

Parents' understandings and practices regarding play and learning

Keshni Bipath, Azwihangwisi E. Muthivhi & Sabeedah Bhoola

Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

*Correspondence to: Keshni Bipath, Groenkloof Campus, University of Pretoria, Pretoria 0002, South Africa. Email iconkeshni.bipath@up.ac.za

Abstract

Parents of young children are often unaware of the general importance of play in children's development and their own roles in children's play. Lack of leisure, lack of space, the COVID-19 pandemic, Early Childhood Centre teacher communication and use of media and digital toys for children, have affected and reduced children's free play. Drawing on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development as an underpinning theoretical framework, this paper explores the contestations of play and learning using parents' voices. The study used open-ended qualitative questionnaires to extract parents' feedback on their understanding and practices of play with 3–4-year-old children. The researchers used convenient purposive sampling and selected 6 parents of young children from middle-income families in Pretoria, South Africa. In a time of schoolification of the early childhood years, the findings highlight that although parents believed that play was essential, they set up structured learning environments for their 3–4-year-old children at home. The study accentuated the importance of parent intervention programmes so that parents are aware of how to engage in play with their children appropriately, and what the appropriate adult roles for extending and enhancing play are.

Keywords: Playful learning, play and learning contestations, early childhood development, parents' understanding and practices, South Africa

Introduction

Parents' lack of understanding of their roles in children's play, lack of leisure, lack of space, the COVID-19 pandemic and use of media and digital toys for children have affected and reduced children's free play. Globally, children's right to play is recognised and enshrined in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (OHCHR 1989), which South Africa, the context of this study, ratified in 1995. This right is captured in the South African Constitution (RSA 2016) and the South African National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (Department of Basic Education 2015). The qualification framework for early childhood care and education (ECCE) (Department of Higher Education and Training 2017) emphasises a play-based teaching and learning approach. However, despite this increasing recognition of the importance of play in early learning, there is still little consensus on parents' understanding of play and their engagement in supporting their young children through playful interactions.

Within early childhood care and education, the concept that play is the best way for children to learn, combined with the idea that parents are partners in the child's learning, combine to form a large part of ECCE literature (O'Gorman and Ailwood 2012). Adults need to provide adequate support for children during play activities to develop substantially (Ginsburg 2007). When considering the lack of play, the importance of play may be understood by studying parents' mindsets in terms of play and learning. Parents and children benefit from play in that a bond is created, and good morals and communication are taught by parents to their children (Anderson-McNamee and Bailey 2010). Cooney is of the opinion that parents define play as imaginative, pleasurable, fun, child-initiated and having an active component (Cooney 2004, 265). Play is the essence of childhood learning and the richer the play, the richer the learning outcomes for the child (O'Connor et al. 2017).

However, working parents, hurried lifestyles, instant entertainment on devices like smartphones, and increased emphasis on academics, all reduce playtime (Ginsburg 2007). Doliopoulou and Rizou (2012) agreed that most Greek kindergarten parents indicated changes in life circumstances have resulted in diminishing play time (due to the lack of leisure of both children and parents) and play spaces (mostly outdoor). New technologies (television, PCs, video games) have changed personalities, according to these parents. They had described their children as egocentric, selfish, antisocial and aggressive. When parents reflected on their own childhood, they felt that their children are very different and have become violent due to lack of play and freedom. In step with this reduction in play, mental health problems are constantly increasing worldwide (Bor et al. 2014).

The pandemic has disproportionately impacted young children from low income Black and Latino communities. They have paid the biggest price in terms of family illness, loss of loved ones, uncertainty and disruption. It is argued that children who experience trauma in their lives, need play as a critically important vehicle for adapting to stress. (Carlsson-Paige 2020)

Most Chinese parents believe that academic achievement is far more important than play in their child's education (Chua 2011; Chang 2003; Roopnarine and Johnson 2001). In Hong Kong, play was seen to be an instructional tool that could be used to maximise direct teaching (Pramling-Samuelsson and Fler 2008). It is not known how parents in a developing context like South Africa understand and engage their children in play. Therefore, the aim of the study reported in this article was to describe the discrepancies in parents' understanding of play and how they engaged their children in play activities. If we are aware of the tensions between parents' understanding and practices of play, the role of adults when facilitating play, voices of parents from other countries and the role that play plays in the life of a child, it would contribute to more and better planned parental guidance sessions by ECCE professionals. Montessori posited that children, teachers and parents must have a link with each other for the smooth running of the whole learning process (Goren 2005).

Tension between play and learning

Good play experiences unite all aspects of development and achieve social, emotional, physical, intellectual, moral, creative and cultural benefits for young children (Eliason and Jenkins 2008). Through playful learning experiences, children develop relevant competencies as they are provided opportunities to balance work with play. The same authors state:

To some, it (play) suggests frivolous leisure activities, 'killing time' and recreational activities. Play does not provide a concrete, tangible, or academic end product that can be displayed to parents. It is not teacher-directed. However, through mature play, children learn and develop skills that will prepare them for academic competence needed in the future. (2008, 26)

In a competitive world where the emphasis is on individual success, play-based learning continues to be challenged by education authorities and parents alike.

The place of play in childhood learning is emphasised in policies (DHET 2017) and, at the same time, practices in playrooms and ECD centres highlight the diminishing status thus:

Ever since the passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation in 2001, we've seen play disappearing from classrooms for young kids, replaced by an overemphasis on academic standards and testing. This approach is wrongheaded and goes against everything early childhood professionals know about what children need and how they learn in the early years. (Carlsson-Paige 2020, 3)

Besides, evidence from research in neuroscience and early learning has shown that the separation of work and play in laying academic foundations for the growing child, is misconstrued (Colliver 2011). In particular, constructivist early childhood educators argue that striking a balance between work and play provides avenues for children to explore their environment, build their personality and construct knowledge that is unique to them (Bodrova and Leong 2010). Consequently, there is the need to continually navigate the landscapes of the play-versus-work controversy, if scholars are to properly guide the 'future directions of play scholarship and policy' (Colliver 201, 13).

The alarming disappearance of play and the 'academisation' of early childhood programmes has been mentioned by Nicolopoulou (2010). Nicolopoulou (2010) and Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2009) have warned of the erosion of play favouring more didactic approaches in areas such as literacy acquisition for preparation of test-based school assessment. Gunnarsdottir (2014) argues that this disappearance of play takes place using more formal teaching approaches migrated down the years in response to the demand for children's learning to be measured and scored. Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2013) refer to this move as 'schoolification' and they bemoan the top-down approach that is impinging on early learning programmes resulting in increasing formalisation of education in the early years. The schoolification of the years before Grade 1 is being felt in many countries.

The role of adults when facilitating play

Adults have a substantial role when planning and facilitating play that promotes learning through play. Firstly, besides providing a wide range of appropriate play activities for children to choose from, adults need to care, support and extend children's play. They should avoid dominating or interrupting play. Secondly, adults need to be responsive when facilitating children's play. Through meaningful support, adults can scaffold children's learning to their next stage in their development. Vygotsky (1896-1934) reinforced the collaborative, interactive nature of learning hence the 'serve and return' approach to learning. He regarded the adult as a mediator. He proposed that language is one of the chief means of mediating new knowledge to children and that ideal learning environments are thus social contexts where children engaged playfully with each other (Karpov 2005).

Within a sociocultural framework, the adult's role can be seen as a 'more knowledgeable other' alongside a child's play which may require some degree of intervention in order to meet the 'adult's expectation' (White et al. 2009). Yang (2000) discovered that children between the ages of three and six often do not pay much attention to the play activities they have selected and require adult support to reflect upon their choices.

Voices of parents from other countries about play and learning

Parents in Sweden all agreed that open-ended, creative, child-centred materials and activities were important (Carlson and Stenmalm 1989). However, in the United States, more parents were of the opinion that the purpose of early childhood education is to prepare children for school competition, for example, by completing workbook pages, learning to write the alphabet, using the microcomputer and rote counting. The child's ability to follow teachers' directions, to learn to behave, to resolve conflicts with peers and to acquire formal reading skills, were also rated as more critical among parents. Parents in both countries considered providing safe futures for their children important. However, this view was manifested through demand for academic achievement and conformity in the USA and bringing forth the inner spirit of the child in Sweden.

Parents held varying and contradictory notions of the value and definitions of what constitutes play in Queensland, Australia (O'Gorman and Ailwood 2012). Parents regarded engaging in hands-on

activities and preparation for school as play activities. Parmar, Harkness, and Super (2004) compared how Asian–American and European–American parents rate play, finding that Asian parents generally preferred an early start to academic learning over play provision. Brooker (2002, 2011) undertook research exploring the relationships between children’s homes and early childhood settings in the UK. The tensions and contradictions between these sites in children’s lives are made clear in Brooker’s work, including the varying understandings and value placed on play. Fasoli’s (2014) study revealed diversity in that play behaviours and understanding came together to comprise parents’ models of play. Fogle and Mendez (2006) explored African–American parents’ beliefs about play. These parents held positive views about play and its significance.

Chinese parents’ perspectives on play and learning show that they believe children’s academic achievement to be far more important than play in early childhood education (Huang 2013). Education is highly valued in Chinese society (Wu 2003). It is believed to be a ladder to the achievement of higher social status, and therefore, providing education is thought to be one of the most important parental responsibilities (Chang 2003; Wu 2003). However, Haung’s findings show that Chinese parents might agree with the concept of play if they are aware of the benefits of play. It seems that didactic instruction and 3-R (reading-writing-arithmetic) approaches are still commonly used in Chinese education system (Chang 2003). In South Africa, Bipath and Theron (2020), have recently discovered that pedagogy-in-participation is very prevalent in South African ECD centres. By using snapshots of 10 ECD centres from well-resourced and under-resourced playrooms, they proved that that pedagogy-in-participation in the early years consist of the new 3-Rs. Teachers should have ‘skills in the 3Rs which are developmental Responsiveness, cultural Responsiveness and linguistic Responsiveness in the playroom’ (Bipath and Theron, 9). Play embodies these new 3-Rs.

The role that play serves in the life of a child

Five definitive characteristics define playful learning experiences, according to Liu, Hoffmann, and Hamilton (2017). Firstly, play should be a joyful experience. The release of dopamine in the brain is linked to cognitive functions such as memory, attention, mental shifting, creativity and motivation. Secondly, play is meaningful. The child should be able to make connections between familiar and unfamiliar stimuli. This enables easier learning through the enhancement of analogical thinking, improving of memory skills and metacognition. Thirdly, play involves active engagement which promotes children’s agency and decision-making abilities. Through active engagement children’s memory and retrieval processes are enhanced. Executive control is improved through the development skills that enable children to become less distracted and to improve short-term memory and life-long learning. Fourthly, play is iterative or involves repetition: children thus acquire important learning characteristics such as perseverance and ultimately greater flexibility in their thinking. Lastly, play encourages social interaction which should include positive caregiving practices. Social interaction leads to the healthy development of social-emotional regulation and the lessening of learning barriers such as stress; it also helps children cope with challenges later in life.

Our study aims to add the perspectives of South African parents’ understandings and practices of play and learning. This new knowledge could enhance the role of the ECCE professionals to support children’s play at home during COVID-19. The research question is: What are the understandings and practices of parents regarding play and learning?

Methodology

In this study, an interpretivist approach was applied as an epistemological framework. In the interpretivist paradigm, reality is socially created and not objectively determined; perceptions are

comprehended and meaning is constructed. Interpretivist researchers use the social reality of participants to create meaning (Maree 2016) to understand the behaviour of human beings (Hudson and Ozanne 1988). According to this paradigm, there is no single reality or truth but rather multiple realities, which means that individuals determine their own reality from their experiences (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). As researchers, we sought to create meaning by interpreting the multiples realities that the participants held regarding play and learning.

Participants

The participants were recruited through ECD centres that serve middle-income families, and determined by the moderate school fee amounts paid by parents and the community characteristics, such as duplexes and townhouses. The study was conducted in the Laudium and Centurion areas, Gauteng Province, South Africa, to comply with the inclusion criteria of a middle-income community. We restricted our investigations to parents of children aged 3–4 years old. This age group precedes Grade R (kindergarten), and it is at this time when parents’ understanding and practices in play carry substantial weight in the development of the child.

The table (Table 1) describes the age, gender, occupation and location of the participants in this study.

Table 1. Description and coding of the participants.

Participant	Gender	Age of Participant	Relationship with child	Occupation	Location	Age group the participant based their views on
(P1) Parent 1	Male	35 years old	Father	Graphic Designer	Centurion	3.5-year-old son
(P2) Parent 2	Female	33 years old	Mother	Lecturer	Laudium	3.5-year-old daughter
(P3) Parent 3	Female	35 years old	Mother	Dietician	Centurion	4-year-old daughter
(P4) Parent 4	Female	44 years old	Mother	Dietician	Centurion	3-year-old son
(P5) Parent 5	Female	36 years old	Mother	Full-time Mum	Centurion	4-year-old son
(P6) Parent 6	Female	35 years old	Mother	Major: Literature	Centurion	4-year-old son

The first 6 participants who responded to our e-mails were chosen from a possible 10 parents who volunteered to participate in the study. The 6 selected participants’ understanding and their play experiences enabled us to analyse their understanding and practices towards play and the young child’s development.

Procedure

Data were collected during April and May 2020, when South Africa was under lockdown-Alert Level 5. Alert level 5 was the most restrictive of all levels. Children and parents, who were not essential service workers, were confined to the home. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, data were collected through open-ended qualitative questionnaires administered via e-mail or through telephonic interviews. Parents were identified from the ECD centres and their names and contact details were passed on to us via the ECD principal of one school in the area where the research was conducted. Contact was made initially through a phone call, when the aims of the study were explained to the parents. The researcher requested that the parent either responded via an e-mail with the qualitative questionnaire

attached or, where the parents were not comfortable with an e-mailed questionnaire, these questions were asked telephonically. Aligned to the ethical guidelines of the University of Pretoria, participants signed informed consent forms.

Parents were asked the following questions:

1. What do you understand by the term 'play' for 3–4-year-old children?
2. How do you engage in play activities with your child?
3. Which do you consider more important? Play or Learning? Explain.
4. Does learning take place inside or outside the house? Explain.
5. Describe the play or learning environment that you have for your child.

Limitations

Social desirability bias refers to the tendency of participants to give socially desirable responses instead of choosing responses that are reflective of their true understanding and practices (Grimm 2010). The dual method of data collection via phone calls and e-mailed questionnaires could have hindered the validity of the data. We were aware that parents who chose the e-mailed method for answering the questions could have had adequate time to read through and change their answers compared to the parents whom answered spontaneously over the phone. However, data were carefully analysed.

Data analysis

Rigorous thematic analysis formed the basis of data analysis in this qualitative study to identify themes from the collected data (Aronson 1995). The identified themes and sub-themes were then linked to the reviewed literature and theoretical framework to formulate findings. The aim of trustworthiness in a qualitative inquiry is to support the arguments that findings are worth our attention (Guba and Lincoln 2005). Two of the researchers engaged with the data intensively to demonstrate the clear links between the data and interpretations. The third researcher then verified the emerging themes and this further enhanced the rigour of the research findings.

Findings and discussion

There were variations when it came to parents' understanding and practices regarding play. All six parents who were interviewed were educated and lived in secure, enclosed homes. Five had full-time jobs, and one who was a qualified teacher, had resigned to be at home to take care of her newborn twins. As the research was conducted during the Covid-19 lockdown, parents reported being in contact with the teachers from the ECD centre their child attended and spoke about receiving Whatsapp messages from teachers regarding stimulation activities. In South Africa, the Department of Higher Education and UNICEF had been proactive in creating an array of parent handouts and activities that parents could do with their young children during the lockdown. Many non-governmental agencies also offered online activities for children from birth to matriculation level. Free online books were made available so that parents could read to their little ones, and there was a website that offered worksheets for children of all ages. There was an abundance of educational resources available free of charge to South African parents.

During the lockdown, these parents were suddenly faced with taking care of their children, and the learning and stimulation activities received were welcome. They found themselves in the position of primary caregiver and educator. Being in a chat group with other parents was helpful; they were geared to ensure that their children were not neglecting their so-called school activities. When we had

contacted them to find out about their play understanding and practices, they were eager to share their experiences.

Parents' understanding of play and learning

The participating parents were assigned numbers 1-6, for confidentiality. P1 to P6 all described the link between play and learning by expounding on the belief that learning results from play. P1 asserted that the terms were *synonymous*. Parents acknowledged the need for play and regarded it as essential. P5 stressed that it was *necessary for a child to play* and P4 explained that meaningful play allowed learning to occur. Despite expressing that play and learning were equally important, attention was given to what participants noted as the benefits that meaningful play yielded. P4 said that she thought that play and learning *work hand in glove, especially if it is meaningful*. P3 used an example of her child participating in meaningful play using blocks. She explained that through block play, her child can achieve milestones in understanding shapes. P5 explained that children are taught many lessons through meaningful play. Like P4, she used examples of meaningful play activities such as Lego and brought up a new concept, playful learning. P6 also stated that she focused on the educational benefit of play. P6 stated that *play is the means for them to learn and explore*. Vygotsky's (1998) concept of social situation of development helps us to perceive the meaning of children's own subjective experiences, in play (Vygotsky and Rieber 1998). The concept describes the unique, age-specific, inimitable and emotional relationship between the child and her or his social environment. The COVID-19 situation has changed the relationship between the parents and the child, as well as the environment of the child at home. Parents thus all stressed meaningful play.

P2 noticed positive improvements in her child's linguistic abilities, which she says was a result of playful learning. She notes: *I continuously talk to my child while I play with her*. Studies on the relation between play and language have generally emphasised language production. Language comprehension might, however, have as much or more theoretical significance at the early ages (Fein 1981). According to Sigman and Sena (1993), representational competence is highly associated with language comprehension. They found that children who showed more symbolic play acts could comprehend more language in both structured and unstructured situations. However, Tamis-LeMonda and Bornstein (1996) do not clarify whether more responsive mothers influence the language and play sophistication of their children or whether children who are linguistically precocious and/or more sophisticated players, solicit greater responsiveness from their mothers.

P1 was the only parent that expressed the ideology of natural play. He said that play should take place freely and explained that children should not be restricted during play. His child was allowed to express himself freely during play. He defined play as free movement and expression within a safe, but not restrictive or overbearing, environment. It must also be mentioned that P1 was the only dad, while the rest of the participants were mums. From the quotations, it was clear that all the mums in the study believed play and academic skills were linked. These findings are consistent with Rao and Li (2009), who coined the term 'eduplay', which is a fusion of play and early academic acquisition. The dad, P1, was the only one who wanted his child to play naturally. He placed value on *free play, child centredness* and *early childhood-appropriate practices*.

Parents' understandings about the benefits of play

Parent participants believed that development such as social, cognitive, creative, emotional and physical development occurs during play. P5 said, *there is always a lesson learnt. Play is crucial and valuable in every child's mental growth*. P1 explained the benefits of play by highlighting that play positively affected a *child's thought process as well as social skills*. P1 felt that *more play at a young*

age encourages more robust reasoning, better socialization and more independent thought. P2, P4 and P6 all voiced similar opinions by also affirming the link between play, learning and development. P1 described the importance of play in the physical development for children. He explained that play and learning created a well-balanced individual and *also develops better physical conditioning which is key in developing the gross and fine motor skills needed for writing, drawing and improved focus.* Fine and gross motor skills were developed which allowed children to improve their ability to perform many activities inside and outside. P4 said: *There are certain anatomical developments that need to happen in play (like finger strengthening with playdough) to facilitate the learning (writing). Role-playing helps teach order, understanding and consequence.* She explained that playful learning taught her child how to order and sequence things, and it improved the finger muscles, allowing her child to participate in drawing exercises easily.

P3 focused on the cognitive development of playful learning: *My 3-year-old develops an understanding of how things work, I see the cognitive and creative.* She explained that through play her child gained an understanding of her surroundings and developed problem-solving skills. Besides, she could see that there was an improvement in creativity when her child played and learned. P5 agreed on the benefits that play served by illustrating the social skills that her child had developed interacting with peers as she gained social skills that improved her level of confidence. She noted how that helped to *create and build their self-esteem ... and sets a positive mindset for a child (P5).*

P6 said: *I prefer that my child plays and learns in a structured manner. We especially enjoy the works of Dr Seuss as it teaches him to be creative and play with language.* She believed that play and learning allowed her child to develop holistically (cognitive, social, emotional and physical development.) She particularly focused on language and comprehension development. Her approach to playing and learning for her child was structured. She engaged with her son through Dr Seuss's works to ensure that he received adequate language skills.

From the utterances of the participants, it is clear that they understood the benefits of play on the holistic development of children. Using various methods to play and learn, participants focused on the skills acquired by their children through playful learning. However, one wonders whether these are because the participants were middle-income families who have realised the value of buying books and educational toys, rather than guns and dolls, for their children. We were also aware that the social media, chat groups and communication from ECD centres that parents were exposed to, seemed to highlight the value of learning. These parents wanted their children to be academically sound. White et al. (2009) posit that when a child enters the early childhood environment, they also bring with them their 'whakapapa', their history and the hopes their family had for them in the future (White et al. 2009, 41). In the case of the children from the participating families in our study, the 'whakapapa' would be the need to achieve academically.

Parents' practices regarding the play-learning environment

When parents were asked about the play environment at home, all 6 showed that they intentionally had a set play and learning environment at home. They seemed to copy the environment at the ECD centre and extended this set-up to their home context. P1 had a 'dedicated room for play'; however, he told us that his child preferred playing where other people present and thus carried his toys around. P1 did not have a one-way approach to where his child should play, and he was open to his child playing where the child felt comfortable: *He often brings his toys or puzzles to work to where others are.* Although P1 believed in free play, he had set up a structured learning environment for his child.

P2, on the other hand, stipulated rules concerning her child's play and learning environment. She did not allow her child to play freely with all types of toys. There was a restriction on the number of hours her child played with particular toys. She applied a structured approach to her child's playful learning environment. P2 showed her strictness and disciplined parenting skills by saying: *My child also knows that she has to ask if she is allowed to play with certain toys.* P3 also made use of a structured environment for her child's play and learning. She created a school environment at home for her child. She has art equipment set out for her child and has a chalkboard for writing exercises in what was more of a formal setting: *It is structured sometimes when she does art or colouring, then I provide her with the colouring and art equipment and set it out for her.*

P4 had also set out specific play areas for different play activities. This parent was very particular and did not let her child just play in any environment: *We also have a dedicated space for outdoor play and depending on the activity, we set up for paint or gardening.*

P6 emphasised that learning was 'very important' while playing. She set up her child's play environment in a formal manner and stated:

We currently utilize our garage as a space for play/learning. We have set up tables and chairs as well as necessary stationery, map with alphabets in various colours a book corner, chalkboard an assortment of educational toys /most utilized toys.

Similarly, P3 had a set-up similar to a school environment. The environment she set up for her child included a chalkboard, alphabets and educational toys: it was an educational environment. In their study of the effect of school closure and prolonged home confinement on China's schoolchildren, Brooks et al. (2020) expressed their concerns about the negative effect on children's physical and mental health. They stated that children become less active, spend more time watching television and eat less healthy foods. The structured play home environments for young children troubled us as researchers. Would it not lead to mental and health issues for children?

P5 said that she did not have a structured environment for play and learning for her child. Like P1, she focused on the aspect of making play and learning fun for her child: *I try to make it as fun as possible. Most of the time, its free play and my child chooses what to do. Having the right toys or equipment is important.* This statement confirms that she sought out developmentally appropriate toys intentionally for the optimal development of her child.

What was surprising in the study was that although the parents were aware of playful learning and the benefits of play for children, they had set up a structured learning environment at home. We acknowledge that the COVID-19 lockdown could have influenced the home environments. Parents are themselves occupied with working at home. Therefore the most disciplined way to get their children settled, is to provide them with their own workspace as well. The parents thus seemed to have assumed the role of the educator. Daniels (2020) also calls for the parental educational role to be reimagined for its value in advancing educational goals. During the lockdown, it seems, parents have taken on educator roles that they are navigating in home climates filled with anxiety and vulnerability, 'As education happens in the home space, the pedagogy that the parent as generic educator follows focuses less on education, and more on learning', says Daniels (2020). The successes that many caregivers have with their children's learning could lead to recognition of the parent as co-educator and contributor to their children's academic success. It could also lead to the acknowledgement of informal learning opportunities and interventions that happen in homes as valuable and educationally worthwhile. Therefore, this reality has resulted in a structured environment for South African children, even though they were just 3–4 years old.

Conclusion

In this study, we explored parents' understanding of play and their engagement in supporting their young children through playful interactions. However, due to the rapid pace of life, the COVID-19 pandemic and the competitive modern lifestyle in middle-income societies, we noticed a decrease in free play and its replacement by more structured activities at home. Despite the social desirability bias, our research revealed that all participants were aware of the benefits of play to the holistic development of the child. However, their engagement with their children seemed to be based on structured play activities. Influenced by the vast array of learning materials available during COVID-19 and the ECD teachers' constant Whatsapp messages about stimulation activities, have perhaps resulted in an overemphasis on learning from parents. This focus could lead to children not having the fun, enjoyment and excitement that play offers. Social interaction with other children the same age, and positive caregiving practices such as love and care, were missing from parents' utterances. Children could be faced with mental and health issues due to the lack of free play activities, and the lack of love and playful learning. Children's rights are a concern, and we need to be certain that a child's holistic development is enhanced and not damaged by their parents' strict educational interactions. Therefore, it has become urgent for ECCE professionals to provide parental guidance to parents of babies, toddlers and infants, to ensure that play remains what it was – fun – and that children experience the joys and wonder of free play. Future research on the role of ECCE professionals to support children's play at home during Covid-19 may prove beneficial.

Disclosure statement

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