



Investigation of Preschool Education and Child Development Undergraduate Students' Thoughts on Play

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to reveal the thoughts of 2nd-year students studying in preschool teaching and child development undergraduate programs about plays. A case study, one of the qualitative research designs, was used in the study. 72 students, 41 from preschool teaching and 31 from child development undergraduate programs, participated in the study. The thoughts of undergraduate students about plays were collected with the help of a semi-structured interview form prepared by the researcher. Students were asked questions about what plays are, why children play, what they provide to children, the role of plays in education, factors affecting plays and negative aspects of plays. The study was designed as a qualitative case study. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview form with open-ended questions and analyzed using content analysis. According to the results of the study, undergraduate students defined plays as fun and a teaching tool. In addition, they emphasized that children play to express themselves. They stated that plays support children's developmental areas. They stated that permanent learning can be achieved by using plays in education, but educators should make appropriate preparations in planning and implementation. They emphasized that the main affecting factors plays are the environment and the content and type of plays. Undergraduate students stated that children playing digital games too much can cause addiction and that this situation can be a negative aspect of plays. The results were discussed within the framework of the literature and suggestions were made.

KEYWORDS

Preschool education; preschool teacher candidate; child development; play view; undergraduate program.

INTRODUCTION

Play is a universal language. However, there are different views, theories, and research on the definition of play (Brooker, 2010; Gaskins et al. 2007). It is said that play arises spontaneously, changes, matures, and deepens with age, and is also influenced by experience. In the literature on early childhood, play is defined as a child-centered activity, free from external rules, generally initiated and directed by the child, and including elements of imitation and imagination (Fleer, 2011; Rubin et al. 1983; Sutton-Smith, 2001).

Play plays a significant role in the acquisition of various skills by supporting many areas of children's development, including cognitive, social, emotional, physical, sexual, and language development (Ginsburg, 2007; Zembat & Yılmaz, 2020). Especially in early childhood, children are observed to have a very high learning speed, explore their environment with great curiosity, and see everything as a field of research for them. In this intense learning process, children experience a natural learning experience by fulfilling their needs to move, touch, experiment, think, and feel through play. This process increases children's intrinsic motivation towards learning and allows them to experience a sense of competence. During play, children have the opportunity to develop life skills such as social interaction, problem-solving, communication, decision-making, and self-regulation. The impact of play on children's learning and development is extremely effective and lasting, surpassing the contributions that can be achieved through other means (Miller & Almon, 2009; Whitebread et al. 2012).

Children use both gross and fine motor skills intensively while playing. They perform gross motor movements requiring jumping, leaping, running, pushing, pulling, carrying, balance, strength, endurance, and flexibility, as well as fine motor movements such as cutting, holding, tying, attaching, disassembling, squeezing, gluing, and sewing. These movements support children's physical development. Children frequently perform these movements during their play (Hoşgör, 2010). Play allows children to learn social values, rules, and responsibilities. In this process, children face the consequences of their actions and receive positive or negative feedback. Thus, they realize which behaviors are acceptable and which are not. Experiences such as acceptance or rejection by society are concretely experienced through friendships during play (California Department of Education, 2010; Lockhart, 2010). In addition to being an enjoyable process for children, play teaches them that approved behaviors should be reinforced and that undesirable behaviors should be controlled and regulated (Tuğrul, 2017).

While playing, children acquire new knowledge by using their existing information; they blend old knowledge with new information, make interpretations, and thus advance their knowledge construction processes. This process is quite exciting for children and offers them the opportunity to understand the world (Nwokah et al. 2013; Tuğrul et al., 2014b). Furthermore, they actively use mental skills such as problem-solving, planning, self-regulation, and evaluation during play (Whitebread et al. 2012).

Play, which is important for children, is a crucial part of their education. Play-based educational activities facilitate easier motivation in learning environments and provide opportunities for lasting learning (Pellegrini & Smith, 2007). It has been emphasized that children make sense of information more effectively in a free environment, interact with their surroundings, and concentrate their attention by actively participating, as behaviors and skills emerge in this environment (Oktay, 1999; Tezel Şahin, 1993).

Theorists working on play in the field of child development have also drawn attention to the developmental importance of play (Frost, 2010). Jean Piaget (1962) considers play as a reflection of the child's cognitive development and classifies plays according to the developmental stages of children. According to him, play is a cognitive process that progresses from the sensorimotor stage to symbolic play and rule-based play. Lev Vygotsky (cited in Haktanır, et al. 2013) evaluates play in a socio-cultural context; he argues that in play environments where the child assumes social roles and creates symbolic meanings, the child experiences the "zone of proximal development," and thus cognitive development is supported through social interaction. Mildred Parten (1932) classified play behaviors according to their levels of sociability and revealed the gradual role of play in the child's social development. According to her, play is a process that extends from independent play played alone to cooperative social play. Smilansky (cited in Riley, 1973), influenced by Piaget's theoretical framework, classified plays as functional, structural, dramatic, and rule-based; she particularly emphasized the importance of dramatic play in terms of language development and social role-taking.

These theoretical approaches reveal how play supports different aspects of child development and make the question of how individuals working or studying in the field of early childhood education understand play even more important (Fisher et al. 2008). The perspectives of preschool teacher candidates and child development undergraduate students on play directly affect their professional competence, their interaction with children, and how they will use play-based teaching approaches. Therefore, examining students' thoughts on play is a fundamental step in creating quality educational environments that support children's play experiences. These theoretical perspectives not only explain the developmental functions of play but also provide a conceptual framework for understanding how educators and prospective teachers perceive, interpret, and implement play in educational contexts.

Beyond theoretical discussions, a growing body of research has focused on teachers' and prospective teachers' beliefs about play and how these beliefs influence classroom practices. Studies indicate that while teacher candidates generally value play and acknowledge its developmental benefits, they may experience difficulties in translating this theoretical understanding into pedagogical practice (Lynch, 2015; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). In particular, prospective teachers often conceptualize play as a natural and beneficial activity for children, yet tend to prioritize academically oriented or teacher-directed activities in instructional

contexts (Pyle et al., 2018). This discrepancy highlights the importance of examining how undergraduate students define play and position it within educational processes.

Play is a natural part of a child's life. According to Huizinga (1995), play is a universal phenomenon that appeals not only to children but also to adults. For someone playing, participating in, or witnessing play, there may be different definitions, schemas, patterns, or places associated with it. Compared to children, teachers and educators may have different perspectives on the definition of play. It can be said that they find play developmentally beneficial, fun, educational, and a means of self-expression, and they see it as a method (Giren, 2016; Güneş et al. 2012; Tuğrul et al., 2014a). Educators' thoughts on loving and supporting play during their education, and making it a part of the educational process, influence children's desire to learn and their creativity, increase their motivation, and promote positive behavior and harmony with their environment (Bateson & Martin, 2013; Zembat & Yilmaz, 2020).

Recent discussions in early childhood education have emphasized the distinction and balance between free play and structured, play-based learning. While free play is associated with children's autonomy, creativity, and self-regulation, guided or structured play has been highlighted as a pedagogical approach that intentionally supports learning outcomes without undermining the playful nature of the activity (Pyle & DeLuca, 2017; Weisberg et al., 2016). Research suggests that educators' perceptions of play significantly shape how they design learning environments and the extent to which they integrate play into instructional practices. Therefore, understanding undergraduate students' perceptions of play is critical for evaluating how future educators may approach play pedagogy in practice. In this context, examining how undergraduate students conceptualize play provides important insights into the development of their pedagogical understanding of play-based learning.

It is of great importance to train educators who correctly understand children's interaction with play in their developmental processes and who can prepare appropriate educational environments accordingly. By revealing how students define play, the meanings they attribute to it, the place of play in education, and their level of awareness regarding its potential negative effects, contributions are made to evaluating the content and practices of teacher training programs. It is known that in preschool education and child development undergraduate programs, the importance of play is emphasized throughout the education, and students can gain experiences that can influence their perspectives on play (Hyvonen, 2011). These undergraduate programs offer courses such as early childhood play development and education, traditional plays in early childhood, play and play materials, and children and play, which provide theoretical foundations of play and incorporate applications and experiences (YÖK, 2018). At the same time, these courses can ensure that undergraduate students have a positive perception of play; enabling them to both support play in its free form and to use it effectively in structured educational activities. It is considered important to examine the perceptions of preschool teacher candidates and child development undergraduate students regarding play, especially those taking the course "Play Development and Education in Early

Childhood Education," which discusses the theoretical and practical framework of play. This is because the thoughts, opinions, and perspectives that both teacher candidates and child development students develop regarding play can be reflected in their practices and subsequent professional lives (Bergen, 2002). Teacher candidates who take the play course gain the skills to guide children without interfering in their play, conduct developmental assessments, and enrich play environments (Edwards, 2017). This positively affects not only individual development but also classroom management and the quality of learning. The differences in teachers' perceptions of play and how they are reflected in classroom practices are well known (Lynch, 2015). Therefore, play education should be an integral part of pedagogical knowledge at the undergraduate level.

Moreover, existing research has primarily focused on in-service teachers, while studies examining the perceptions of undergraduate students in preschool teacher education and child development programs remain limited, particularly in terms of how these students define play, associate it with developmental domains, and position it as an educational tool. Theoretical perspectives on play, such as those proposed by Piaget, Vygotsky, and Parten, provide important conceptual foundations for understanding children's play behaviors; however, previous research indicates that theoretical knowledge alone does not guarantee effective pedagogical use of play in educational settings (Edwards, 2017; Hyvonen, 2011). In this context, examining how undergraduate students interpret and internalize these theoretical frameworks is essential. Drawing on these theoretical perspectives and empirical discussions, the present study examines undergraduate students' perceptions of play in relation to its developmental functions and pedagogical role in early childhood education.

In this regard, fostering positive thoughts about play can help them both support free play and use it more effectively in educational activities. Play is an important activity, method, and tool that supports children's physical, mental, emotional, and social development. Therefore, correct learning, perspectives, and experiences regarding play education are acquired during undergraduate education. Accordingly, this study aims to examine the perceptions of preschool teacher education and child development undergraduate students regarding play and to explore how undergraduate education shapes these perceptions. In line with this this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- How do preschool teacher education and child development undergraduate students define the concept of play?
- How do undergraduate students perceive the role of play in early childhood education and child development?
- How do undergraduate students associate play with different developmental domains?

METHOD

This study was conducted with the permission of the xx University Education Sciences Ethics Committee, numbered 12/25 and dated 30.12.2024. A qualitative research design was used in

this study. The research was conducted as a case study. A case study is a research model that focuses on why and how questions and on real life, where researchers have little possibility of intervening in events and phenomena (Merriam, 2013; Yin, 2003). A case study design was used in this study because it aimed to conduct a detailed analysis of the phenomenon of play within defined boundaries.

Participants

The participant group of this study consists of second-year undergraduate students in preschool education and child development at xx University. Since the study group was selected based on the research problem, participants were chosen using purposive sampling according to the criterion of taking a play course. (Merriam, 2013). The reason for including both undergraduate programs in the study was that the play course was offered in the fall semester and that students were acquiring new skills related to play. A total of 72 undergraduate students participated in the study: 41 from the preschool education program and 31 from the child development program. The students were taking the play course for the first time. There were no male students in the child development program. There were eight male students in the preschool education program. The average age of the participating students was 22.

Data Collection Tool and Process

In this study, data were obtained using a semi-structured interview method in line with the research objective. The aim of the interview method is to gather in-depth information. An interview is an activity to understand the feelings and thoughts of individuals included in the research about a topic or situation (Berg and Lune, 2015). The use of the interview method in this study aims to gain in-depth insight into the thoughts of undergraduate students about play. An interview form prepared by the researcher was used in the interview method. The form includes questions to determine demographic information (age, gender, prior course experience) and six open-ended questions. Demographic information was used to more clearly define the group characteristics of the participants in the study. In the open-ended questions aimed at obtaining thoughts about play, all dimensions were included in a way that reflects the basic framework of play. The questions were submitted to the opinion of two experts with doctoral degrees in the field of preschool education, and after being finalized, they were transferred to a digital environment. Participants were informed that participation in the research was voluntary and that the information they provided would only be used for scientific research. The researcher met with the students in the classroom, provided them with a link to the digital form, and waited for them to complete it. The students completed the form within 20-30 minutes.

Data Analysis

The findings obtained from the study were analyzed by identifying themes and codes within the framework of content analysis methodology. The information obtained from the digital form was converted into documents and analyzed using the MAXQDA 2020 software. Content analysis is a systematic qualitative analysis method frequently used to analyze interview-based

data by organizing verbal or written responses into meaningful units, codes, categories, and themes (Creswell, 2013; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Through this process, data that are similar and related to each other are grouped together and interpreted within the framework of specific concepts and themes allowing participants' views to be systematically defined (Karataş, 2015). In content analysis, participant statements were limited to codes determined according to their semantic integrity. This method enables researchers to interpret participants' views by identifying recurring patterns and underlying meanings within qualitative data (Miles & Huberman, 2014). In the analysis process, conducted an initial reading to become familiar with the data and created a draft code scheme containing the given responses. After coding according to the draft scheme, the researcher performed a more in-depth reading and re-coded the data. During this process, codes were added to or removed from the draft scheme. The students' statements were reviewed again, and the suitability of the determined codes was determined. Each student was given a number related to their department. Preschool education students were assigned codes PTC1, PTC2 , ... and child development undergraduate students were assigned codes CD1, CD2 , ... The data were arranged in this order. The reliability of the research was ensured by consulting expert opinions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the analysis of the data, another expert independently analyzed the data set in addition to the researcher. Conflicting situations were discussed again, and an attempt was made to reach a common conclusion. Inter-researcher agreement was found to be 82%.

FINDINGS

This study, which examined the thoughts of students enrolled in preschool teacher training and child development undergraduate programs about play, presents the findings together. Content analysis was conducted, and the codes in the responses were used as the basis. In this case, the number of statements made is greater than the number of students.

Undergraduate students were asked questions about their general thoughts on gaming, the reasons why children play and the benefits gaming provides to children, and the resulting codes are shown in Table 1 (see appendix).

According to Table 1, undergraduate students were asked the question "What is play?", and when the responses were converted into codes, the most frequent answer was that play is an enjoyable and fun activity. Students frequently defined play as activities that are educational, supportive of development, rule-based, allow children to express themselves, and in which they participate voluntarily. Looking at the programs, both programs touched upon similar points.

However, undergraduate child development students more frequently answered that play is a way to release energy, provide relaxation, and is a tool used for problem-solving. Some examples of the undergraduate students' answers are presented: *"Play is important in a child's life. Children support various aspects of their development through play. Physical, social, sensory, personality, and psychomotor development are examples of this"* (PTC15, supportive of development). *"It is generally an activity that helps us have a good time and have fun"* (CD23,

enjoyable/fun). *"Play is an activity that a child constructs according to their own personality, and in this way, reveals their true personality"* (PTC8, self-expression). The fact that undergraduate students primarily describe play as an enjoyable and developmental activity indicates that they generally have an accurate and positive understanding of play. However, the limited emphasis placed on planning, instructional goals, or the educator's role suggests that students tend to conceptualize play primarily at a descriptive level rather than as a structured pedagogical process. This situation may be attributed to the dominance of theoretical perspectives on play in undergraduate education and limited opportunities to experience how play can be systematically integrated into teaching practices.

According to Table 1, the most frequent answer given by students to the question "Why do children play?" was that children play to get to know and express themselves. This was followed by statements related to making sense of life, understanding, needing things, and showing emotions. Looking at the answers from a program perspective, the answer "learning by doing and experiencing" did not appear among child development students. Some of the answers from undergraduate students are presented: *"Play is the language of emotions in children. They show their emotions in play"* (PTC1, emotion transfer). *"Play and children cannot be considered separately; children meet their needs in many areas through play and use their excess energy in play"* (CD12, needs). The students' frequent emphasis on self-expression as the rationale for play reflects their awareness of the emotional and social dimensions of play. This finding is consistent with child-centered theoretical perspectives; however, the relatively limited emphasis on adult support or guided interaction suggests that students may not yet fully recognize the educator's role in actively scaffolding these processes within play-based learning environments.

According to Table 1, students most frequently answered the question "What does play provide/gain for a child?" with "It contributes to development." The most common answers to this question were that it facilitates the child's learning about life, that it is a teaching method, that it supports personality development, and that it helps solve problems. No significant differences in answers were found among undergraduate programs. Some of the answers given by undergraduate students are as follows: *"Play is a learning tool for children. They learn many things by playing"* (CD30, teaching method). *"Play is preparation for life, therefore children can develop the skills they learn in play later in life"* (PTC32, teaches life). *"Play is indispensable. It nourishes the child's sense of discovery, enables them to learn and ask questions"* (CD7, solves/ discovers problems). While students associated play with multiple developmental domains, their explanations largely remained general and outcome-oriented. Rather than describing how play supports learning processes, students focused on what play provides. This pattern suggests a gap between students' knowledge of developmental outcomes and their understanding of the pedagogical mechanisms through which play facilitates learning.

The answers to the students' questions about the place of play in education, the factors influencing play, and the potential negative aspects of play are presented in Table 2 (see appendix).

According to Table 2, students were asked the question, "What is the role of play in education?" Students evaluated the use of play in education from both positive and negative perspectives. In their responses, students stated that using play in the educational process can make learning easier and more enjoyable for children, ensure active participation and retention, and support development. As negative aspects of using play in education, students mentioned the inability to plan and implement plays appropriately, the potential for technological game tools to create addiction in children, the possibility of children being excluded from the play, and insufficient resources. Some of the responses given by undergraduate students are as follows: *"If there is play in education, learning becomes easier and faster, it increases children's participation in the activity, and we can make a difficult process like learning simpler thanks to play"* (CD22, easy learning). *"It is an effective method. If designed correctly, it is very effective. However, teachers who do not have knowledge about how to plan and implement plays can negatively affect the process"* (PTC20, lack of planning/implementation). The emphasis on the need for proper planning and implementation indicates that undergraduate students are aware of the potential risks of poorly designed play-based activities. However, these concerns also suggest limited pedagogical confidence in managing play as a teaching method. This finding points to a gap between students' positive beliefs about play and their readiness to implement play-based pedagogy effectively in educational settings.

According to Table 2, the most frequent answer to the question "What factors influence play?" asked of students was related to the need for a safe environment. Other factors influencing play were identified by students as the content of the play, the child's developmental level, adult intervention, the presence of toys, adult attitudes, rules, and voluntary participation. No change was observed in the factors influencing play between the programs. Some of the undergraduate students' responses are presented: *"Play materials that increase creativity and toys that children adopt cause play to last longer"* (PTC18, material/toy). *"External interventions are very important while children are playing. Interventions that negatively affect the child's imagination should not be made, and the child's enthusiasm should not be dampened"* (CD2, adult intervention). While adult intervention was frequently cited as an influential factor, students did not provide detailed information on how or when such interventions should occur, or how educators could balance guidance with children's autonomy in play. This suggests that while students may possess general theoretical knowledge about factors influencing play, they may struggle to translate this knowledge into deliberate pedagogical strategies. From a teacher training perspective, this finding indicates a need for more practice-oriented learning experiences that support students in developing reflective and contextually sensitive approaches to facilitating play.

According to Table 2, the most frequent answer to the question "Do you think gaming can have a negative impact?" asked of undergraduate students was that addiction can develop due to excessive screen exposure while playing digital games. According to undergraduate students, the inappropriateness of the play to the developmental level, inactivity due to prolonged screen time, playing symbolic plays with inappropriate content, the presence of overly competitive plays, and the content of digital games are seen as negative effects of gaming for children. Differences were observed in the responses among the programs. For child development undergraduate students, learning incorrect information from a playmate and not being able to participate in plays for a child with special needs were answered as negative situations. Some examples of the responses given by undergraduate students are presented: "Children with special needs being excluded by their friends in the plays they play can negatively affect them" (CD19, disability status). *"While playing with peers, they may give the child incorrect information and frighten them"* (CD10, learning incorrect information from a peer). Students' predominant focus on the negative effects of digital games, particularly addiction and excessive screen time, indicates a heightened awareness of current challenges in early childhood education. Nevertheless, the relatively limited reference to the educational potential of digital games suggests that students' perspectives may be shaped more by societal concerns than by pedagogical discussions on the balanced and purposeful use of digital play.

Figure 1 shows the most frequently occurring codes in the responses of undergraduate students in preschool education and child development.

Figure 1

The most commonly used codes.



According to Figure 1, the most frequent response given by undergraduate students regarding play concerns its relationship with development. The fact that it is an enjoyable and fun activity, and that it serves an educational purpose, was also frequently emphasized. The use of play by children as a way for self-recognition and expression was also among the responses.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the views of undergraduate students in preschool education and child development regarding play. The findings show that students made multi-dimensional evaluations of play, including its definition, developmental contributions, role in education, environmental effects, and potential negative aspects. While the theoretical knowledge acquired in their undergraduate programs was reflected in their responses, it was observed that their views remained superficial in some areas and needed to be deepened in terms of practical application. This superficiality may also be related to the changing meaning of play across generations, as current students tend to associate play with entertainment and leisure more than with its pedagogical and developmental dimensions (Tuğrul et al., 2014b).

From the perspective of teacher education, these findings suggest that undergraduate programs should move beyond emphasizing the developmental benefits of play at a theoretical level and provide structured opportunities for students to experience, analyze, and reflect on play in practice. Application-based components such as guided play observations, play planning workshops, and micro-teaching activities focused on play-based learning may help teacher candidates deepen their understanding of play as a pedagogical process rather than merely an enjoyable activity.

In particular, engaging students in analyzing video-based play scenarios, designing play activities aligned with developmental goals, and reflecting on the role of adult intervention during play can support the development of pedagogical judgment. Such practices may enable teacher candidates to better understand when and how to guide play without limiting children's autonomy. Additionally, incorporating reflective discussions that link play experiences to theoretical frameworks may strengthen the connection between theory and practice in undergraduate education. These application-oriented approaches can contribute to preparing future educators who are not only aware of the value of play but also competent in implementing play-based pedagogy effectively in educational settings.

Students frequently described play as a "fun" and "educational" activity. This aligns with Fröbel's definition of play as a child's natural way of learning (Sevinç, 2004) and Montessori's view linking play to children's developmental needs (Kayılı, 2010; Lillard, 2013). Huizinga (1995) emphasizes the pleasurable aspect of play, while Lazarus defines play as a spontaneous activity that brings happiness (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2006). The findings indicate that students have partially internalized theoretical knowledge, but most of the definitions do not encompass the holistic functions of play.

Students viewed play as a means of self-expression for children and a natural part of life. This approach parallels Vygotsky's view that play is a means of learning social roles and internalizing cultural values. Furthermore, the fact that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines play as a right (1989) supports this finding. It is a well-established fact in the literature that children can express their emotions through play and feel free in this

process (Koçyiğit et al. 2007; Wong et al., 2011). This awareness among the students indicates that they are beginning to understand the child-centered approach.

The findings indicate that students are aware of the developmental contributions of play, but express these contributions at a generalized level. Piaget and Vygotsky's theories of play clearly reveal the role of play in cognitive development. In the literature, play is defined as a process that supports cognitive, social, emotional, language, and motor development (Onur & Güney, 2004; Özdoğan, 2009). The superficiality of the students' responses may stem from the fact that, as Broadhead (2006) points out, prospective teachers' skills in observing and analyzing learning opportunities in the play process are not sufficiently developed.

Students emphasized that play is a tool that provides lasting learning in education; however, they pointed out the necessity of proper planning and implementation for effective use. This finding is consistent with studies that highlight the importance of striking a balance between structured and free play (Howard & McInnes, 2012; Lillard, 2013). However, students' knowledge of instructional planning appears to be limited. This situation indicates the need to strengthen the application-based content related to play in undergraduate programs (Wood, 2014).

Students identified the environment, type, and content of play as the most important factors influencing play. Within the context of Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach, a child's social, cultural, and physical environment directly shapes their play experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Furthermore, the type and content of play are key variables determining their contribution to developmental areas (Pilten & Pilten, 2013). The findings indicate that students possess theoretical knowledge on this point, but are limited in their ability to conduct in-depth analysis.

Students focused on the negative effects of digital games, drawing attention to problems such as addiction and social isolation. The literature indicates that excessive and uncontrolled use of digital games can create addiction and behavioral problems in children (Işıkoğlu Erdoğan, 2019), but that they can also provide educational benefits through content and duration management (Palaiologou, 2016). These views of the students show that their awareness of digital games is high, but their knowledge level regarding the positive uses of digital games remains limited.

This research examines the thoughts of undergraduate students in preschool education and child development programs regarding play, providing important data on how undergraduate students approach the concept of play. Although play is a critical element in early childhood, both developmentally and pedagogically, students' knowledge and awareness levels regarding this concept have been addressed in different studies. Saracho and Spodek (2003) emphasize that play is a fundamental element in the training of prospective teachers, both in its developmental and educational aspects. Sherwood and Reifel (2010) revealed that prospective teachers' knowledge levels regarding the concept of play are quite variable and that this awareness develops through the educational process. Koçyiğit and Baydilek (2015) state

that the perceptions of preschool teacher candidates regarding the concept of play vary and that this awareness is shaped by their experiences in the program. Educators who take a course on play are able to better understand children's needs and design learning processes more effectively. This directly increases the quality of play-based practices in early childhood education.

This study contributes to the literature by providing empirical data on how prospective teachers define play, which developmental domains they associate it with, and how they conceptualize play as an educational tool. Furthermore, the findings offer valuable insights into how the attitudes and knowledge levels of preschool teacher candidates and child development undergraduate students regarding play may influence their future professional practices. In this respect, the study constitutes an important data source for educators, researchers, and program developers.

Overall, it appears that students' views on play largely align with accurate information, but these views need further support with examples, theories, or applications in some dimensions. Play plays a critical role in children's cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development. Play is a natural way for children to learn. Students' views on this subject are an important tool for understanding the world of children and developing play-based learning strategies. The responses of undergraduate students indicate that they have an accurate perspective on play.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study was conducted with undergraduate students from a single university, which limits the generalizability of the results. Second, the data were collected through self-reported responses based on students' subjective evaluations; no classroom observations or practical applications were included in the study. Therefore, the findings primarily reflect students' theoretical knowledge and perceptions of play rather than their actual teaching practices. Additionally, the qualitative design of the study does not allow for causal interpretations. These limitations should be taken into account in future research.

Recommendations for Future Research

Following this study conducted with undergraduate students, some recommendations were made:

- Since undergraduate students' knowledge of plays is mostly at a theoretical level, more play-based teaching and applications (e.g., play design, play-based teaching strategies) should be integrated into programs.
- To measure the level of awareness of the play among undergraduate students, pre-test and post-test applications supported by quantitative research can be conducted.
- By comparing the perspectives of students who have and haven't received play education, the impact of undergraduate programs can be assessed more clearly.

- Longitudinal studies can be conducted with individuals in post-graduation professional life to examine the use of play-related skills acquired during undergraduate studies.

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APPENDIX

Table 1.

Content analysis results regarding the definitions of play by undergraduate students in child development and preschool education.

	Child development	Preschool education	Total
What is a play?			
Enjoyable / pleasant / fun	21	32	53
For educational/teaching purposes	20	28	48
Supportive of development	15	16	31
Having rules	10	15	25
Self-expression/awareness of emotions	6	11	17
Voluntarily	6	5	11
Energy release	5	1	6
communication tool	4	4	8
Preparing for/understanding life	4	2	6
Imaginative	3	3	6
Problem-solving / creative thinking	3	1	4
Why is it played?			
Self-expression/self-awareness	7	21	28
Giving meaning to life/being a part of life	6	17	23
Need/relief	7	7	14
Emotional connection/emotion transfer	6	4	10
Therapy/treatment process	3	6	9
Learning by doing and experiencing	0	5	5
What does it provide?			
It supports development.	38	40	78
He learns about life.	18	23	41

It is a teaching method.	18	21	39
It provides social skills/value acquisition/personality development.	16	17	33
Solves/discovered problems	5	8	13
He uses his imagination	5	4	9

Table 2.

Content analysis results regarding factors influencing play among undergraduate students in child development and preschool education.

	Child development	Preschool education	Total
Play in education			
<i>Positive role</i>			
Persistence/attention-grabbing	9	14	23
Easier learning	12	10	22
Supporting the acquisition/development of social skills.	10	12	22
Fun learning	8	13	21
Active participation	9	9	18
<i>Negative role</i>			
Lack of goal setting/planning/implementation evaluation	4	5	9
Technological addiction	3	2	5
Child exclusion/anxiety	1	2	3
Lack of resources	1	0	1
Factors influencing the play			
Safe environment/surroundings	12	13	25
Play content / genre	9	13	22
Age/development level	14	7	21
Adult intervention	9	9	18
Material/toy	7	10	17
Educator/family attitude	6	6	12
Level of rule-based play/too many rules	5	7	12
Voluntary participation / willingness	4	6	10

Negative effects of the play			
Screen time/addiction	12	13	25
Not appropriate for developmental level/age	10	9	19
Prolonged inactivity/health problems	5	10	15
Symbolic plays with violent/sexual content	4	10	14
Extreme competition	2	10	12
Content of digital games	5	3	8
Physical injury	2	2	4
Learning incorrect information from a playmate	2	0	2
Children with special needs/disability	1	0	1
