Merriam, 2002).

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), basic qualitative study is also known as generic qualitative study. It refers to studies that exemplify the characteristics of qualitative research. Merriam (2009) especially stated that basic qualitative research design attempts to uncover the participants’ experiences, the meaning participants ascribe
to those experiences, and the process. It is also possible to explore all these in one study. Basic qualitative research in education draws from concepts and theories in educational psychology, cognitive psychology, and sociology; and it will not focus solely on beliefs, opinions, and attitude about things. Data are mainly collected through interviews, observations, or document analysis; and findings are a mix of description and analysis. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the analysis usually results in the identification of recurring patterns.

**Participants**

The present study focused on exploring Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ perception toward play and their implementation of play in their classroom; therefore, participants were Hong Kong kindergarten teachers working at local kindergartens that are privately run by voluntary organizations. Seven participants participated in the study, and their teaching experiences ranged from 2 to more than 10 years.

**Recruitment and Access**

The researcher works at a local institution and teaching different teacher training courses. During the time she maintained positive relationship with early childhood educators including teachers and principals. Therefore, to recruit potential participants, the researcher emailed principals of target kindergartens, who then helped to forward the recruitment email to potential teacher participants. Potential participants joined on a voluntary basis (see Appendix D for email recruitment). The interviews were conducted at the kindergartens where the participants work. The researcher communicated with the principals to get access to the participants’ classroom to have the interviews. To increase the incentive of their participation, the teacher participants and the principals were informed how their contribution to the study enhances current teacher-training programs and the overall learning experience for young children. Focusing on the ethical considerations when conducting this qualitative research, all participants’ identities are being protected, and they are fully informed about the research study. The researcher considered the consequences of the present study on the participating individuals and then determined what rights should be protected. The researcher treated the participants equitably and made sure the needs and rights were met. Participants were free from physical danger and emotional stress, and the researcher was careful about the release of findings as it could cause embarrassment or social distress. Participants signed an informed consent before they participated in the study, and they were told that they could withdraw at any time (see Appendix B for the informed
consent of this study). The researcher made an offer to answer additional questions about the study, and provided contact information. Above all, IRB approval was obtained for this research.

Data Collection

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), data collected through words ought to be labeled as qualitative. Through interviews, direct quotations from participants about their experiences and opinions can be obtained; and through observations, detailed descriptions of participants’ behaviors and actions can be recorded (Patton, 2015). Basic qualitative research requires a data collection method that encourages participants to provide detailed and first-person accounts of their experiences and self-perception of phenomena. Therefore, to ensure that rich data was obtained and participants had opportunities to share freely and reflectively, one-on-one and in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted for the present study. Semi-structured interview was picked, partly because this method is considered as well-suited to in-depth and personal discussion, and partly because it can be easily managed and give participants space to think, speak, and be heard (Creswell, 2013).

The researcher first prepared an interview schedule in order to enable participants to provide a detailed account of the experience through facilitating comfortable interaction with participants. As stated in Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the schedule helps both researchers and participants to stay focused on the research area and to anticipate possible difficulties. It is essential to note that verbal input from the researcher was minimal. When phrasing interview questions, open-ended ones are included.

A three-interview protocol was developed in order for the researchers to build relationship with the participants and for the participants to feel comfortable when sharing ideas. The first interview lasted for 20 to 30 minutes, aiming to describe the study to the participants and gain informed consent from them. The researcher asked some background and demographic questions of the participants. The second interview lasted for about an hour. The second interview aims to obtain information on participants’ conception of “play-based learning” and investigate how the participants create a play-based classroom. The third interview lasted for 20 to 30 minutes in order for researchers to ask follow-up questions and to review transcripts with the participants (see Appendix C for the interview protocol).
As mentioned in the recruitment section, the researcher contacted the principals of the target kindergartens to recruit potential participants (see Appendix E for sample letter of support from kindergarten principal). When the recruitment procedure was done, she got access to the participants and then discussed with them about where the interviews were being conducted. The researcher then discussed with the kindergarten principals to find out the feasibility of having the interview at their schools. The participants were informed that the interviews would be audio-recorded so that the researcher could precisely transcribe the interviews.

As the language commonly spoken in Hong Kong is Cantonese, the researcher conducted the interviews in Cantonese. The interviews were then transcribed and translated simultaneously to English by the bilingual researcher, Lam Pui Ching. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

In addition to conducting interviews, a review of lesson plans was conducted by the researcher. Eight lesson plans were collected from the teacher participants in order to understand the daily schedule of the kindergarteners and how they planned their classes. As Bogdan and Biklen (1998) suggested, reviewing official documents help to obtain a perspective of the field towards the phenomenon being studied. The names of the kindergartens and teacher were replaced with pseudonym in order to protect the privacy of the participants and their workplace. These lesson plans provided a background and an evidence for the teacher responses from the interviews.

**Data Storage**

Data from the study will be stored for up to three years and will be protected from physical damage as well as from loss or theft. The researcher is the only person with access to the stored data. Hard copies of notes were kept in a locked file cabinet, and soft copies of the notes and transcriptions were sealed with password. The researcher replaced names and other information with encoded identifiers. Moreover, the researcher consistently updates the anti-virus protection on the computer and uses firewall to protect the computer system.

**Data Analysis**

The researcher took several steps for the data analysis process. The first step included reading and re-reading the translated transcript. The researcher read the transcripts a number of times in order to immerse herself in the data. Moreover, she listened to the audio-recording before reading the transcript; it helped the researcher to recall the interview process, which would generate a more complete analysis. The second step was initial noting.
The researcher maintained an open mind and jotted down notes for anything of interest within the transcript. The third step was developing emergent themes. After exploratory coding, the researcher found the connection, patterns, and interrelationships between the notes; and relevant themes began to emerge. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described, turning notes into themes or categories is challenging, and that involves an attempt to produce concise statements from various comments attached to the transcript. The themes developed reflected participants’ original words. The fourth step was searching for connections across emergent themes. The next step was moving to the next case. The present study involved more than one participant, and therefore the researcher moved to the next participant’s transcript and repeated the first couple of steps.

Lastly, lesson plans from the teacher participants were examined. The use of documents in qualitative studies is very important as “they are a stable source of information” and “they are a rich source of information, contextually relevant and grounded in the contexts they represent” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 276). The research reviewed eight lesson plans written by the teacher participants. This review provides data needed to understand children’s daily schedule in kindergarten and to examine how teachers planned their lessons.

**Trustworthiness**

On the trustworthiness of the study, the primary concern focuses on the reactivity of the participants. It is possible that some participants may answer the interview questions differently due to the attention they receive from the researcher. Other than that, the researcher’s positionality and her relationship with the participants may affect the validity of the research. In order to establish trustworthiness, the researcher adopted a couple of procedures. She obtained feedback on the written result from the participants, especially on data analysis and coding part. Moreover, the researcher sought advice from her advisor and got support in analyzing the data.

**Limitations**

Although the use of basic qualitative research design helps to explore live experiences of the participants, there are numerous limitations attached to this study. First, the skill of the researcher is essential to the research quality, which can be easily affected by the researcher’s positionality. In fact, the presence of the researcher in the data gathering process is unavoidable and therefore can influence the responses of participants. Moreover, the rather small sample size limits the generalization and external validity of the findings.
Chapter IV: Analysis of Data

Introduction

The purpose of this basic qualitative research was to explore the perceptions of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers around the subject of “play-based learning” and the implementation of “play” in their classrooms at local kindergartens that are privately run by voluntary organizations. Specifically—by answering the following research questions—this study sought to understand how Hong Kong kindergarten teachers make sense of their experience when using “play” as the pedagogy.

The central research question was: “What are the experiences of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers with play-based learning?” The sub-questions included: (1) What is the conception of play and “play-based learning” as understood by Hong Kong kindergarten teachers? (2) How does the conception of “play-based learning” develop with the experience that Hong Kong kindergarten teachers receive in his/her course of teacher education program? (3) What are Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ perceptions of the benefits and challenges of creating play-based learning in their classrooms? And (4) What are the factors affecting Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ implementation of play and play-based learning in their classroom?

In this chapter, the profiles and background of the seven participants were first introduced. Based on the analysis of the transcripts, four superordinate themes and fourteen sub-themes emerged. The emergent themes are presented in each of their accounts as follows. The superordinate themes and subthemes are 1) Teachers’ Conception of Play and Play-Based Learning; its subthemes are a) Play is a natural instinct, b) Play involves positive emotions and active engagement, c) Free playtime is different from learning time, and d) Play-based learning is using play as a strategy for children to learn planned objectives in a fun way. 2) Teachers’ Conception of the Development of Play-Based Learning; its subthemes are a) Teachers’ early childhood experiences affect their view on play and learning, b) Compulsory teacher training and professional training provide ideas on adopting play-based learning, and c) Teachers solidify and reflect on the conception of play-based learning through their actual practice. 3) Teachers’ Perception on Benefits of Play-Based Learning; its subthemes are a) Physical development, b) Language development, c) Socioemotional development, and d) Cognitive development. 4) Factors Affecting Teachers’ Implementation of Play; its subthemes are a) Teachers lack the knowledge and
practice on creating a playful classroom, b) Teachers were limited by school curriculum and school size, and c) Teachers lack the support from the school and the parents. These superordinate themes and subthemes will be minutely described and summarized. The findings were supported by verbal quotations from the interview transcripts, and the information obtained from the lesson plans was provided by the participants. A short summary was used to conclude the overall findings. Please see the below table for the main findings for easy reference.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme #1: Teachers’ Conception of Play and Play-Based Learning</th>
<th>Theme #2: Teachers’ Conception of the Development of Play-Based Learning</th>
<th>Theme #3: Teachers’ Perception on Benefits of Play-Based Learning</th>
<th>Theme #4: Factors Affecting Teachers’ Implementation of Play and Play-Based Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-theme a)</strong></td>
<td>Play is a natural instinct</td>
<td>Teachers’ early childhood experiences affect their view on play and learning</td>
<td>Physical development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-theme b)</strong></td>
<td>Play involves positive emotions and active engagement.</td>
<td>Compulsory teacher training and professional training provide ideas on adopting play-based learning</td>
<td>Language development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-theme c)</strong></td>
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Participant Profiles

There were seven participants in this qualitative study. Each of them provided detailed information through three semi-structured interviews regarding their perceptions and experience toward play-based learning. They also provided a total of eight lesson plans for review.

Ada. Ada was born in Hong Kong and had received a traditional education since she was in kindergarten. She described her learning experience as a traditional one, because at all time she had to sit and listen to the teachers and to do a lot of memorizing and reciting at school. She had as yet been working in the early childhood education field for four years. She remembered that kindergarten schooling was only about writing and reading; therefore, she originally did not plan to be a kindergarten teacher after graduating from high school. However, her mother encouraged Ada to study early childhood education (ECE) as her mother could foresee good development in that field. After receiving good results in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE), and to continue her study, Ada was admitted to the Hong Kong Institute of Education (retitled The Education University of Hong Kong), an institute dedicated to the advancement of teaching and learning. Ada obtained a Higher Diploma degree in Early Childhood Education, and the kindergarten she is working now is her first teaching job.

Betty. Betty was born and raised in Hong Kong. She lived in a rural area and described the kindergarten where she studied as being very traditional. She needed to be quiet and pay attention to the teacher most of the time. Although the kindergarten she attended was traditional and that she got only limited choice over what she wanted to do in class, Betty described her kindergarten experience as a happy one. When she was young, she enjoyed helping her mother take care of the neighbors’ children. Therefore, she identified herself as an experienced caregiver. After graduating from high school, she decided to study ECE and was admitted to the full-time higher diploma program of the Open University of Hong Kong. After that she worked in a local kindergarten for three years, after which she decided to study a bachelor’s degree in ECE. Betty was then admitted to the part-time Bachelor program of the Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK). This is the fifth year that she has worked in a local kindergarten, and she has now planned to pursue further studies in the ECE field.
Claire. Claire was born in mainland China and moved to Hong Kong when she was six. She received her early childhood education in mainland China, and remembered her time there with great fondness. She recalled that she spent a lot of time playing and dancing during her kindergarten years. Claire found that she was dedicated to teaching young children when she was still very young. Her aim has always been to be a kindergarten teacher. And now finally, her dream has come true. After she graduated from high school in Hong Kong, she decided to study ECE and was admitted to the higher diploma program of the Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education (IVE), one of the leading vocational providers in Hong Kong. Claire has had experiences working in two different local kindergartens, and this is the sixth year she has served in the field of early childhood development. Claire has always believed that being a kindergarten teacher is a lifetime career choice.

Daisy. Daisy was born and raised in Hong Kong. She has described her experiences of studying for her kindergarten course as fun. Her time was filled with many activities, including frequent recreation and singing, interspersed with lovely meals. She specifically mentioned that she did not need to write and read all the time. Singing occupied most of her time during her kindergarten studies. Daisy described herself as shy and withdrawn. Because of this, she aimed to find a job that did not require her to deal with complicated human relationships. So naturally, being a kindergarten teacher seemed to be a good choice for her. After she graduated from high school, Daisy was admitted to the higher diploma program of IVE studying early childhood education. Daisy’s current job is her first, and this is also the third year of her ECE studies. Daisy decided to obtain a bachelor’s degree in ECE and just submitted the application to the EdUHK.

Eliza. Eliza was born and raised in Hong Kong. She studied at a local kindergarten from an early age and described her kindergarten experience as fun but hard. It was fun because she had many snacks. Conversely, it was hard because she had to write a lot every day. ECE was not her first choice after she graduated from high school. However, EdUHK still made her an offer to study for a higher diploma degree in ECE. As that was her only choice at that time, Eliza decided to take it. After a year of studies in ECE, Eliza found that she enjoyed working as a kindergarten teacher, and for that reason, she continued. After she obtained the higher diploma degree, she stayed on at her current kindergarten as head teacher for five more years. Soon she realized the need to do further study and she applied for the part-time bachelor’s degree program in ECE at EdUHK and graduated three years after.
Flora. Flora was born and raised in Hong Kong. She studied in a local kindergarten. She remembered that there were many group tasks with role-play during class time, but there was also much homework to get done every day. In general, Flora enjoyed kindergarten and she was happy; and despite having to do so much Chinese character-writing, her memories of kindergarten were very important to her and that was why she decided to work in the ECE field. Her kindergarten teachers were all very nice and Flora always wanted to emulate her kindergarten teachers. After she graduated from high school, she was admitted to the higher diploma program of EdUHK studying ECE. This is the third year that she has worked in her current kindergarten. Currently, Flora had no plan to continue her study in the related field.

Gail. Gail was born and raised in Hong Kong. She had also worked as a kindergarten teacher for over 10 years and she regarded herself as an experienced and happy teacher. She never had the opportunity of having any kindergarten experience herself, as her parents did not send her to study when she was young. Additionally, she chose to be a kindergarten teacher because there was no specific qualification requirement many years ago. She was introduced by a friend and started her working life as a kindergarten teacher. She received some trainings at the beginning. From her perspective, she found those training useless as she was just taking care of a group of children. Many years ago Gail thought that she was more a nanny than a teacher. Gail witnessed the change in government policy; and later on she needed to obtain a higher diploma degree if she wanted to continue working at kindergarten. A few years ago Gail then started studying for a part-time higher diploma in ECE by HKEdU. At the moment, Gail had no plan to do further study in the ECE field.

Teachers’ Conception of Play and Play-Based Learning

Since the nineteenth century, many theorists have observed children during play, and they have tried to understand how play contributes to children’s development. However, there is no exact definition of play; and play is generally referred to leisure activities that are for enjoyment, with no specific objectives attached (Charles & Mumuni, 2018; Lau & Grieshaber, 2010). Some researchers observed that certain educators separated play from the academic; and in their distinction, play is aligned with socioemotional development, while explicit instruction is aligned with learning academic subjects (Bergen, 2009; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). To understand how the kindergarten teachers in this study view play, all participants were asked to describe and define play-based learning
and play itself at the beginning of their respective interviews. In fact, all participants considered play as a good strategy to use in the kindergarten classroom because play is always fun and attached with positive emotions. Play-based learning is therefore a teaching pedagogy that should be used in kindergarten as it combines play and learning, which will boost children’s learning and development.

**Play is a natural instinct.** All participants believed that play is a natural instinctive response of children, and probably no child dislike play. Therefore, they all believed that play is one of the best pedagogies to use in the kindergarten classroom as children learn best through play. Betty shared,

Everyone loves to play. I love to play, and of course children love to play. I think children remember what they did during playtime more than what they did during teacher-directed lesson. So, I think play is a good strategy to teach children something.

Eliza expressed a similar notion toward play and learn:

I think children learn best when they are actively and physically engaged. Children simply love to play, and play is the time when they get to make their own decisions. Therefore, I agree that play is an effective way to help children learn.

As play is a natural instinct, most teachers believed that it helped to boost children’s interest in learning, which made their teaching easier and more effective. Claire claimed that through play-based learning, children tended to remember newly-learned concepts more easily because they could “concentrate on the task.” Flora provided an example of her Chinese class, and she believed that play could help to engage children in learning difficult concepts:

Some concepts are pretty boring. For example, learning Chinese words is boring. Children were unable to just sit and listen to me. However, when I used some word games such as asking them to fish the correct words from the pool, they were more engaged. As they wanted to win the game, they tried their very best to remember the words.

Daisy also had similar experience as Flora. She emphasized that children remembered the knowledge better over time if they learned through play:
Everyone was so excited about the music game. They were really focused on the melody and my objectives were achieved easily. After that day the children kept asking me to play that music game again. About two weeks later I finally played that game with them again, and they remembered the rules and the music concepts clearly. I think play also helps children retain recently-acquired knowledge more easily.

**Play involves positive emotions and active engagement.** Given that all participants recognized that play comes naturally, some of them found it difficult to define play. In general, they described play as activities that children are “willing to participate in” and “free to make their own decisions.” Teachers were asked to use some adjectives to describe children when children were involved in play activities, and for the most part teachers agreed that play generates positive feelings such as ‘happiness,’ ‘fun,’ ‘smiles,’ and ‘laughter.’ For instance, Daisy shared that “when children engage in play, they laugh, they giggle, they talk loudly, they run… they are simply happy.” Gail recognized that play is different from normal class time. She added, “Play is free and enjoyable for children. I think one reason is that children get to be their own boss and don’t need to listen to the teacher. They can do whatever they think is fun.”

Interestingly, all teacher participants tended to relate play to outdoor and physical activities rather than quiet activities, and most of them regarded quiet activities as formal learning activities. Betty shared, “Play involves actions. Children have to move and run around freely.” Eliza was aware of what had been stated in the curriculum guide by EDB, and she regarded playtime as physical activity time. She said,

Because the newly-issued curriculum guide by EDB mentions the importance of play, our school policy changes again and we now need to let children play for at least 30 minutes every day. It was a bit hard because then every class needs to take turns using the gym room, or if not, I have to figure out a good play area in class.

From the teachers’ perspective, the main features of play should be fun and enjoyment, and children should have intrinsic motivation while playing. Therefore, no matter if children are involved in free play or teacher-directed activities, so long as they are having fun and are willing to participate, they are playing. Gail commented,
I think whatever makes children happy is considered as playtime to them. A lot of time I designed games that required patience and discipline. All of them wanted to try and they were willing to follow the rules I set. They were happy during the process, and I think that should be considered as playtime too.

Ada had a similar notion as Gail. She recognized that play can be attached with rules and arguments, but “willingness to play” is one critical feature for distinguishing if children are playing or not. She opined,

I see that children set rules when they play, and they keep changing the rules. Sometimes they argue about it but I seldom see them quit playtime. They never tell me they don’t want to play. I think play can have rules attached. As long as children are having fun and want to keep doing it, let them play. That’s my view.

**Free playtime is different from learning time.** Four teachers compared free playtime with typical learning time. They believe that free playtime is the exact opposite of traditional teacher-centered learning time. During traditional learning time, teachers identified clear learning goals, while they may not set any learning goal for free playtime. Here are some excerpts from the quotations of respondents that may show their view on the context of play in formal learning.

For instance, Eliza shared, “Unlike the traditional class time, playtime, by contrast, is more relaxed and fun. Children definitely prefer playtime than traditional learning time as they don’t have to just sit and listen passively.” Ada also added, “I have clear objectives for my Chinese and English lessons, but for children’s free playtime, I don’t.” Claire’s comment showed that she recognized the effectiveness when using play to teach; however, learning through play involves learning objectives while free play does not. She said,

I have to use play as the pedagogy in my class. I have to think of some games for children to play in every lesson. That’s hard because I have to think of something that is fun, and I need to make sure children learn in my games. Of course, when it comes to their free playtime, I won’t ask them to accomplish any specific tasks.

In fact, one teacher mentioned that the main difference between formal learning time and free play was that lessons acquired during play may not always be measurable. Another teacher said that formal teaching time is always needed as kindergarten teachers need to ensure that their lesson objectives are always achieved.
Teachers were also asked about what they observed when children were engaged in play and when children were learning through play. When engaged in play time, no matter if it is free-play time or organized play time, teachers described children as “engaging in the activities,” “motivated,” and “happy.” Similarly, when the teachers concerned describe how children did when learning through play, they used similar terms as they believed that children would not categorize if they were learning or not. In particular, Betty and Flora mentioned that “no matter what activities children were doing, as long as they are happy, they think they are playing.” To children, they were engaged in both the free-play time and the learning-through-play time. From teachers’ perspective, free play and organized play time would form a similar impression on young children. To teachers, they clearly differentiate free time and learning-through-play time. For instance, Ada, Eliza, and Flora stated that free play time has “no clear learning goals” and that they “did not have to get specific tasks done” during free play time; on the other hand, all teachers agreed that they had to “plan ahead” for the learning-through-play time and that they needed to “achieve specific learning objectives in class.” Although playtime and traditional learning time were being compared and contrasted, all teacher participants believed that play and learning were interrelated. All participants agreed that children learn through free play, but they could not be sure that children learn the planned concepts. Flora shared, “Children play and learn simultaneously. However, I may not always be sure exactly what they learn in one session of playtime.” Eliza concurred that children learn through free play, but formal teaching time is also necessary. On this she mentioned, “I agree that children learn best through play, and that’s why I incorporate play elements into my formal learning class time.”

**Play-based learning is using play as a strategy for children to learn planned objectives in a fun way.**

Since play is one effective strategy to enhance children’s motivation to participate in class and that learning time with clear objectives is needed, play-based learning is a good teaching approach because it combines the two. Ada said,

Playtime occurs when children are free to make choices; formal learning time occurs when the teacher leads the class. But it’s possible to combine play and formal learning times. If children are enjoying what they are doing at the same time, I would still say that they are playing and learning at the same time, which is ideal.
Flora provided a very clear definition of what play-based learning is. She said, “To me, play-based learning is the same as learning through play. Achieving lesson objectives is still the key, and I am teaching children concepts and knowledge through playing games.”

In sum, from the teacher participants’ perspectives, children are born with the desire for play. Play is also attached with a lot of positive emotions such as happiness, fun, laughter, and enjoyment. Most importantly, although there might be arguments and rules during playtime, children are always willing to continue and participate in it. Traditional learning time, however, is totally different. To these participants, traditional learning time is teacher-centered and children get limited choice during. In order to boost children’s willingness to learn, teacher participants believed that play is one good strategy to use to teach children. Play-based learning is therefore being welcomed by most teacher participants in this study, and they believed that children can learn concepts and knowledge in a fun way by adopting a play-based learning approach.

**Teachers’ Conception of Development of Play-Based Learning**

School serves many functions and, in general, educators focus on educational outcomes such as children learning academic content. In fact, education is concerned with facilitating human learning and development through the agency of a teacher; therefore, understanding how teachers develop their beliefs in teaching becomes an essential task (Beatty, 2017; Cheuk & Hatch, 2007). The development of a teacher is complicated and cannot be evaluated solely on the basis of the events and circumstances which influence it. When exploring how teachers develop the concept of play-based learning, one should not only emphasize the courses and training they attended; there was a lot more to it than that. In this section, both teachers’ early childhood and their teacher training experiences will be taken into account to explain how they develop the concept of play-based learning. Additionally, understanding how teachers create a play-based classroom helps to explain how they applied the learned concepts and beliefs in their own classrooms.

**Teachers’ early childhood experiences affect their view on play and learning.** Of the seven participants six were born and raised in Hong Kong and one spent her childhood in mainland China. For those who spent their childhood in Hong Kong, five received traditional kindergarten education. To these participants, traditional education was similar to teacher-centered approach, which teachers were the ones who deliver knowledge and
students were the receivers. They also stated that “discipline” and “order” were two common elements found in a traditional classroom. Haven said that, however, all teacher participants described their kindergarten experience as “hard but fun.” Some teachers considered their early kindergarten education as “hard” because there were a lot of writing and reading. Ada specially mentioned that the main scenario she remembered from kindergarten was “writing and reading,” and that affected her teaching now so much so that she did not want her students to just “read and write in class.” Eliza also had very similar experience and she remembered that she needed to write a lot every day, which was “hard.”

Kindergarten was also “fun” because there were various activities they could do at school. Daisy had very positive experience in kindergarten. She recalled that she spent a lot of time doing “fun activities such as dancing and singing.” Unlike others who also studied in a traditional kindergarten, Daisy did not think the school emphasized too much on reading and writing. Both Eliza and Flora mentioned that writing occupied a big part in kindergarten, but they both found it fun to attend school when they were young children. They got to do some “fun” activities and that helped to make up the “hard” part. Being a kindergarten teacher was always Flora’s dream as she had great experience while attending kindergarten. She claimed that her experience playing at school and being treated nicely there had affected how she taught her students and organized her classroom.

Claire was the one who spent her childhood in mainland China. She described it as a wonderful experience as she got to play and dance all the time, and she believed that such experience had affected the methods that she used to achieve different lesson objectives. Gail was the only one who had not received any early childhood education; however, she said she had a happy childhood as her parents let her play most of the time. She valued her childhood time because it was the only time she was stress free. Therefore, she stated that even though she needed to follow the school curriculum she tried her best to let students relax and play sometimes.

All teacher participants had different descriptions regarding their kindergarten or early childhood experiences. In general, all could recall some good memories from kindergarten education, and they agreed that their classroom practices were affected by these experiences. They tended to design their lessons in a more “fun” way; and what considered as “fun” was highly related to their personal kindergarten experiences.
Compulsory teacher training and professional training provide ideas on adopting play-based learning. Starting 1997, the Hong Kong government has imposed a minimum teaching qualification requirement for kindergarten teachers and principals. Even since then the government has continued to upgrade the qualification of kindergarten teachers (EDB, 2016). The teacher participants of this study all obtained a teacher certificate and a higher diploma degree in early childhood education through different accredited institutions. Three of them were studying for a Bachelor’s degree in early childhood education, and all of them indicated that they wanted to serve in this field.

All teachers agreed that in these compulsory training courses they developed their beliefs, ideas, and classroom practice. They had a chance to attend to their feelings associated with such a change in government policy. Daisy and Flora said that the compulsory training was a kind of teacher development, and they loved to gain new theoretical ideas and new teaching suggestions. Daisy said that she “learned a lot of theories” and these theories helped her to “understand how children develop and know what is best for children.” Flora mentioned that some teachers would share ideas with her, and she got a lot of chances to discuss with other peers about ideas in teaching kindergarteners. Ada, Betty, and Eliza appreciated the chance for them to try out learned concepts in classroom in the compulsory training program. The institutions they attended would organize practicum for them, and they got to try out and practice the newly learned teaching ideas. Although Betty claimed that the time spent in the practicum school was not long enough, she did receive “support” and “feedback” from her supervisor and she was able to “reflect critically.” Regarding the implementation and the concept development of play in early childhood education, all participants claimed that teachers would talk about “play” in different classes; however, they claimed that not a lot was being stressed in any class on how to incorporate play elements. Ada said that she attended a course about play-based learning in kindergarten, but she recalled that that course focused more on play theories than actual practices.

Although not all participants indicated an interest in doing further study in early childhood education, all teachers had experience participating in professional training courses. Some teachers said these courses provided various opportunities for them to reflect their practices, while others said they had gained some new ideas on how
to plan their lesson in a more playful and fun way. Unfortunately, as there was no practical session at all in these professional training courses, many teachers found that they tended to forget the content of the courses easily.

**Teachers solidify and reflect on the conception of play-based learning through their actual practice.**

While all participants said that they were being taught how to structure and set up a classroom, they were asked to use examples to describe what they did to incorporate play into the daily routine. Additionally, to examine their actual practical on how they structure play in their classroom, eight lesson plans were collected from them for further investigation.

First, all teachers were interviewed about how they implement play in their classrooms, and they claimed that they integrated and interspersed play into different activities. No matter if it was the learning-corner time, language learning time, math and science activity, physical activity, art or music time, play was always blended in. A majority of the teachers agreed that play should be designed in a way that matches the curriculum. Clair shared that her students got to play all day: Even when they needed to learn academic content such as English and Chinese words, she would make sure that children got to play some games in order to learn better. Flora had a similar notion regarding the importance of play. She especially mentioned that she would “design some fun games for them to play throughout the day.” Gail provided an example to show how she planned her class in order to match the school curriculum. She contributed,

> For my school, we have a different theme every month. Therefore, I need to design games according to the featured theme of the month. For example, the theme now is community helpers; so I designed some role play games for children and they could alternate being the community helpers.

In fact, teachers were, in general, using play as a tool to enrich the class; therefore, teachers designed games for kindergarteners to learn and achieve specific academic goals, and the roles of teacher included that of a supporter, director, knowledge transferor, and leader. Here Claire provided an example showing how she supported children when they were learning through play. A child was trying to use a stick to stack up some hexagon nuts that kept failing. Claire then “discussed with the child about the ways to stack up the nuts.” She even provided a shorter stick for the child to use; and finally the child stacked up five nuts successfully. Claire claimed that she was a supporter in this case as she “did not teach the child what to do directly but provide guidance and necessary
materials for the child.” Flora had similar experience, but she described her role as a knowledge transferor and a director rather than a supporter because she showed the class what to do. She said that for activities such as the science ones, she felt the need to demonstrate the experiment so that children knew “what to do” and got to learn “some concrete science concepts.”

For the most part, teachers held positive attitudes toward their involvement in children’s play. Three teachers recognized the need to supervise children during directed playtime in order to ensure the learning quality in play. Ada mentioned that she needed to “observe” her students carefully and “intervene when necessary” to prevent children “playing the teaching materials or games incorrectly.” Gail emphasized the value of free play, in which children got to “make free choices about what they want to do”; however, she also believed that “children cannot just do free play all day long” and she needed to “design games for children to play with clear rules, which children have to follow to learn the lesson content.” Eliza provided an example on how and why she found it important to monitor children’s playtime:

I have to monitor them when they play. For example, there was an occasion when children were playing animal puzzles. I had to make sure they knew the features of the animals so that they could finish the puzzle in a logical way and not just randomly. If I noticed that they did not know how to do the puzzle, I had to review the features of the animals again so that they knew how to play the puzzle game and also to have fun.

Other than using play to enrich the school curriculum, teachers valued play as an independent part in children’s development, thus incorporating free playtime into children’s daily schedule. All teachers considered free playtime as children-directed and unorganized. Having said that, teachers believed that free play should exist in parallel with formal learning time so that children get to relax and rejuvenate from long stressful learning activities. Daisy described how she set up a free play environment. She stated,

I put out certain things on different tables and the children are free to choose whatever they want to do. Of course, if they really want to play another game and ask me nicely, I usually let them play. They have a very packed timetable at school already, and I want them to get to do something they like whenever possible.
Although free playtime was more children-directed, Ada and Claire were concerned with classroom management; and they both would state to the children that they needed to follow certain classrooms rules when doing free play. All teachers viewed safety as their principal responsibility in a kindergarten, which explained why they would intervene when necessary. Eliza said that children might forget classroom rules and got too excited. Accidents happened easily and therefore she needed to stay alert at all times. Betty stated that she needed to intervene during play or game time under certain circumstances such as when children fought or were not in control. Her main aim was to make sure that children play and learn in a safe environment.

Interestingly, although all teachers believed that there should be a balance between learning time and physical playtime, they failed to allocate more time on physical activities. Both Flora and Betty complained about the lack of physical activity time at school; however, they only mentioned that they would design more games for learning time but not to allocate more time on physical activity.

Through actual practice using the play-based teaching approach, teachers claimed that they identified more about the teachers’ role in children’s play. Flora and Ada provided examples of the teachers’ roles as playmate, observer, and materials-provider. In particular Flora said,

When children rule their playtime, I try to be just an observer. Even when there were conflicts between children, I tried to let them solve the problems by themselves. It was really hard for me because I was so used to stepping in and helping them. But during free playtime, I tried to hold back.

Ada’s example also supports Flora’s sharing about the role of a teacher:

There was an occasion when they wanted to make a big tent. Therefore I searched through the classroom and got them the materials they needed. I wanted to help them make the tent at the beginning, but later I stopped and let them try on their own. Actually, they were pretty capable, and they did a great job making the tent. I then played with them and we pretended to have a picnic together. We had so much fun, and after that they always asked me to play with them.

Above all, the majority of the teachers expected to develop a closer relationship with children during playtime; and they were aware of how much they should interact with children during play. Claire especially mentioned that she felt “the relationship between the children and I was greatly enhanced.”
Secondly, lesson plans written by the teacher participants were collected in order to understand how they planned their lessons. The format of all lesson plans was standardized and was similar to the one posted on the EDB website. The lesson plans had common elements such as targeted class level, number of students, objectives of the lesson, and time allocation. All lesson plans indicated the time allocation and the activities for a three-hour school day. Three lesson plans had extended explanation on English lesson; three focused on Chinese lesson; and two focused on Music lesson. The contents of the play sessions in the text were identified. It was found that that teachers allocated more time on teacher-initiated games than children-directed free-play. They blended playtime into the curriculum, and teacher-initiated games were used to achieve academic objectives in different lessons.

All lessons included clear academic learning objectives. For instance, K2 children were expected to be able to retell a story in English lesson and to recognize five English key words in the story. Plus, they were expected to learn some phonetic sounds. For the K3 Chinese lessons, children were expected to recognize eight Chinese words in one week. For the K2 music lessons, children were supposed to learn a new melody and used specific instruments to tap the beat of the new song. All objectives had an academic purpose which was clearly stated in the curriculum.

The lesson plans also indicated the materials used in class. The materials used for all lessons were prepared by teachers, and they mainly used picture books and word-cards to teach targeted concepts. When it was teacher-directed game time, all materials were prepared and children had limited choices.

Children were usually required to sit in a big circle to do some revision at the beginning of each lesson. Teachers then started to introduce new concepts. After that teachers used games to help children solidify the newly learned concepts. The lessons were mostly teacher-directed. For example, children were asked to listen to the melody carefully whilst using assigned instruments to tap the beat. The idea was that they needed to stop immediately when the music stopped, or they lost the game. It was specifically noted in the lesson plan that teachers were supposed to guide the children to tap the beat and to make sure that children knew what to do when the music stopped in the game. Another example was that the teacher gave each child a Chinese word-card with a missing part. Children needed to search for the missing part in a basket filled with foam rubber. According to the
lesson plan, teachers are expected to correct children if they make mistakes. Therefore the conclusion is that all teacher-designed games were intended to strengthen newly learned concepts.

Upon closer inspection the interviews and the lesson plans did reveal the teachers’ concept toward play-based learning; they all recognized the importance of play, yet conditions had to be imposed. The lesson plans were strong evidence showing that teachers emphasized academic achievement and tended to use play as a strategy to achieve lesson goals.

**Teachers’ Perception of Benefits of Play-Based Learning**

Other than knowing how kindergarten teachers define play, it is important to explore how they perceive the functions and values of play. All participants were asked to use concrete examples to describe how play contributes to child development, and they all agreed that play plays a strong role in promoting all-round development in children. For instance, Gail believed that play comes naturally to children, and children simply cannot grow properly without play. Since the majority of the teacher participants believed that play has positive effects on enhancing children’s development in many ways, they felt the responsibility to advocate for play among educators, and play-based learning is definitely beneficial. Moreover, play-based learning should be highly valued in the early childhood educational field. In fact, Claire was glad that EDB realized the need to promote play in early childhood setting and recommended that teachers use play and games to teach. Additionally, schools should create the opportunity for children to play for at least 30 minutes per day in accordance with the new curriculum guide. To Claire, although it was not a compulsory policy for kindergarten, it was a good start to draw educators’ attention onto the value of play. Other than learning academic knowledge, all teachers agreed that play helps to promote all human development, which includes physical, language, socioemotional, and cognitive development. For that reason, play should be used as a medium to teach, and all teachers were able to use examples to show how play promotes these areas of development in young children.

**Physical development.** All teachers tended to relate play to different kinds of outdoor and action-related activities. In their view, children move while playing, through which both large and fine motor skills are enhanced. Flora gave an example on how children demonstrated the ability to move their bodies with coordination in space, thus developing large-muscle control. Her class played dodgeball for five consecutive days, and Flora witnessed
how children run around without bumping others, doing arc steps, and dodging. She said that these physical skills could be developed easily through playing games. Daisy provided another example showing how children used eye-hand coordination to perform a task. There were three girls in her class trying to build a tower together with small wooden blocks. As whoever made the tower fall would lose the game, everyone was excited and was very careful when putting successive blocks on top of the tower. Daisy was amazed as she observed that the girls were able to stack up the block carefully with a sense of how to balance the tower.

**Language development.** There is no doubt that children spend a lot of time on communication when playing. Since language is one important instrument of shared understanding when children play, the teachers agreed that language development can be enhanced. From teachers’ observations, there were various uses of language. For instance, children used language to negotiate roles with their playmates and to recite or make up stories when doing role-play. Betty provided an example showing how children communicate with language and gestures through play and interactions. When two girls were involved in dramatic playtime, Betty realized that they both wanted to play the role as a princess and they spent a couple of minutes just talking to each other trying to figure out a solution. During this negotiation process, Betty observed that one girl “rolled her eyes” in order to show disappointment.

Gail also shared a scenario when children were doing free play on the carpet. A group of children built a castle with big blocks, and they pretended to protect the castle from their imagined enemies. One child got excited and started to destroy the castle, for which other children started to complain about his behavior. That child kept kicking the castle until some other children talked to him seriously and stated that they would not play with that boy if he kept ruining the castle. According to Gail, the boy wanted to play with other children so he finally stopped kicking. This scene showed that the children can “listen with understanding during conversations”; furthermore, Gail found that children not only negotiate when they play, they continue to “adapt or adjust their behavior based on other children’s feedback.”

**Socioemotional development.** When children are playing, they learn about their emotions. Six teachers provided examples on how children communicate, negotiate, compromise, collaborate, and share. Specifically, children discover how they feel and start to empathize with other children. What is more, children learn to express
their feelings and handle ordeals. When children get to release anxiety and regulate their emotions, they can learn better and more effectively. Ada remembered how children develop their social skills and learn about emotions when she was teaching the concept of counting with a train track building game. She recalled,

Play definitely promotes children’s socioemotional development. There was an occasion when I asked two children to count the number of sticks and then built a train track. After that we slowly added more sticks to extend the track. Then they pretended to be a train walking around and, slowly, more children wanted to join this math activity. They all helped to extend the train track and at the end every child had joined. They told me that they were very happy. They worked together to make a long train track and they took turns walking in front of the train. At the end they even asked me if I could let them count more sticks in order to make a longer track. That was one of the best math sessions I’ve ever had with them, and I think the social and math skills they learned from this activity were valuable.

Claire once grouped children into threes and requested them to solve a big puzzle together. She observed that children could support each other in the activity. They were able to show cooperation and demonstrate the ability to understand and regulate emotions. On this she said,

One child was frustrated because she could not find the right place to put her puzzle piece. I was amazed when another child comforted and supported her peer by showing her how to get the puzzle done together. There was no argument at all and I can tell that all the children were happy to get the task done well at the end.

In fact, four teachers thought that Hong Kong children spend too much time on formal learning. While there is a need to achieve certain academic objectives, they believed that incorporating play into learning time can ease children’s stress from learning. Children could drive away negative feelings such as anxiety, tiredness, and frustration during play. Betty stressed the importance of play and incorporating play into learning time. She said, “After children have spent a good amount of time doing intense learning work, they simply need to either nap or play to rejuvenate . . . if we combine play and learning, I believe that children can learn in a more relaxing way.”

Three teachers mentioned that play also promotes self-regulation development. Children learn to organize
themselves because they are motivated to play and are willing to organize their behavior in order to blend in the group. For example, Daisy remembered an obvious change in a young child. She recalled,

Some children are very emotional. They like to yell or to cry to express their feelings and unhappiness. For instance, one of my K1 students, Lily, used to have tantrums or meltdowns when she was not happy. After a few months though, I realized a significant change in her. Lily loved to play with another girl who was very nice and mellow. When they played together, Lily learned to use more words than tears. I am glad to witness her transformation.

Daisy’s example is a strong evidence showing how children can handle feelings appropriately when playing with others; besides, they learn to use language to express anger when experiencing different emotional situations.

**Cognitive development.** In different play and learning-through-play scenarios, teachers believed that children were actively thinking and creating mental pictures in their minds about actions that they planned to act out. Children are able to use objects, language, gestures, and many other things to make representations. For example, Flora recalled a time when she asked two children to demonstrate a scene visiting a dentist. It was right after she introduced the job of a dentist. She was surprised to see how children “expand concepts based on their observations and experiences, such as what a dentist would say to the patient and how to care for the patient in pain.” Her example is an evidence showing how children try out different pretend roles in play and how they solidified learned concepts. Another example is provided by Ada. She remembered that a child was pretending to be a cook, using a small shovel as a spatula and some wooden block pieces as food. This showed that children can use imaginary objects to represent real items; in order words, they use invention and pretend with make-believe objects in play.

Interestingly, five teachers identified cognitive development as the ability to learn academic content. They emphasized that children acquire intellectual skills such as literacy, math, and science by integrating those learned concepts into the context of play. Teachers usually used games to let children revise and practice what had learn in formal lessons. Children learn math concepts, phonics, and Chinese words through playing games and using teacher-designed learning materials. For instance, Claire said that counting money games help to increase
children’s awareness of numbers; and role-play games help children to understand roles in the society and different relationships. Daisy described a scenario when children were doing pretend play. She recalled,

Two children were pretending to be a waiter and a customer. First, they made a menu. They wrote some Chinese words on it, and drew pictures when they did not know how to write the words. Then they started to play. The waiter was holding a piece of paper and a crayon for taking orders from the customer. There were times when the waiter did not know how to write the words, and so he tried to use some pictures to jot down the customer’s order.

Daisy’s example was a strong piece of evidence showing what children were practicing and learning while playing. When children were writing during playtime, they were practicing the use of symbols to make words for communication. These were all evidence to show how children acquire academic content through play, and for that reason teachers would have to added incentive to incorporate play in their lessons.

Four teachers talked about the relationship between cognition and creativity. They believed that children needed basic knowledge to create new things and ideas. Gail stressed that “children need various skills and concepts to create new games and develop new rules. When they play and create, both their cognitive skills and creativity will be enhanced.”

In sum, all participants recognized the importance and significance of play. No matter if it is children’s free playtime or teacher-organized game time, all agreed that both have positive impacts on childhood development and, therefore, play-based learning has its value in the early childhood education field and should be valued. Play-based learning seems to help teachers reach their objectives and let children learn in a fun and relaxing way. Within free play and teacher-organized playtime, children are able to learn skills that form a foundation for learning and surviving in the society. They are able to regulate their bodies, emotions, and other essential skills needed in their future lives. Children learn these skills through observation, modeling, and social interaction. Through the use of play-based learning, children can learn within the context of relationships. Teachers, therefore, play the role of supporters and set up a fun learning environment for young children; all the while determining the schedule and allocating adequate time to play and learn.
Factors Affecting Teachers’ Implementation of Play and Play-Based Learning

All teacher participants seemed to hold positive attitude toward the functions of play. They valued the functions of play and tried to adopt play-based learning approach to teach kindergarteners. In order to explore the factors that prevented them from incorporating play elements into their classrooms, they were asked about the challenges they experienced when adopting play-based learning.

Teachers lack the knowledge and practice on creating a playful classroom. All teacher participants received formal compulsory teaching training and obtained kindergarten teacher’s certificates. Gail was the only one who studied for a part-time program to obtain the qualification, as there was no specific qualification requirement when she entered the early childhood education field many years ago. She stated that she received some training at the beginning but those were only for taking care of a group of children. Gail was trained to be a caregiver more than a teacher years ago. Daisy and Flora said that the compulsory training was a kind of teacher development, and they loved to gain new theoretical ideas and new teaching suggestions. They had chances to try out the learned strategies, and practice these new theoretical and teaching ideas in a collaborative situation. At the university, they received support and feedback, and they were able to reflect critically.

All teachers were trained at accredited institutions, but four claimed that they still lacked the knowledge on how to create a playful classroom. They complained that their training courses focused more on theories. Lecturers would talk about how to put theories into practice; however, without sufficient practical experiences, it was hard to do so. They said that the institutions they attended had assigned them to kindergartens for practice; but they only got to teach for less than a month, and most of the time they were just observing how the head teachers hosted the class. For that reason, they believed that they mainly learned relevant knowledge through their working experience. Daisy complained about the course on play-based learning which she took was not helping her to apply such knowledge in real kindergarten setting. She said, “I know play-based learning is not a new teaching method in the field, but I only had one course talking about play and most of the time the teacher just taught us some play theories. I found it useless.” Gail had similar feeling and she learned about how to create a play-based classroom through her work. She said,
I learned how to do play-based learning through actually doing it in my class. I can tell if I am successful or not by observing children. If they are happy, I am successful. I don’t think the school taught me a lot on how to incorporate play in the class.

Eliza further confirmed the lack of formal training on play-based learning in the compulsory training courses. She said,

I had practicum, but only for a short period of time. During block practice I did not get to try many things. The support teacher focused more on how I achieved the learning objectives. So, I did not learn much about how to incorporate play in class. I was a bit nervous when I was being told to incorporate a play element in formal learning time.

**Teachers were limited by school curriculum and school size.** Most teachers viewed the lack of space and time as the two constraints when adopting play-based learning approach. Since a lot of them related play with physical movement, they mentioned that they could not design a lot of fun play activities when the classroom was too small and filled with furniture. To make adjustment, Ada said she could “just do some quiet play activities where children were mostly playing at an assigned area.” Flora had similar notion about the size of the classroom and she noted, “Children need to run and jump, but how can they do that when they are always stuck in a small classroom? Sometimes we even need to share the classroom with another class. That is horrible.”

The lack of time issue was highly related to the school curriculum. Teachers reported that children need to accomplish a lot of learning tasks, while children spent only three hours in school every day. The lack of time was a big concern, and that prevented teachers from including more play activities in children’s daily schedule. Here Gail reported what children needed to do every day in her school:

We have very packed schedule. Children need to learn Chinese, English, math, science, and much more every day. Including snack time and bathroom time: how much time can we really do play activities? Yes, we incorporate some fun games in every activity, but teaching a new concept takes time, and honestly not every child gets to play my game due to the time limit.

Based on the school curriculum, all teachers claimed that they had to accomplish specific learning tasks for each lesson, and they encountered certain difficulties in using play to teach certain subjects. Although it seemed that
play has mostly positive effects in teaching and helping teachers to achieve curriculum objectives, two teachers mentioned that play was not an effective tool in helping them to teach certain academic contents such as phonics and Chinese writing. With reference to this, Betty specifically “found it hard to design games to solidify children’s knowledge of phonics,” given that she was not the English teacher and might not know the sounds very well. Gail agreed that it was difficult to incorporate play in every single subject. When teaching Chinese writing, for example, she thought children needed to memorize some Chinese characters because she could not think of any games to teach those words.

**Teachers lack the support from the school and the parents.** Four teachers felt that the school management team, especially the school principals, did not support them to incorporate play activities in class. They stated that the principals wanted them to make sure the learning objectives were achieved. Because “learning through play” was emphasized in the EDB’s newly published curriculum guide, teachers were also expected to make sure that children learned in a fun way. Nevertheless, teachers claimed that principals prioritized learning time. Teachers sometimes got blamed for making a mess when children were playing, and they felt that more support was needed from the school. Claire recalled a time when the principal requested to stop a play activity. She said, “The principal would say that she supported play, but she did not. There was a time when my students were doing some messy play on the table. She asked me to clean up immediately.” Daisy was confused about the school policy. She said,

> I am not really sure about the school policy. It said we are supposed to incorporate play in their daily routine, but learning always comes first in reality. The schedule constantly needs to change because students did not get their school work done, which reduces their playtime.

Ada provided an example about how the school principal commented on her class management ability and she felt sad about it. She recalled,

> A few days ago, the children were doing pretend play in class and they talked louder than usual. The principal walked by, and she warned the children to speak quietly. Later she asked me to pay attention to classroom management. I felt disappointed because I was just trying to incorporate play into my class time, as requested by the school.
Other than the lack of support from school, five teachers felt pressure from their students’ parents. They explained that parents would complain if they planned too many play activities for the children. They claimed that parents did not know much about play-based learning and were quite ignorant of the fact that teachers were in fact using play as pedagogy to make children learn better. Even when they explained to the parents, parents did not seem to understand. Gail stated that parents were fine if they knew that she was using games to teach academic contents, but parents were not supportive if children were doing free play. Betty and Eliza had similar experiences and they both got complaints from parents. Betty said that some parents believed that “school is for learning” and “home is for playing.” She specified that parents “did not understand teachers were using play to boost children’s interest in learning.” Eliza tried to explain to parents about the aim of incorporating play into the curriculum; yet, her parents did not agree with her, which made the implementation of play more difficult and challenging.

Summary

This chapter has presented the data from the interviews and from reviewing the lesson plans. It aims to answer the sub-questions and ultimately explore teachers’ experience with play-based learning.

The findings revealed that teachers thought play is a natural instinct, and that is why children learn best through play. Although they found it difficult to give play a concrete definition, most of them agreed that play is fun; and children are willing to join in and are free to make their own decisions. Moreover, children can learn skills and knowledge subconsciously. There was a prevalent view that play is better attached to educational purposes and children are expected to learn through play. It was also confirmed that most teachers related play with physical activities, and that sometimes quiet activities can also be viewed as learning activities.

All teachers agreed that play is strongly related to childhood development. It affects children in many different ways and should therefore be valued in school. When teachers implement play in the kindergarten classroom, there have been shown to be contradictions between teachers’ perceptions toward play-based learning and their actual practice. Lesson plans reflected that teachers focused more on learning objectives than on incorporating play into the lesson content. They tended to do more teacher-directed games, and those games were initiated with a clear learning purpose. Therefore, play seemed to be used as a tool for enriching the curriculum. Of course, teachers emphasized that they provided free playtime for children, and they claimed that it is equally
important. Teachers identified the differences between teacher-initiated play and free play, and they believed they had different roles when hosting these playtimes.

The findings also highlighted teachers’ concerns about safety issues when incorporating play into their daily routine. Other than that, the main challenges came from the lack of knowledge in implementing play, the lack of time and space to have playtime, and the constraints from school principals and parents. In the next chapter, discussions on the central question and related topics will be presented.
Chapter V: Discussion and Conclusion

The importance of play in early childhood development is indubitable. Because of its benefits to young children, play-based learning is often viewed as the fundamental pedagogy in the pre-primary classrooms of many countries (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Lynch, 2015). Similar to many other countries, the Hong Kong Government imposed “learning through play” as the central pedagogy for pre-primary education. In the newly published Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide (2017), it was clearly stated that teachers should adopt a child-centred approach. To ensure that children are learning in a joyful atmosphere, teachers should cater to children’s developmental needs by providing interesting learning experiences for them. As suggested by the Hong Kong Education Bureau, “half-day and full-day kindergartens should arrange no less than 30 and 50 minutes every day respectively for children to participate in free play,” and schools should avoid arranging learning activities during free play time (CDC, 2017, p.58). However, with the imposed policy and programs aiming to prepare kindergarten teachers to adopt play-based learning, the Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI) annual reports reflected the reality that learning and teaching in this sector were deviated from the government’s expectations (Cheng, 2012). In addition, teacher participants in this study included physical activities as part of the activities in learning through play, but not as individual sessions. This reflected their lack of understanding about the government’s expectations and about how play-based learning should be implemented in Hong Kong. Thus there is a need to understand Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ experiences with play-based learning so that program designers, education leaders, and other related personnel can help to bridge the apparent disconnect between teachers’ beliefs about play-based learning and their actual practice.

From Chapter Four, four themes emerged from the analysis of transcripts. They are 1) Teachers’ Conception of Play and Play-Based Learning; 2) Teachers’ Conception of Development of Play-Based Learning; 3) Teachers’ Perception of Benefits of Play-Base Learning; and 4) Factors Affecting Teachers’ Implementation of Play and Play-based Learning. Chapter Five will then contain a summary of the research findings, with the discussion of these findings in their relationship to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two and the theoretical framework reviewed in Chapter One. Potential solutions rooted in the research findings are to be proposed in order
to resolve the problem of practice in this research, with a coda in the form of limitations and conclusion recorded in this chapter.

**Summary of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ experiences with play-based learning. With this understanding, it is possible to find out the interrelationship between kindergarten teachers’ perception about play-based learning and their practice of implementing play in the classroom. The causes of the disconnections between teachers’ perception and practice can also be explored. As stated in Chapter Two, play has been seen as an instinctive behavior of children, and it boosts physical, cognitive, social, and emotional strengths. At the same time, kindergarten is the period of transformation from home environment to school system. And various studies revealed that through these programs children attending kindergarten get more benefits in adjustment to elementary school and in the life ahead (Chen, 2016; Manessis, 2014; Sun, 2015). Play and kindergarten are both considered as essential in children’s learning and development, and play-based learning is drawing increasing attention in the field. Therefore, evaluation of experiences of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers with play-based learning will be helpful to finding out the obstacles and challenges in practicing play-based learning (Stellakis, 2011). Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory was used to guide this study because it described children’s all-round development including language use, social awareness, and cognitive development through social interaction with others (Tok, 2018). To understand teachers’ experiences with play-based learning, the questions which guided the study were:

1. What is the conception of play and play-based learning understood by Hong Kong kindergarten teachers?
2. How does the conception of “play-based learning” develop with the experience that Hong Kong kindergarten teachers receive in his/her course of teacher education program?
3. What are Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ perceptions of the benefits and challenges of creating play-based learning in their classrooms?
4. What are the factors affecting Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ implementation of play and play-based learning in their classroom?
It was purposeful to select participants who were Hong Kong kindergarten teachers working at local kindergarten privately run by voluntary organizations. It was because all kindergartens in Hong Kong are privately run, and a majority of them are non-profit-making and are sponsored by voluntary agencies (Education Bureau, 2018). Principals from four kindergartens agreed to participate the study, and invitation emails were sent to these schools. There were seven participants who took part in this qualitative study at the end, and they had teaching experiences of two to more than ten years. Three semi-structured interviews were conducted to find out their experience and perceptions on play-based learning. Eight lesson plans developed by these participants were also reviewed to understand how kindergarten teachers planned their class. Owing to the nature of qualitative research, the inductive analyzing approach was considered and all data were manually coded (Yuen, 2015).

Summary of the Findings

According to the analysis in Chapter Four, Hong Kong kindergarten teachers have consensus toward the concepts of play and play-based learning. They believed that play is a natural instinct and that numerous positive emotions are attached with play. Although play and learning were considered as interrelated, free playtime is significantly different from learning time. Therefore, when teachers combine play and learning, play is viewed as a strategy to facilitate learning time; and it is expected that children could learn the planned objectives effectively and happily. In general, kindergarten teachers valued and recognized the functions and benefits of adopting play-based learning in their classroom. They witnessed and were able to provide examples to show how play promote children’s physical, language, socioemotional, and cognitive development.

From their early childhood experience and compulsory teacher trainings, kindergarten teachers gained understanding and ideas on adopting play-based learning in their class. They also had chances to solidify and reflect the conception of play-based learning through actual practice. However, teachers still found that the compulsory training could not cater for their actual needs when it comes to adopting play-based learning. They found it difficult to create a playful classroom and to blend in play elements in several learning time slots. They also noted that the lack of time and space were two significant factors that affected the quality of playtime. Last but not least, teachers mentioned that school leaders and parents were not supportive, as they emphasized more on academic achievement rather than playtime.
When reviewing teachers’ lesson plans, it was found that teachers emphasized achieving learning objectives in their lessons and neglected the natural outcomes of free play. They tended to design games with intentions to let children learn planned objectives. As kindergarten teachers claimed that they followed the lesson plans when they had lessons with children, the lesson plans were strong evidence showing the contradiction between their beliefs toward play and their practice in adopting play-based learning. This is also a piece of evidence confirming their saying about their lack of knowledge in adopting play-based learning even though they accomplished compulsory teacher trainings at accredited institutions.

**Discussion of Findings in Relationship to the Literature and Theoretical Framework**

The findings of this study provided insights regarding Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ perceptions and practice with play-based learning. They expressed their views on the necessity of providing play elements in children lessons to support and enhance children’s development. The teacher participants likewise mentioned the challenges in reconciling their perceived role in nurturing children’s development with the reality in Hong Kong society.

**Teachers’ conception of play and play-based learning.** Understanding Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ views, philosophy, and perception on play-based learning was the first level of evaluation, and participants were asked to describe the characteristics of play. Although different views came into consideration, all teacher participants agreed that play is a natural phenomenon, and that, generally, play is an exercise in which all human beings want naturally to take part. Teachers mentioned that play created positive excitement of happiness, energy, and laughter. Children seemed happy during play and felt free, and they were able to take responsibility to make personal decisions. At the same time, these teachers found it difficult to give play an actual definition, as it not only involves emotions but is also a behavior. Their descriptions about play matched with what many theorists and researchers found from their research. As mentioned in Chapter Two, it is difficult to give play a definition because of its complexity as a behavior, as a process, and as an approach to task. Yet, in general, people would agree that voluntary participation, enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, and many more other positive emotions are the characteristics attached with play (Howard, 2009; Lillemyr, 2009; Santer, Griffiths, & Goodall, 2007).
Interestingly, some teachers mentioned “rule” as the basic difference between free play, directed play, and learning time (Cheuk & Hatch, 2007). Teachers admitted that if children enjoyed a teacher-directed activity, that specific activity could be considered as playful learning. When comparing formal learning with play-based learning, teachers generally agreed that formal learning is teacher-centred and play-based learning was just the opposite. This finding was consistent with the literature that formal learning and play-based learning are two very different approaches in teachers’ view. According to these literatures, the main difference between teacher-centred teaching methods and play is that the teacher-centred teaching approach usually attaches itself with clear learning goals, while play may not have clear goals (Bruce, 2010; Howard, 2010; Rogers, 2011; Synodi, 2010). Play has a relaxing and fun element, and children prefer to play as compared to just sit and listen, as in the case of traditional learning (Palenzuela, 2004). Teachers said that they use games to teach children so that the children can learn in a fun atmosphere. When it comes to free play learning time, there will not be any final assessment and strict rules so that children can play freely and learn within. This finding is consistent with the literature saying that play-based learning is using play as a strategy to teach, and teachers are expected to accomplish lesson objectives in each lesson (Chen, Li, & Wang, 2017; Wood, 2013).

To further understand teachers’ conception toward play-based learning, eight lesson plans were reviewed. Time allocation, activities, and play sessions contents were focused when reviewing these lesson plans. It was found that teachers allocated more time to teacher-initiated play as compared to free-play. Basically, playtime was managed within teacher-directed games and curriculum to deliver lessons. All curriculum objectives were clear and well designed. Teachers prepared all lessons plans, and children had no choice during teacher-directed or organized game time. They used picture cards and word-books to teach target concepts. Teachers employed specific instruments, but children had no choice in how to employ them. Teacher-directed lessons and games were used and aimed to strengthen newly learned concepts (Bai, 2014).

Knowing how teachers planned their classroom helped us to understand their concept about play-based learning. It showed that kindergarten teachers use play as a tool to enrich the curriculum, and that they do not give separate value to children’s need of free play. They integrated play in different activities to match the curriculum. In fact, from the interviews, some teachers questioned about whether or not lessons delivered can always be
measurable during playtime. They claimed that formal teaching time is also required to ensure that the target learning objectives are achieved. This notion matches with the findings of different researches saying that games are often designed for subject learning such as language learning, math and science, art, music, and physical activities for the whole day. In other words, a lot of times teachers are using play as a strategy to achieve lesson goals rather than viewing play as an independent part (Chan, 2016; Cheuk & Hatch, 2007; Li, 2004). Teachers’ notion toward learning through play was very much aligned with the concepts featured in the thematic approach. Here teachers acted as a facilitator in class, and they provided real-world experiences and hands-on activities for children to achieve various learning goals. According to their understanding about children’s level and ability, they design games and plan the learning objectives for the lesson, and their aim is to assist children to learn the different areas of a selected theme (Mumford, 2000).

In teacher-directed learning or gaming activities, teacher has various roles such as supporter, mentor, or co-player. Their perceptions about their role in children’s play and learning match with the roles as described in different contemporary pedagogies. For instance, teachers’ roles in project approach include facilitator and supporter, in which teachers are supposed to encourage children to share and interact (Helm & Katz, 2011). Teachers of HighScope approach also have similar responsibilities in helping children to do the planned activities and to review what children have accomplished during the day (Belfield, Nores, Barnett, & Schweinhart, 2006). Teachers carefully observe children’s play because incorrect playing with teaching materials develops wrong concepts, in which the children may not achieve their learning objectives. For example, musical chair, word or puzzle games need clear conceptions and instructions. Teachers would first describe game rules clearly as a logical clearance of game concepts and then provide guidance for better performance as learning was necessary for young children. Teachers shared their experience of learning Chinese words, and it seemed that children were demotivated easily with teacher-directed and outcome orientated games (Charles & Mumuni, 2018). Some word games like fishing the right words from the pool and matching Chinese words to make vocabularies could catch children’s attention. Play improves concentration and enhances learning powers.

According to the teacher participants, this type of gaming activities enables children’s willingness to remember the words and learn related knowledge. As Charles and Mumuni (2018) mentioned, when children are
motivated, teachers can easily obtain curriculum objectives. However, teachers said that it was not easy to incorporate play into all lessons. This finding is also consistent with the research by Stellakis, who were of the view that some teachers find it tough to use games and playtime to promote children’s literary (2011). In general, teachers’ conception toward play-based learning was similar to that of the literature, which they had a positive attitude toward using play as a tool to curriculum enrichment objectives and that they actually engaged in incorporating play in their curriculum. They were also satisfied with the fact that play helps to increase children’s intrinsic motivation in learning with time. These findings from interview and reviewing lesson plans are consistent when compared to other similar research (Chan, 2016; Charles & Mumuni, 2018; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Gonzalez, 2014).

Other than viewing play as a strategy to teach specific concepts, teachers also admitted the necessity of incorporating children-directed play into the daily routine. Similar to the research finding by Little and Eager (2010) that teachers recognized the need for children to be responsible and organize their own playtime, teacher participants of this study highlighted the need for balance between learning activity and free playtime. Aligned with Nariman and Chrispeels’ research (2015), children-initiated play is considered as an independent activity and teachers usually serve as observers and mentors. Teachers claimed that free playtime helped them to develop positive relationship and to maintain friendly interaction with children. During free playtime, children get to improve all aspects of development, though safety issues were always described as the major concern during all sorts of play activities. Maintaining a safe playing environment was therefore the teachers’ responsibility and concern. This finding was consistent with Little and Eager’s research (2010) in that teachers needed to find a balance between risk, challenges, and safety while letting children do free play. When children interact during playtime, unexpected accidents and issues can happen; and teachers mentioned that they had to stay alert at all times to ensure a safe play and learning environment. Thus, teachers were familiar with their responsibilities to manage playtimes (Jennifer & Cheung, 2015).

**Teachers’ conception of development of play-based learning.** The next level of investigation will focus on how teachers develop these notions of play and play-based learning. It is important to note that culture and past experiences shaped how people think and perceive their surrounding environment (Ho, Grieshaber, & Walsh,
Teachers’ social background affected how they implemented play in their classroom. Focusing on their kindergarten experience, teachers mainly referred their experience as happy ones. There were a couple of teachers who mentioned that activities such as reading and writing existed in their kindergarten life and sometimes it was hard; however, their overall comments toward their kindergarten experience were very positive. For that reason, they believed that one responsibility of kindergarten teachers was to let children have a happy kindergarten life, and that play was an excellent strategy capable of achieving this goal. From their working experience as a kindergarten teacher, all teachers were able to highlight how children develop physical skills, social skills, emotion regulation skills, thinking and language skills through playing, which is consistent with the existing research (Poteliūnienė & Šatikauskaitė, 2015).

Teachers could provide examples on how children communicate, interact, compromise, collaborate, and share within a group during playtime. With those observations, they believed that play promoted children’s social skills. Some teacher participants also realized that children try to manage their status within the group, and that through making friends they learn the social skills needed to survive in the society. Emotional development was enhanced when children were learning through play. Teachers’ experience in working with children made them realize the benefit of play and incorporating play elements in their class. In fact, Vygotsky’s theory is used to frame the current study. The examples that teachers provided showed how play developed children’s zone of proximal development, and how teachers scaffolded children’s learning and facilitated peer scaffolding. For instance, Claire’s example about how one child taught and comforted another child when engaging in a puzzle activity showed how a more knowledgeable peer was scaffolding another peer. And Claire’s choice to be an observer showed that she helped facilitate peer scaffolding in this case. Moreover, teachers recognized their role during learning through play activities. Another example by Claire showed how she scaffolded children’s learning. Instead of telling children what to do, Claire guided a child to stack up the hexagon nuts and provided appropriate resources. Aligning with the discussed elements from Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, there were numerous examples from the finding to support the importance of play and of implementing play in classroom. As an inevitable element in children’s sociocultural environment, teachers definitely play an important role in children’s development. Nevertheless, investigating how teachers view play and implement play in classroom has become a
controversial subject in the field. After all, recent legislation already has a “play” component aiming at better learning among children (Cheng & Stimpson, 2005; Lau & Grieshaber, 2010).

The reviewed literature has also provided evidence to show the importance of properly implementing play in the classroom, the role of play in children development and in the education system. The current study explained child development and play, as well as play’s role in developing strong foundations for learning in Hong Kong education system. This study has undertaken qualitative research on Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ experience in using “play” as the learning mechanism (Jennifer & Cheung, 2015). Teachers’ description on the benefits of play aligned with Vygotsky theories, which emphasized on interactions between young children and how such interactions facilitate children’s growth.

What also influences teachers’ conception development is probably their experience in receiving training about teaching at kindergarten. From compulsory training, kindergarten teachers learn different teaching concepts and theories; and that affect how they view play and play-based learning. Again, teachers’ perceived play as a natural instinct and a way to improve children learning (Li, 2004). They described play as fun, as a physical activity that is attached to curriculum objectives and children learning. Literature revealed that Hong Kong kindergarten teachers work according to traditional teaching culture with less real-life examples and are only concerned with lecture delivery. Training is therefore essential for kindergarten teachers to learn innovative and practical strategies to assist children in better learning so as to overcome cultural differences in the lingual and working contexts. Surrounding environment affects children’s learning, and kindergarten teachers have the duty to regulate that (Cheng & Stimpson, 2005).

Currently, the compulsory teacher trainings and professional trainings in Hong Kong aimed to facilitate teachers’ acquisition of different perspectives and ideas. They are expected to incorporate a wider vision of what teaching involves. Through these trainings, teachers should be able to understand their roles, to expand their vision of their professional roles as well as their awareness of broader issues in early childhood education. In the Hong Kong context, structured kindergarten programs and pedagogies are used for young children. During early childhood, major parts of development occur, and play improves and accelerates that process. The concept of play has been explained and contemporary pedagogies discussed, for better play incorporation into preschool education.
field. For instance, as stated in Chapter Two, Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory has been employed for the project approach to implementation in class, and play is one key element in the project approach. Project implementation includes project initiation, providing real-world experience for children, and aligning play element with curriculum in order to create a streamlined learning process (Yuen, 2015). Other teaching approaches such as High scope and Reggio Emilia are also based on the work of Vygotsky, play being one element within. High scope approach is related to the specific activities that help children to make high learning; while the Reggio Emilia approach is based on the social constructivism of Vygotsky, which highlights relationship and intensity of interaction. These approaches were introduced and being taught in compulsory teacher training programs (Ho, Grieshaber, & Walsh, 2017; Jennifer & Cheung, 2015). Although the teacher participants of this study claimed that they lacked on-site practice in adopting these approaches, they understood how play could be found in different settings in kindergarten.

The content of Hong Kong teacher training programs is mainly shaped around the education policies and trends in Hong Kong. In fact, Hong Kong kindergartens are run privately by voluntary organizations and receive Government support; thus they need to be supervised by the Education Bureau (EDB) for quality assurance (Yuen, 2015). Government promoted different supports and expectations in the past years. For instance, the new Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide issued in 2017 stated a clear position that early age children should learn joyfully through play. On top of those, the Quality Assurance Framework for kindergarten program evaluates the quality of kindergartens on a regular basis for continual improvement. Such a procedure involves monitoring, as well as the assessment and planning of strengths and weaknesses. The review team evaluates whether or not the kindergartens are following EDB regulations, and it also checks their whole curricular and extra-curricular school curriculum. All these show that the government is interested in improving learning experience for young children and is making an effort to promote play-based learning. At the same time, kindergarten teachers are aware of these trends in Hong Kong when they attended the compulsory trainings or other professional teacher trainings. In fact, free preschool education to all children is always demanded by the public, and quality improvement is the focus of educational sector (Nariman & Chrispeels, 2015).
Lastly, culture is another important factor affecting teachers’ conception development regarding play-based learning. In Hong Kong culture, academic achievement is highly valued and therefore most kindergartens are academically orientated (Chan, 2012; Ho, Grieshaber, & Walsh, 2017). In fact, kindergarten teachers are aware of the high expectations of education in Hong Kong, and a lot of times they are expected to prepare and equip young children for primary school with its exam-oriented and academically focused education system (Rao, Ng, & Pearson, 2010). This explains why the findings of this study revealed the fact that teachers stressed on achieving academic objectives for each lesson. Moreover, it rationalized the reason why so many teachers valued play as a tool or strategies to effectively teach their children rather than just doing free play at school.

Having reflected upon how teachers developed their conception toward play-based learning, it is understandable that teachers’ view and practice with play-based learning were not aligned. On one hand, teachers were influenced by Hong Kong culture where they were expected to emphasize on children’s academic achievement. Much evidence showed that the teacher-centred approaches, which emphasise children’s attentiveness and academic attainment, are highly valued in Hong Kong (Chan, 2012; Ren & Wyver, 2016; Sun, 2015). On the other hand, compulsory kindergarten teacher trainings mainly adopt the Western idea of teaching practices, which influences Hong Kong teachers to recognize the benefits of adopting student-centred approaches (Ho, Grieshaber, & Walsh, 2017; Sun, 2016). The findings from this research showed that Hong Kong kindergarten teachers had tried to implement student-centred approaches in their classroom, which further illustrated that Hong Kong teachers were not entirely authoritarian (Ng & Rao, 2008; Rao, Ng & Pearson, 2010). Some findings of this research also supported this argument in that kindergarten teachers have been trying to implement student-centred approaches in their classroom. For instance, a couple of teachers mentioned that they tried to be an observer in class and provided opportunities for children to try and make choices. Some other teachers like Claire and Daisy provided concrete examples on how they tried to put children’s needs as their priority and created a student-centred classroom. At the same time, the findings showed that teachers also focused on achieving academic goals. These findings highlight the discrepancy between teachers’ conception and practice with play-based learning. Moreover, it helps to explain the reasons why it is difficult to narrow the gap between perceptions and practice. As stated by Roopnarine (2011), there are cultural variations in the beliefs about play and
how teachers implement play in their classroom. In order to narrow the gap between beliefs and practice, it is essential to investigate teachers’ culture in detail.

**Teachers’ perception of the benefits of play-based learning.** Focusing on the benefits children could encounter from teachers’ perspective, current research findings are parallel to other researchers’ findings (Wong, Wang, & Cheng, 2011; Yuen, 2015). Aligning with these researches, the teacher participants of this study realized that adopting play-based learning approach helps children to improve vocabulary and sentence construction, because they are constantly exploring and directing their own play. Children are allowed to design interactive charts, sing nursery rhymes, play with stickers, draw on various materials, etc. All these activities keep children engage in listening, reading, speaking and writing (Cheuk & Hatch, 2007). Teachers also stated that play can help children master complicated math concepts such as shapes, sorting, phonics, pattern matching, counting, subtraction, and addition. Cognitive gains were obvious over time; moreover, children can maintain emotional balance, improve social skills, and participate in group tasks. Children’s perspective-taking, self-respect, and confidence were significantly improved regarding their personalities. Teachers talked about teacher-child interactions for better support to children’s development in kindergarten. Although all the teachers’ beliefs and classroom practices were slightly different due to their working experience, personal training, and educational background, traditional teaching mechanism was consistent among all, which was sometimes contradictory to developmentally relevant approaches (Tok, 2018).

Teachers could use various examples to confirm their beliefs in the benefits of adopting play-based learning in their classroom. For instance, some claimed that play could enhance instinctive abilities. During the game time, winning and enthusiastic feelings could help to ease anxiety, tiredness, and resentment. Play also developed self-regulation because children got to observe how others dealt with specific situations. Children were more willing to use words than tears to solve problems, and it was a transformation process. Cognitive development could also be promoted through play, which enabled children to learn academic content effectively. All these observed benefits reconfirmed the findings and the saying of different research and theorists (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Chan, 2016; Cheng, 2012; Cheuk & Hatch, 2007; Fernández-Oliveras & Oliveras, 2014; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Rogers, 2011). From teachers’ experience, children’s intellectual skills are enhanced due to the ample opportunity for continuous
problems solving during playtime. When playing, children show cognitive intelligence which also lead to creativity. Children seem to be more enthusiastic when learning academic subjects like music theory, phonics, simple math concepts and much more through gaming and playing.

Generally, participants said that free playtime or teacher-organized games positively influenced childhood development. Teacher-organized play seems easy to manage as compared to free play that brings more social interaction. They said that teacher-organized games and organized playtime have planned objectives, which is better to fit the school curriculum. This finding is parallel to other research concerning the importance of incorporating teacher-initiated games in class (Fernández-Oliveras & Oliveras, 2014; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). Play is a biological motivation for young children, and children’s thinking and language skills are enhanced when they are exposed to new experiences. Teachers also claimed that play with toys and teaching materials is very important as these materials may help to further develop cognitive, social, and emotional exposure and balance. From the teachers’ perspectives, children’s play behavior can be evaluated so that teachers could adjust their teaching approach in order to assist children to learn and grow (Sun, 2015).

After all, teacher participants agreed that play improves children’s all-round development. For physical development, fundamental movement skills are developed in the kindergarten years, and children are able to succeed in sports or other activities. Play improves cognitive development. Children’s exposure to new surrounding environment and new information help to better visualize and understand different concepts. Sociodramatic play, representational play and fantasy play involve abstract thinking and symbols use for improved learning. It is also agreed that play promotes language development as children mainly use language for communicate purpose during playtime. Families and culture differences determine language use and teachers employ strategies for language development such as hosting more social events and group games. Play also brings socio-emotional development. Children consider themselves as individuals and as part of a social world. Therefore, with time they learn to manage themselves in social groups with social competence and relationships with others. This echoes with Vygotsky’s description on children development, in which children learn independent problem solving skills through guidance by more knowledgeable others (Manessis, 2014). Because teachers witnessed these benefits with play, they claimed that they structured their lesson accordingly. Although the lesson plans reflected
the discrepancy between teachers’ beliefs in play and practice, teachers did design different games aiming to provide more play opportunities for young children. Referring to Vygotsky’s social-cultural theory, teachers helped scaffolding and developing children’s zone of proximal development through interacting with children and facilitating peer scaffolding. Through questioning, demonstrating, modelling, and providing opportunities for children to try, children are able to learn more effectively. Thus interaction with people and guidance can lead to various skills development and independent performance. During play, children expose themselves to more diverse language use, coordination, and cognitive skills. In formal learning environment, however, less active learning is happening, which is consistent with existing research (Cheuk & Hatch, 2007). After all, cultural, social experience as well as the biological developmental elements such as heredity and brain growth are the factors affecting children development, and kindergarten teachers need to adjust their teaching strategies accordingly by monitoring and assessing children; and playtime is a considered as a good time to make such observations (Watkins, 2004).

As teachers experienced how incorporating play elements enhanced children’s overall development, they believed that children learn better and more effectively through play. Children have strong command on concepts that they learn during play, as compared to teacher-directed lesson. This finding is also consistent with research describing how play can support and scaffold children of diverse abilities (Gehris, Gooze, & Whitaker, 2015; Huang, 2013; Koustourakis, Rompola, & Asimaki, 2015). It also explains the reason why policy makers emphasized more on play-based learning in the recent Hong Kong Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide (CDC, 2017).

**Factors affecting teachers’ implementation of play.** To explore the reasons why there is a discrepancy between kindergarten teachers’ beliefs and practice with play-based learning, it is worthwhile to discuss the factors that affect teachers’ implementation of play. All teacher participants claimed that they faced different significant challenges in incorporating play into the curriculum. One critical factor that affected teachers’ practice was teachers’ knowledge and experience. They said that they had insufficient knowledge in creating a playful class environment. Although they obtained teacher’s certificates from accredited institutions, the programs focused more on the theoretical part and lack elements in practical experience. This echoes with Cheuk and Hatch’s finding that it is essential for kindergarten teachers to put theories into practices; but oftentimes they lack practice time when
they obtain their certificates (2007). Teachers were not totally satisfied with the training courses they attended, as they lacked the chance to apply the learned techniques to real classroom settings.

Other constraints include the lack of time and space to run play-based learning in class. Small classroom is always occupied with furniture, which does not facilitate free playing from the kindergarten teachers’ perspective. Similarly, the lack of time prevents teachers from performing many other learning activities. It is termed as a structured constraint. In fact, since all kindergartens are privately run, kindergartens have a larger room to design their curricula and can free children from unnecessary academic pressure. However, the Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide (2017) reminds kindergartens to prepare children for future learning. It advocates development in the affective and academic aspects of kindergarteners. To provide different learning experience for children, kindergarten curriculums are generally packed, and the lack of time is continuing to be one major constraint for many Hong Kong kindergarten teachers (Chen, Li, & Wang, 2017; Howard, 2010; Leung, 2003; Wood, 2013).

Regarding the lack of space, according to Heidemann and Hewitt (2010), play can happen anytime anywhere, and it is the teachers’ responsibility to create a playful environment for children to learn, no matter if it is an indoor or outdoor environment. Sluss (2015) provided a lot of ideas on how to create a playful classroom. She specifically stated that environmental design is only second to adult interaction in terms of influencing play, and that the size of the classroom should not affect the quality of playtime. While teacher participants of this study complained about the lack of space for children to play, one reason to explain this finding is that teachers lacked knowledge on how to create a playful classroom, which reflected the shortcoming of the current compulsory teacher training programs and confirmed the finding regarding teachers’ lack of knowledge and skills in adopting play-based learning.

Teachers also mentioned the lack of school management and parental support regarding using play as a strategy to teach. There was a complaint on the fact that the principal just wanted to ensure the accomplishment of learning objectives, while children required a fun way to learn. This reconfirmed Chan’s (2016) findings on her research, which tried to explore the factors affecting Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ teaching practices. She found that the principals’ views affect the school curricula and teachers’ implementation of different pedagogies, and that principals should learn to reflect on and internalize their personal beliefs. Another research by Jennifer and
Cheung (2015) also supported this saying, and the participants of their study said that they needed to concern about school leaders’ advice and made adjustments to their teaching pedagogies accordingly.

Principals had a negative attitude towards messy play. They preferred to have the children learn in a quiet environment, and making too much noise is sometimes prohibited. Principal’s expectations thus hinder teachers from using play strategy to teach, and the teachers have to over-prepare children for the formal way of education (Gonzalez, 2014). In fact, this finding reflected the hidden problem in current teacher and principal training programs. In the previous session, the reason of teachers’ lack of knowledge and skills in adopting play-based learning was discussed. If principals were not being supportive regarding the implementation of play, it could imply that professional trainings for principals were also needed. As Yim (2017) stated, both teachers and principals needed to have continuous trainings in order to stay updated with the current trend in early childhood education. To reveal teachers’ stress in adopting play-based learning, on the one hand, they were told to follow the recommendations by the Hong Kong Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide, which was to facilitate children’s learning through play (CDC, 2017); on the other hand, school leaders aimed to prioritize academic achievement. Teachers’ dissatisfaction with this unclear direction resulted in pressure for themselves, and thus, affected their implementation of play in their class.

Focusing on the lack of parental support, some teachers felt the pressure from parents. Parents believed that children could play at home, and therefore school was基本上ly a place for children to learn academic content. This notion aligned with many research findings stating parents’ expectations on kindergartens and teachers. In general, they expected teachers to help equip children for primary schooling, and schools are expected to be academically oriented (Chan, 2012; Ho, Grieshaber, & Walsh, 2017; Rao, Ng, & Pearson, 2010). These parental expectations affected how kindergarten teachers implemented play in their classroom. Rather than expecting parents to conform to teachers’ teaching strategies used in class, the schools and teachers should collaborate with families in order to seek consensus about what helps children grow and learn effectively (Chen, Li, & Wang, 2017; Ho, Grieshaber, & Walsh, 2017).
Conclusion

The themes generated from the findings aimed to explore the experience of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers with play-based learning. With such an understanding, the researcher can try to explain the potential discrepancy between kindergarten teachers’ beliefs and practice toward adopting play-based learning in their classroom. Current discussion evaluated Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ perception toward “learning through play,” their actual practice, and students’ learning through a qualitative approach. Kindergarten teachers’ experience implies that program designers should consider front-line teachers’ challenges when implementing play elements in their curriculum and class, and such related challenges reported by the teachers have been discussed above. Educational leaders’ support is mandatory for better learning in a pleasant environment (Cheng & Stimpson, 2005). Kindergarten teachers agreed that play has cognitive, language, physical, and social-emotional benefits for young learners. Motor skills developed through various physical activities; and cognitive development is enhanced through problem-solving work. During play, children need to actively interact with others, and that leads to advancement in social skills and communication skills with language. With improved situation management, children can enjoy and learn in group association task, thus achieving emotional strengths and experience. Play pedagogy is an educational component in many countries (Charles & Momani, 2018). A teacher-student bond develops during play activities and, therefore, play is considered as an effective teaching strategy because it helps to promote a positive bonding between students and teachers, which influences their learning and emotions.

It was found that kindergarten teachers’ practices and beliefs for “learning through play” were not completely aligned. Teacher training is needed in the broader context and on a practical basis (Bai, 2014). Recent annual reports of Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI) reflected the general use of the teacher-centered approach instead of the student-centered approach, which was contradictory to government’s recommendation. Therefore, it further confirms the importance of this study, as it evaluated kindergarten teachers’ beliefs and practices for the better understanding of the scenario and for the better development of childhood programs to manage potential gaps in current and future contexts. It is essential to encounter head-to-head the teachers’ views and practices for program designers and education leaders to handle effectively the challenges in implementing play by training and
support. Constructivism-interpretivist research paradigm was used for the current study where personal views were acquired in an open research setting (Stellakis, 2011).

The researcher directly interacted with the participants to reach context-specific assessments. She has chosen this paradigm to understand the multiple realities involved in the course of bridging the potential gaps. The researcher has described how the Hong Kong kindergarten teachers implemented play in their classroom and associated practices. Descriptive and inductive qualitative approach has revealed the participants’ perspective as regards the improvement of current practice and the strategies of administrators (Li, 2004). The central research question aims to uncover Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ experiences and the process of creating a play-based classroom. Data Analysis involved reading and re-reading, initial noting, development of emergent themes, coding patterns, interrelationships evaluation, and searching connections across emergent themes. Trustworthiness elements have been considered. It determines results validity and strength of arguments (Bai, 2014).

**Implications for Practices**

This study aimed to understand Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ perception and actual practice with play-based learning. It highlighted early childhood educational concerns in Hong Kong, with a focus on better practices for learning and development. Evaluation of implementing play activities and practices provided areas of concerns for teachers, education leaders, children of early age, and childhood training program designers, because they can find ways to revise current training systems and education leaders for better support (Saracho, 2001). Therefore, the findings of this qualitative research are beneficial for childhood educators and their young students at the higher level. These findings also provide implications for teachers’ training programs designers, policy makers, school leaders, front-line kindergarten teachers and parents.

**Implication for teachers’ training programs designers.** This study pointed out that kindergarten teachers needed more than minimal professional trainings in order to gain more knowledge on play-based learning and on how to create a playful classroom. The minimal training currently observed does not satisfy the needs of teachers in the real practice. Some teacher participants of this study questioned how play can be incorporated into practice. It showed that they failed to internalize their belief about play. In fact, knowledge and expertise are both needed for teachers to fully and effectively integrate the play-based learning approach (Wood, 2013). Often, pre-service
teachers lacked the necessary skills to prepare a play-based classroom (Fernández-Oliveras & Oliveras, 2014). For that reason, designers of teachers’ training programs should review the current programs and make relevant adjustments, so that these programs would not just focus on the teaching of knowledge and basic skills with play-based learning but also on the link between teachers’ belief and practice. This confirmed the need for teachers to have professional trainings that actualize their beliefs (Wen, Elicker, & McMullen, 2011).

**Implication for policy makers.** The nature of early childhood education policies could influence practitioners’ interpretation and decisions on their teaching methods (Wood, 2013). The findings of this study reminded Hong Kong policy makers the appropriateness of the relevant policy for teachers to implement play in their curriculum. On the other hand, they need to clarify the expectations on front-line teachers and to provide guidance in implementing play-based learning. For example, one reason why traditional thinking about teaching and learning is still being highly valued is that both parents and kindergartens felt the need to assist children in managing the transition to primary school (Fong, 2014; Fung, 2009). Therefore, policy makers could help to improve the current situation by adjusting the academic requirements for admission to primary school.

**Implication for school leaders.** Kindergarten teacher participants in this study mentioned the lack of support from the principals, which affected their willingness and confidence in adopting play-based learning. The findings of this study helped school leaders to understand front-line teachers’ perspectives on play-based learning. School leaders should reflect on their management skills; at the same time, they need to review current school curriculum and discuss with teachers about ways to implement play elements in children’s daily routine. It seemed that there is a need for school leaders to provide in-service trainings for teachers, so that teachers could learn more about how to set up a play-based lesson. In order to cater for parental expectation, the need to prepare children’s transition to primary school as well as to satisfy children’s natural needs for play, school leaders have the responsibilities to actively review the curriculum and find a balance between learning and play. School leaders could also organize various parent workshops and develop related education materials, so that parents gain more understanding of the concept of play-based learning and of how play could be integrated into the school curriculum. This action not only helps promote play-based learning but ease the tension between teachers and
parents, because parents will start to know more about the value of play and the benefits of adapting play-based learning.

**Implication for front-line kindergarten teachers.** This study showed the discrepancy between teachers’ belief and practice with play-based learning. The findings might be useful in drawing teachers’ attention back to reflecting on their current practice. They should be aware of children’s responses toward play-based learning, as that would affect the way they incorporate play in children’s daily routines. Furthermore, it aroused their attention on their knowledge and skills regarding play-based learning. There might be a need for them to adjust their current teaching pedagogy and/or to seek for further professional trainings. With knowledge about play-based learning, teachers can also help to enhance parents’ understanding of what constitutes a quality learning environment for young children, thus eventually minimizing the discrepancy between teachers’ and parents’ beliefs and practices about play-based learning.

**Implication for parents.** Lastly, the kindergarten teacher participants of this study mentioned that parental expectation on the education offered by the school affected teachers’ choice of teaching pedagogy. In order to promote play-based learning—a pedagogy believed to be effective in teaching young children—parents’ education is essential. This study helped parents to reappraise what strategies work well when it comes to educating young children. Parents could participate in different parent talks and/or courses offered by early childhood institutions or other related organizations in order to stay updated with the current trends and pedagogical strategies. Bearing in mind that parents have an essential role in children development, it is never the school’s job when it comes to enhancing children’s learning; thus parents need to reflect on their view and make adjustments when needed.

**Limitations**

This study offers new interpretations of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ perception and practice with play-based learning; however, every research has its limitations and by reflecting on the entire process, I recognize several limitations that exist in the present study.

The first limitation was related to neutrality, and the researcher’s bias was potentially a major limitation. The researcher of this study was a kindergarten teacher in the United States and is a lecturer teaching pre-service kindergarten teachers at the Education University of Hong Kong. Her personal experiences and understanding of
early childhood education may influence her role as a researcher and how she sets herself to interpret research data and findings. As data were interpreted through the view of the researcher, her knowledge and experience shaped how the research was being conducted (Gall, et al., 2007). She was aware of this limitation and tried to be reflective during the whole research process; yet this study was seen as her interpretation of how kindergarten teachers perceived and adopted play-based learning in Hong Kong.

The second limitation was related to the limited number of participants. The majority of the kindergartens in Hong Kong are privately run by voluntary organizations, but there are still a good number of private independent kindergartens (Education Bureau, 2018). Although all kindergartens are registered and being inspected regularly by the Education Bureau, owing to the autonomous administration of early childhood education, the quality of education in early childhood field in Hong Kong can be varied. Considering the accessibility of this study and the time constraint of the participants, only seven qualified participants could join this study. Because of this limitation, even though a general picture of how kindergarten teachers perceived and adapted play-based learning were revealed, the findings cannot represent the overall situation of play-based learning in Hong Kong.

The third limitation was related to the absence of other stakeholders of play-based learning. Understanding that education is not only about teachers but also about children, parents, principals, policy makers, and many others, it is important to draw their views toward the needs for play and play-based learning in the kindergarten classroom. Furthermore, exploring the perspectives of these social actors help to find out their influences on the practice of play in kindergarten. Owing to the limitation of accessibility of the interviewees, the researcher decided to focus on the view of kindergarten teachers only. Having said that, the researcher was aware that the findings would have been more comprehensive if the perspectives of different stakeholders of early childhood education had been considered.

The fourth limitation was related to the research methods used by the researcher. Owing to the time limitation of the researcher and the accessibility of the participants’ workplace, she could only gather data from interviews and the participants’ lesson plans. No observation was carried out. According to Gall et al. (2007), conducting observations helps to gather rich data and offers the opportunity to understand what has actually happened in specific situations. It also helps to crosscheck data gathered through other means. Therefore, missing
observation may affect how the researcher evaluated kindergarten teachers’ actual practice in adopting play-based learning in their classroom, which may also influence the findings. Field observation is therefore recommended for future research. Moreover, the researcher had no control in what documents that the participants shared. For that reason, only lesson plans of Chinese, English and Music classes were obtained, and no free-play plan and daily schedule collected. In order to have a full picture of teachers’ concept and experience on play-based learning, the collection of different kinds of documents related to lesson planning are recommended for future study.

The last limitation lies in the language translation during the research process. The interview protocol was prepared in English; however, the interviews were conducted in Cantonese by the researcher as requested by the participants. Moreover, the collected lesson plans were written in Chinese. Therefore, all data collected were transcribed and translated from Chinese to English by the researcher. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, all transcriptions and translations were done by the researcher only and were not cross-checked by others. For this reason, there might be deviations between the participants’ meaning and the researcher’s presentation of the findings.

Suggestions for Future Study

There has been an increasing attention on researching the topic of play and play-based learning. In fact, a great deal of research has been done on the related topic. However, play and play-based learning remains a complex field for researchers to explore (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Vickerius & Sandber, 2006; Wood, 2013). The present study focused on teachers’ perceptions and actual practice with play-based learning; it provided answers to the central research questions, and it also suggested possible directions for future research in the early childhood education field.

Firstly, the present study investigated Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ perceptions and practice with play-based learning; yet it neglected how other stakeholders view play and play-based learning. For instance, many teacher participants in this study felt the stress from the school principals, parents, and policy makers, which prohibited their implementation of play in the classroom. Moreover, children’s view on play is essential as they play an active role in play-based learning. Their perspectives on the needs for play and the preferences in play may
influence how kindergarten teachers frame their play-based classroom (Clark, 2010; Howard, 2010; Tok, 2018). Thus, additional research on the views of play of other stakeholders is needed.

Secondly, this study revealed the need for teachers to have more professional training on implementing play elements in their classroom, which implied the urgency to review and revise the current compulsory teacher trainings. Additional research should be done on investigating the effectiveness and the applicability of the existing kindergarten teacher training programs.

Thirdly, this study found that kindergarten teachers in general agreed that the characteristics of play include voluntary participation, enjoyment, a focus on process over outcome, and many more; however, there was not much discussion on how to access the quality of playtime and the educational progress that brought by play-based learning. Further research on these topics is recommended.

Fourthly, this research focused on the perceptions and practice of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers who worked for non-profit-making kindergartens but not private independent kindergartens. Although all kindergartens are registered under the Education Ordinance, kindergartens still vary a lot in their scale of operation, management style, resources and curriculum. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore how teachers of the two different kinds of kindergartens perceive play and implement play elements in their classroom.

Lastly, the teacher participants of this study identified different kinds of play that existed in their daily teaching; however, play was only explored in a broad sense. Future research should therefore focus on the specific types of play in order to investigate the pragmatic use of play in kindergarten curriculum and daily routine.

Summary

The topic “play” and “play-based learning” is drawing increasing attention in the early childhood education field as it is considered to be an appropriate means for young children’s education. Researchers have done numerous studies on how children play and how play contributes to children’s growing and learning. Teachers’ perceptions of play-based learning and their practice may vary due to various reasons such as their personal experience, the training they received, the government policies, and the school guidelines. The present study employed a qualitative approach, which combined interviews and documentary review to explore kindergarten teachers’ perceptions of play-based learning and their implementation of play in practice in Hong Kong.
kindergartens that are privately run by voluntary agencies. The study aimed to explore Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ experiences with play-based learning. The findings revealed that teachers’ responses were consistent with those confirmed by the literature. It seemed that teachers value the functions of play and agreed that play-based learning was an effective instructional methodology in early childhood education settings. However, play-based learning has been implemented differently in actual practice. Teachers have made efforts to make learning fun, despite the fact that they have been facing various challenges and difficulties in the course of creating a play-based learning classroom.

The purpose of this study is to understand Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ experiences with play-based learning. Other than searching for an answer to this central question, it hopes to inspire policy makers, education program developers, school leaders, parents, and other stakeholders to rethink the value of play and the need to adopt play-based learning in class. The ultimate goal is to facilitate children’s learning through play and to boost their interest in participating different activities in schools. Only then can children learn, grow, and develop in a fun-filled environment.
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Appendix A: Northeastern University IRB Approval

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: January 31, 2018  IRB #: CPS17-12-12
Principal Investigator(s): Kelly Conn
                          Lam Pui Ching
Department:  Doctor of Education Program
            College of Professional Studies
Address:  20 Belvidere
          Northeastern University
Title of Project: Bridging Beliefs and Practices: A Story of Hong Kong
Kindergarten Teachers’ Perceptions of “Learning through
Play” and the Implementation of “Play” in their Practices
Participating Sites: N/A
DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents: One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: JANUARY 30, 2019

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when
recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new
information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must
be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month
prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any
other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Appendix B: Recruitment Email

Dear Principal,

This is Lam Pui Ching, a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University. Currently, I am seeking experienced Hong Kong kindergarten teachers to participate in a research study about their view on “play-based” learning and their experience on creating a “play-based” classroom. Your school is identified as it is privately run by voluntary organization and teachers received their teacher training in Hong Kong institutions. If you have a moment, I hope that you can help to pass out the attached information to your teachers so that they can decide if they want to participate in the study. It is hoped that their knowledge and experience may help to identify ways in which educators and researchers can support Hong Kong kindergarten teachers during their experience implementing play in the classroom.

I appreciate the time and effort you take to help me recruit participants for this study. For more information about this study, please see the attached information and/or contact me, Lam Pui Ching, by email at lam.pui@husky.neu.edu or by phone at (852) 9345 1995.

Thank you,
Lam Pui Ching
Doctoral Candidate
Appendix C: Attached Information for Recruitment

My name is Lam Pui Ching, and I am a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University. For my doctoral dissertation, I am interested in talking to Hong Kong kindergarten teachers about their view on “play-based” learning and their experience on creating a “play-based” classroom. I want to hear how you conceive “play-based” learning, how you create a “play-based” classroom, what opportunities you see for creating a play-based learning environment for your students, and what challenges you may have had when creating a play-based classroom.

Your knowledge and experience may help to identify ways in which educators and researchers can support Hong Kong kindergarten teachers during their experience implementing play in the classroom.

I am looking for participants who:
1, Teach at Hong Kong local kindergartens that are privately run by voluntary organizations;
2, Received teacher training in Hong Kong institutions;
3, Have at least three years teaching experiences;
4, Have basic spoken Chinese or English skills.

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to participate in two face-to-face interviews and one telephone interview. Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Prospective participants will be asked to sign a consent form and confidentiality will be strictly maintained.

This research is being approved by Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have questions or need more information about this research, please feel free to contact Lam Pui Ching by email to lam.pui@husky.neu.edu or by phone at (852) 9345 1995.
Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Name of Investigators: Principal Investigator, Dr. Kelly Conn; Student Researcher, Lam, Pui Ching

Title of Project: Bridging Beliefs and Practices: A Study of Hong Kong Kindergarten Teachers’ Perceptions of “Learning through Play” and the Implementation of “Play” in Their Practices

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain to you first. You may ask the researcher any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the research if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

We are asking you to be in this study because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about the experience of being a kindergarten teacher in Hong Kong. You work at a local kindergarten that is privately run by voluntary organization and you received teacher training in Hong Kong institutions.

The purpose of this research is to understand Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ belief and practice when implementing play in their classroom and creating a play-based classroom. If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in three interviews. The first interview aims to describe the study to you and get some background information from you. The second interview aims to understand how you view “play-based learning” and how you create a play-based classroom. The third interview aims to get your feedback on the transcription and for the researcher to ask follow up questions. The researcher will audio-tape the first two interviews for transcription purpose.

You will be interview at a time and place that is convenient for you. The first interview will take about 20 to 30 minutes. One week later, the second interview will take place and it takes about an hour. Two weeks later, the research will have a telephone interview with you and it lasts about 20 to 30 minutes. You can contact the researcher through email or phone calls to discuss on the time and place where the interviews are conducted.

Other than your time and inconvenience, there are no risks associated with your participation in this study and we do not anticipate any discomfort.

Although there are no direct benefits to you for participating in our study, your participation will allow us to expand our knowledge about how Hong Kong kindergarten teachers understand the concept of “play-based learning” and the creation of a play-based classroom. Implication of this study may help the researcher to identify ways in which educators and researchers can support Hong Kong kindergarten teachers during their experience implementing play in the classroom.

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project. The original data such as audiotapes, field notes, and transcriptions will be stored in a locked file cabinet and soft copies of the notes will be seal with password. Finally, the data will be destroyed after three years.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as an employee of the kindergarten you work for.
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Lam Pui Ching at (852) 93451995 or email lam.pui@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Kelly Conn at 1-(857)-205-9585 or email k.conn@northeastern.edu, the Principal Investigator.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, Mail Stop: 560-177, 360 Huntington Avenue, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 1-617-373-4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

I agree to take part in this research.

_______________________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part

________________________________________
Printed name of person above

_____________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent

________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Institution: _____________________________________________________

Interviewee (Title and Name): ______________________________________

Interviewer: _____________________________________________________

RESEARCH QUESTION:

What are the experiences of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers with play-based learning?

Sub Question #1: What is the conception of “play-based learning as understood by Hong Kong kindergarten teachers?

Sub Question #2: How do Hong Kong kindergarten teachers create a play-based classroom?

Sub Question #3: What are Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ perceptions of the benefits/opportunities of creating a play-based learning in their classrooms?

Sub Question #4: What are Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ perceptions of the challenges/obstacles of creating a play-based learning in their classrooms?

Interview

Part 1: Introductory Protocol

You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about the experience of being a kindergarten teacher in Hong Kong. My research project focuses on the experience of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers with a particular interest in understanding their belief and practice implementing play in their classroom. Through this study, we hope to gain more insight into how Hong Kong kindergarten teachers create a play-based classroom. Hopefully this will allow me to identify ways in which educators and researchers can support Hong Kong kindergarten teachers during their experience implementing play in the classroom.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the tapes which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. To meet our human subjects requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me [provide the form* - note there is no actual form for this class project]. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?

This interview should last about 45 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?
Part II: Interviewee Background (5-10 minutes)

Objective: To establish rapport and obtain the story of in the participants’ general with the research topic. This section should be brief as it is not the focus of the study.

A. Interviewee Background

1. Where were you born?
2. How long have you been living in Hong Kong?
3. What kind of kindergarten did you attend?
4. Why did you enter the field of education?
5. Please describe your pre-service teacher training.
6. How long have you been teaching in kindergarten?

Interview II

Part 1: Play-based learning

One of the things I am interested in learning about is how you define “play-based learning.” I would like to hear about your perspective/experience about “play-based learning” in your own words. To do this, I am going to ask you some questions about the key experiences you encountered. If you mention other people, please do not mention names and give the person a pseudonym.

THE CONCEPTION OF “PLAY-BASED LEARNING”:

1. In your own words, how would you describe your understanding of what “play-based learning” is?
2. In your classroom, can you describe what play-based learning looks like?
3. What does it look like when a student is engaged in play?
4. What does it look like when a student is learning through play?

THE CREATION OF A PLAY-BASED CLASSROOM:

1. How do you structure play in the classroom to promote learning?
2. Recall one time when you really felt you incorporate “play” in your classroom.
   a) Describe what exactly happened.
   b) Describe what you did to prepare the lesson.
   c) Describe what you were doing.
d) Describe what young children were doing.

BENEFITS/OPPORTUNITIES:

1. What do you think children could learn from play activities?

2. How do you think play-based learning promote...
   a) Children’s cognitive development? Examples?
   b) Children’s social development? Examples?
   c) Children’s emotional development? Examples?
   d) Children’s physical development? Examples?

CHALLENGES/OBSTACLES:

1. How does play during free-play time look the same or different than play during organized-play time?

2. Can you describe how you adjust your teaching approach over time?

3. Why do you need to make such adjustments?

4. Describe any additional experiences that impact on how you incorporate “play” in your classroom.

*Ask participant if they have any questions and thank them for their participation.*

**Interview III: Telephone Interview Script**

Hello, may I speak to ____________________________?

My name is Lam Pui Ching and at an earlier time you participated in research on understanding how Hong Kong kindergarten teacher perceive “play” and how they create a “play-based” classroom. I would like to a follow up interview with you.

Is this a convenient time to continue?

1 – Yes
   Begin the interview

2 – No
   Reschedule: This interview would last about 20 to 30 minutes, and can be arranged for a time convenient to your schedule. Is there another time I could contact you?

I will begin the interview now.