

Playwork Practices' Impact on Pre-service Preschool Teachers' Understanding of Play and Insights into Pedagogy of Play

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how playwork practices enhance the professional development of pre-service preschool teachers (PSTs) and explored the power of playwork practices on pre-service teachers' perceptions of play. Titled "Play for the Planet," the project involved 32 PSTs from early childhood education courses at a university, impacting around 650 preschool children and 300 families across two phases beginning in 2021. As part of their training, the PSTs managed loose playgrounds in a local open traditional park space and evaluated the impact of playwork practices on their growth and understanding of play. The findings reveal that playwork with loose parts not only deepens PSTs' comprehension of children's play but also significantly advances their professional development, fostering a richer appreciation of the pedagogy of play and equipping future educators with the skills to effectively support holistic child development.

KEYWORDS

Playwork; playwork practices; preservice teacher; teacher education.

INTRODUCTION

Playwork is a professional field focusing on supporting and promoting children's play. Playwork practice involves creating and maintaining environments in which children can engage in self-directed unstructured play. This approach recognizes the inherent value of play in children's development and well-being (King & Newstead, 2022). Playwork practitioners are trained to observe and understand children's play needs, provide appropriate opportunities, and ensure the safety of the play environment. Playwork practitioners also develop important relationships with their children and families, fostering a sense of trust and understanding. Through these relationships, playwork practitioners can better cater to the individual needs and interests of each child, thereby promoting their holistic development.

Playwork is an evolving profession that requires practitioners to update their knowledge and skills constantly. However, there are different definitions and understandings of playwork in the field. Some sources define playwork as a specific role within a playground, such as being responsible for the day-to-day running of a playground and facilitating play opportunities for children (King & Newstead, 2022). Other sources define playwork more broadly as a philosophy or approach to working with children that prioritizes their right to play and supports their self-directed play experiences. Regardless of the specific definition, playwork practitioners share the common goal of promoting and facilitating children's play (King & Newstead, 2022). Playwork, as a professional field, recognizes the importance of play in children's development and well-being. Playwork practitioners consider various theories and studies related to play, child development, and psychology. They apply this knowledge in their practice to create environments and opportunities that promote their children's play and overall well-being (Brown & Hughes, 2018)

Playwork practitioners also adhere to a set of principles that guide their practice, such as playwork principles. These principles, which include supporting children's right to play, valuing and respecting each child's individuality, and promoting inclusivity and equality in play, help playwork practitioners maintain a professional identity and provide a common framework for practice. For play training to be effective, the process of play and the role of practitioners in creating a playful environment should be prioritized (King & Newstead, 2019). Playwork training can equip teachers with skills to create engaging and supportive play environments that promote children's holistic development. Research suggests that professional development programs can improve teaching practices by helping teachers enact new ideas within their educational systems (Kennedy, 2016). By integrating playwork training into teachers' professional development, educators can enhance their ability to facilitate play-based learning experiences that cater to diverse learning styles and promote creativity and social interactions among students. Professional development plays a crucial role in equipping teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to create engaging and supportive play environments for children. By integrating playwork training into teachers' professional development programs,

educators can enhance their ability to facilitate play-based learning experiences. Playwork training can provide teachers with a deeper understanding of the importance of play in children's learning and development. This training can also help teachers develop strategies to effectively implement play-based learning in their classrooms, such as creating open-ended materials and incorporating cooperative play activities.

Theoretical Framework and Project Implementation

The project was based on the theoretical framework of playwork (Hughes, 2001) and the pedagogy of loose parts (Nicholson, 1971), which emphasizes the importance of child-led play and exploration with diverse and open-ended materials. The playwork framework, as described by Hughes, emphasizes the importance of play in children's development and well-being. It recognizes play as a significant and valuable activity that is guided more by imagination than by fixed rules. Playwork focuses on creating environments and opportunities for children to engage in self-directed play, where they can explore, experiment, and make independent decisions (Hughes, 2001). However, the pedagogy of loose parts, as formulated by Nicholson (1971), emphasizes the value of open-ended materials in promoting creativity and problem-solving skills in play. Loose parts are materials that can be moved, manipulated, and transformed in various ways, allowing children to use their imagination and inventiveness to create their own play experience. The use of loose parts in play allows children to engage in open-ended and imaginative play, in which they have the freedom to explore and experiment with different materials and ideas (Nicholson, 1971).

Play for the project, which is the subject of this research, is implemented in a two-stage process that started in 2021, to ensure that children receive free play from an early age and to encourage them to adopt sustainable development principles in Turkey. At the same time, the project provides an opportunity to strengthen the playwork practices required for the professional development of pre-service teachers.

The First Phases of Project

Launched in June 2021 under the auspices of the Alanya Municipality and the Alanya District Governorate in Türkiye, this project emerged in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, marking a significant post-pandemic community initiative. Alanya, located on the southern coast of Turkey in the province of Antalya, is a popular tourist destination known for its beautiful beaches and rich historical heritage. The foundational team was comprised of eight volunteers, all of whom were university graduates. A comprehensive playwork training program was conducted in the final week of June, delivering a 15-hour curriculum over five days. This curriculum encompassed a range of topics pertinent to early childhood development, including play pedagogy, playwork methodologies, the concept and design of adventure playgrounds, the integration of loose parts in play, and essential first aid skills. The training was designed not only to enrich the volunteers' understanding of child-led play, but also to equip them with practical skills for employing loose parts effectively in play settings.

After the completion of their training, the volunteers-initiated play sessions adjacent to a conventional playground in Alanya, a location frequented by numerous families and children. A storage facility was established nearby to house an assortment of loose parts, which were then made available to the children by playworkers. The assortment of materials provided for play included, but was not limited to, large pipes, tires, fabric scraps, cardboard boxes, playballs, and various household items, all of which were sourced from the recycling operations of Alanya Municipality. This initiative facilitated engagement from children across different age groups, encouraging creative and unstructured play with diverse materials.

The project officially commenced operations on July 3-4, 2021, and continued without interruption until July 18, 2021, when it was suspended owing to a resurgence of COVID-19 cases in the area. However, following the catastrophic forest fire in Alanya Manavgat on August 12, 2021, the project was reinvigorated as a mobile, sustainable play area dedicated to serving the children affected by the disaster. In this new phase, volunteers were mobilized to reach out to children in villages impacted by the forest fire, demonstrating the project's adaptability and commitment to fostering resilience and recovery through play in crisis-affected communities.

The Second Phase of the Project

Following the successful resumption of the project with the return to in-person university education in October 2022, where 40 preschool teacher candidates underwent approximately six weeks or 15 hours of comprehensive playworker training, the initiative broadened its impact through various phases across October and November 2021, and April and May 2022. This period of re-engagement not only reinforced the project's commitment to play-based learning but also marked a significant milestone in May 2022, when Alanya Can Preschool extended an invitation to the project team. This collaboration offered preschool children a unique opportunity to engage with loose parts of materials, further enriching their learning experiences.

Play for the Planet: The Synergy of Sustainability and Free Play

The transition towards incorporating sustainable practices within this project underscores a deeper objective beyond the immediate educational benefits of play. By introducing young learners to the principles of sustainable development through interactive and hands-on play experiences, the project seeks to cultivate early awareness and appreciation of environmental stewardship. This strategic inclusion of sustainability in the curriculum is designed to foster the generation of environmentally conscious individuals who recognize the importance of sustainable living from a young age. Therefore, this project serves as a bridge between practical playwork education for future preschool teachers and the broader goal of embedding environmental responsibility within the fabric of early childhood education.

The initiative encourages children to harness their creativity, imagination, and craft their own play activities by supplying a variety of loose parts materials. This engagement in unstructured play not only bolsters their creative and problem-solving capabilities but also enhances their social interactions and emotional self-regulation. Importantly, such free play

advocates for sustainability by motivating children to repurpose and reimagine the use of materials, aligning with eco-friendly practices.

The project places a high value on creativity as an essential developmental skill by providing a platform for self-expression and imaginative exploration. Through the act of creative play, children learn to express their ideas, solve problems innovatively, and expand their imaginative horizons. Creativity also plays a pivotal role in sustainable development by inspiring innovative solutions and alternative thinking patterns. The introduction of loose parts encourages children to think creatively, fostering unique approaches to play. The training of pre-service preschool teachers emphasizes the critical role of nurturing creativity, ensuring that future educators are equipped to support this developmental aspect.

The project integrates playworker training within preschool teacher education, offering invaluable insights for those aspiring to careers in early childhood education. This training underscores the significance of encouraging creativity, guiding free play, and instilling environmental consciousness through play. Playworkers are trained to assist children in exploring their creativity and self-confidence while ensuring a safe and accessible play environment. Such interactions not only benefit the children but also provide playworkers with insights into their influence on the play setting and the reciprocal impact of play on their practice, promoting a mindful approach to facilitating play.

There are other studies on the importance of playwork practices in terms of teachers' understanding of play and improving their knowledge, abilities, attitudes, and practices in pedagogy of play. Simoncini and Lasen (2021) demonstrated that pop-up playgrounds combined with service-learning experiences significantly enhance early childhood teacher candidates' understanding of children's play, the use of free pieces, and the concept of diluting structured play. This discovery underlines the capability of pop-up playgrounds to enable pre-service teachers to grasp and promote the significance of spontaneous play, the creative use of materials, and the value of unstructured play experiences.

Furthermore, another study found that playwork training had a positive effect on kindergarten teachers by enhancing their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and practices regarding the implementation of indigenous play-based pedagogy, thereby increasing the active participation of learners in the educational process (Elinam et al., 2020). Additionally, incorporating playwork training in postgraduate education elevates teachers' preparedness by blending value-based, cognitive, and reflexive components. This amalgamation fosters the effective application of play-based strategies within the educational framework (Roma, 2020). Current research emphasizes the substantial influence of playwork training across various levels of teacher education, highlighting its effectiveness in cultivating a comprehensive understanding and application of play-based pedagogy. This previous endeavor signifies a noteworthy achievement in the realm of early childhood education in Turkey. It stands as the nation's initial loose part and sustained play initiative, coordinated by an enthusiastic team of pre-school pre-service teachers. The idea has been cleverly modified to function as a

transportable facility, offering children a secure and supportive setting to relax and recover from distressing incidents like forest fires. The program seeks to broaden and incorporate the establishment of mobile playgrounds for preschools and kindergartens across Alanya, thereby offering additional chances for children to participate in unrestricted, imaginative, and environmentally friendly play.

As a result of the practices in the project, it was aimed to reveal the contributions of the playwork training received by the pre-service teachers to their professional development and their responsibilities in the practices changed their understanding of play,

For this purpose, answers to the following questions were sought within the scope of this study.

1. How has playwork training changed pre-service teachers' understanding of play?
2. How does playwork training affect pre-service teachers' professional development?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore the impact of playwork practices on pre-service teachers' understanding of play and its implications for their professional development. Qualitative research aims to deeply understand and interpret individuals' or groups' experiences, meanings, and interactions with the world (Creswell, 2017). Specifically, a case study design is utilized because it allows for an in-depth examination of a particular phenomenon, in this case, the influence of playwork education on teacher candidates, within its real-life context (Yin, 2014). Given the nature of our research questions, the case study design is identified as the most suitable methodological approach to provide a rich, detailed account of teacher candidates' experiences. Merriam (2015) suggested that a case study, characterized by a detailed analysis of a specific system, is the ideal design for comprehending, exploring, and interpreting a desired phenomenon in qualitative research.

Participants

Purposeful sampling is employed in this study to select individuals who have undergone playwork training and applied these practices in various educational settings. Purposeful sampling is a qualitative research technique where individuals are deliberately selected based on specific characteristics directly related to the research questions (Patton, 2015). This selection is crucial for understanding the impact of playwork practices on pre-services teacher professional development and perspectives on play. Therefore, the research was conducted using a purposeful sampling method. In this purposeful sampling method, researchers deliberately select individuals and places to learn or understand the main phenomenon (Creswell 2017).

During the first and second phases of the research project, thirty-two pre-school teacher candidates who participated in the project voluntarily were asked about their experiences after playwork practices with children and how this process would contribute when they started their

own professional teaching. All participants were 3rd and 4th grade pre-school teaching students. 65% were girls; 35 % were men. The mean age was 22,8 years, and the standard deviation was 1.24.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and observation notes to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. Semi-structured interviews offer flexibility to explore participants' experiences and perceptions in depth (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Interview questions were designed to uncover how teacher candidates interpreted their experiences with playwork practices, how these experiences contributed to their professional development, and how their views on the understanding of play were shaped. Observation notes complement the interview data by closely following the interactions and reactions of teacher candidates during the application of playwork practices, enriching and supporting the interview data.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using content analysis. This method systematically categorizes and codes qualitative data, then organizes it under specific themes or categories (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). During the research process, the data were recorded regularly and the codes obtained after the analysis of these data were combined under themes by the researcher. The themes and sub-themes obtained after the data analysis were sent to three field experts, and the themes and sub-themes were finalized in line with the opinions of the experts. Data analysis continued until data saturation was reached, meaning no new data added to the analysis resulted in new themes or interpretations (Saunders et al., 2018). This process strengthens the study's scope and depth and ensures the reliability of the findings. Data were grouped around key themes such as "*Changes in Play Understanding*," "*Perceived Effects of Playwork Training on Professional Teacher Development*," These themes reflect how teacher candidates interpreted the impact of playwork training on their professional journeys and changes in their understanding of play.

Reliability and Validity

To ensure the study's reliability and validity, several measures were taken. First, triangulation was used to check consistency across different data collection methods (interviews and observations) (Denzin, 2017). Secondly, another researcher independently coded the data to minimize the influence of subjectivity, then compared findings. Third, to enhance the study's validity, analyzed themes and categories were shared with participants for feedback (Creswell & Miller, 2000). These steps support the study's reliability and validity, confirming that the research findings accurately reflect participants' experiences.

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from participants before data collection commenced, ensuring the confidentiality and

anonymity of personal information. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

FINDINGS

When a content analysis was conducted based on pre-service teachers' thoughts Changes in Play Understanding,". it was found that four different sub-themes: the sophistication and flexibility of play, play's autonomy and initiative, the pedagogical aspect of play and the creative aspect of play

Changes in Play Understanding

The Sophistication and Flexibility of Play: Pre-service teachers emphasized that play does not occur only within certain rules and structures; instead, children can create various plays using their creativity and imagination. For example, the first pre-service teacher (male, 22) discovered the material independence of plays and children's ability to use any object as a play material, stating, "I realized I was limiting different materials to only certain plays. Seeing children create different plays with these materials changed my perspective." The second pre-service teacher (female, 20) observed the limitless creativity and adaptability of children during play, saying, "It's as if children were made for playing. I realized that there's nothing they can't do if we provide them with the necessary materials and guide them." The third pre-service teacher stated, "I saw that play can be created according to the child's imagination, not based on rules." It is understood that the pre-service teacher candidate (Female, 22) realized the flexible nature of the play and the central role of children's imagination in shaping their play.

It is seen that the second category, the theme of **Play's Autonomy and Initiative**, consists of quotes about children being capable of initiating and directing play and that they can create their own play and experience them on their own without the need for adult intervention. In the statements taken from the preservice teachers regarding this theme, "Before this project, I believed that play was a planned and starting process. I thought that there should be a certain number of children and a ready environment for it to start. However, at the moment of implementation, I saw in the children their assertiveness towards their play, their quick thinking and decision-making, and their ability to start the process on their own." Frankly, it surprised me." This expression has been seen to reflect the features of free play.

On the other hand, it has been observed that there are also statements regarding guided play that supports children's autonomy during the play process. For example, with the statement "*It should always be the primary consideration to highlight children's creativity by simply supporting them through natural movements*" (Male, 22), emphasized how children can use their own initiative while playing freely and that adults should play a supportive role in this process. At the same time, with the statement of another pre-service teacher, "*I thought that play was becoming liberated, I saw this by observing*", it was stated that it provided an environment in which the pre-services teacher evaluated the accuracy of the theories

developed for play in their practices. This statement also implies that pre-services teacher directly observed the autonomy and freedom that play provides to them.

The Pedagogical Aspect of Play: This theme emphasizes that play significantly affects children's social, emotional, and cognitive development and naturally supports the learning process. Although pre-school teacher candidates have taken a course on "play in early childhood" during their undergraduate education, it has been observed that after playwork practices, it has been observed that after playwork practices, their expressions about play emphasized the fundamental characteristics of play in terms of educational and developmental. A pre-school teacher candidate (Female, 21) stated, *"I realized that children can experience everything through play and solve problems, and all we need to do is to give them a bit more say and provide them with more free spaces and open-ended materials that they can easily shape,"* highlighting the educational value of play through children's intrinsic motivation and suggesting that play content should actually be based on children. On the other hand, another teacher candidate (Male, 23) noted, *"The thing that caught my attention the most is that play is a beneficial method for revealing what children have learned,"* pointing out the pedagogical importance of play as an opportunity for children to showcase their knowledge and skills. Also, a pre-school teacher candidate mentioned, *"I saw that children use play not as an aim but as a tool. Play is a means of communication and expressing emotions for children,"* indicating that play is not just for entertainment for children, but also a way for them to express their feelings and thoughts. Another teacher candidate stated, *"I understood that as long as play is freely played by children, it is more effective and its developmental supportive, continuous, and enhancing quality is much more effective,"* (Female, 22) indicating that play provides a natural learning environment that supports pedagogical aspects. It is possible to say that teacher candidates, as a playworker, witnessing the self-developing learning processes of children, can support positioning themselves as educator candidates who understand the value of play and integrate this understanding into their educational practice, adopting a holistic approach to children's development.

The Creative Aspect of Play: The process demonstrates that play allows children to show, develop, and experience their creativity, indicating that teacher candidates have shifted their views towards play in this context. One of the teacher candidates (Female, 22) involved in the practice stated, *"Play may be perhaps the most important factor in reinforcing creativity in childhood."* This statement highlights the critical role of play in the development of children's creativity. Another candidate mentioned, *"Individuals of all ages need to play, and when given the opportunity, they can stretch the limits of their imagination and play creatively"* (Female, 22), expressing the importance of play for individuals of all ages in terms of creativity and imagination. The experiences gained during the practices have shown the importance of being directly involved in practice for the professional development of teacher candidates' thoughts towards play. This is exemplified by a teacher candidate's statement, "We have always been told that play brings out creativity, and now I have seen many real and tangible aspects of this

statement. I believe in this sentence now more than ever" (Male, 21). These quotations demonstrate how pre-service teachers, through playwork practices, have acquired new understandings about the sophistication and flexibility of play, its autonomy, pedagogical aspects, and creative aspects. Based on these experiences, it is possible to say that teacher candidates have the potential to shape their teachers' pedagogical approaches to play in the future.

Perceived Effects of Playwork Training on Professional Teacher Development

Another research question of this study is what the contributions of playwork practices are to the professional development of pre-service teachers. When a content analysis was conducted on the responses to the question posed to demonstrate the contribution of playwork practices to the professional development of teacher candidates, two distinct themes emerged: the development pedagogy of play and the creation of loose parts supporting creativity.

Development of Play Pedagogy: In this theme, teacher candidates have shared their experiences on how their understanding of play pedagogy developed and deepened through playwork practices and witnessing children's learning processes through play. They expressed that their understanding of play pedagogy was directly formed by being involved in play-based learning processes. One teacher candidate (Female, 21) described, *"From the moment we brought loose parts materials to the playground, children started to play by examining them interestedly without rearranging the area. Their actions taught us that they could play without a set order and were open to different things. Observing children having fun in playgrounds and creating whatever they wanted with the materials at hand, and figuring out how to compensate for what's missing with what they have, showed me what play is."* This statement narrates the need for children to play freely and the gains teacher candidates derived from playwork practices. Another teacher candidate said, *"Since it was my first playwork practice, I did not know how to organize the materials, but the children designed them using their imagination thanks to flexible materials."* (Male, 21) This highlights how the candidate developed pedagogical strategies by understanding the importance of supporting children's creativity and freedom. Being involved in playwork practices can influence teacher candidates to adopt child-centered learning and teaching approaches, thereby developing their play pedagogy. This, in turn, can support their professional development. Experiencing processes that start with the child, like free play, is especially important for developing their play pedagogy. For instance, one mentioned, *"Overall, I learned that the more we stay out of the way, the more comfortably and freely children play..."* suggesting that free play should start from the child and the adult's role is somewhat to provide the right environment, highlighting the fundamental ideas of play pedagogy gained through participation. Another teacher candidate reflected on their experience with play pedagogy, stating, *"They played completely of their own design, not according to any plan, and they didn't just play; they learned through playing."* Another teacher candidate stated, *"Their actions showed us that they could play without a set order and were open to different things."* (Female, 22). This shows the candidate recognized the value of free

play processes and the children's ability to learn on their own. These quotations emphasize play-based learning and the opportunities for free exploration in the self-learning process within play pedagogy.

Another teacher candidate stated, "*Their actions showed us that they could play without a set order and were open to different things.*" (Female, 22) From this, the candidate highlighted the importance of providing sufficient freedom and flexibility to children in the educational process. This statement also suggests emphasizing play-based learning, a fundamental principle in play pedagogy, and encouraging children to lead their own learning processes under the teacher's guidance. Thus, the teacher candidate learned ways to make children's learning experiences more meaningful and personally engaging.

Loose Parts Supporting Creativity: In this category, it is found that teacher candidates are inspired by the flexible use of materials and the development of creative play by children with these materials, as well as in designing educational materials and activities that encourage creativity. For example, the statement by a teacher candidate, "*The materials were quite flexible; they could be changed and transformed, making them very adaptable for children to use their creativity,*" (Female, 22) demonstrates how candidates, through playwork practices, experienced how flexible materials support children's creativity. "*The children built constructions according to their own creativity. They played with the pieces they wanted in any way they wanted.*" This statement highlights the freedom in the use of materials and children's creativity, showing the candidate's developed ability to observe how children can use materials in meaningful and creative ways. The candidate learns how important the process of free exploration and creation is in education by experiencing it. "*Frankly, everything was much more beautiful than I expected. The interest of the children in the materials... their ability to create various games with them,*" (Male, 21). This quote speaks to the diversity of materials and how creative children can be with them. It shows that the teacher candidate, through observing the interactions of children with various and loose parts materials, experienced how these interactions contribute to the children's learning and development processes. Another teacher candidate stated, "*The materials being natural recycled materials, that is, not specifically produced for the purpose of toys but still being so popular was incredibly beautiful; I realized that play can be made out of anything, anywhere, at any time,*" (Female, 20) indicating that children can create creative and meaningful play with natural/ recycle and loose materials found in their environment without the need for specially produced toys. This realization enhances both their thinking abilities and imagination, pointing to one of the fundamental principles of play pedagogy: the importance of children directing their learning processes with natural or loose parts materials from their environment. This approach helps the teacher candidate understand that play-based learning is always possible everywhere and is valuable for children's development. Teacher candidates highlight how different materials can enrich children's play experiences and encourage creativity in their statements on this theme. "*I realized I only limited different materials to specific types of play. Seeing children create different games with these*

materials changed my perspective," (Male, 21) said, observing how children can develop creative play with various materials and expressing how this expanded his limited perspective. Moreover, *"I understood once again that there is no need for a specific material for play, and that a game can be played with anything, and we should not give children ready-made materials,"* (Female, 21) indicates the teacher candidate realized the importance of open-ended materials and the freedom for children to create their own games. This also suggests that children experienced different contents from structured material-supported play.

Through their role as playworkers, preschool pre-services teachers demonstrate the importance of safe and play-based learning environments and awareness of the use of open-ended materials/loose parts materials. It also shows that candidates have developed skills in designing environments suitable for children's development.

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

This study explored the power of playwork practices on pre-service teachers' perceptions of play and its supporting role in their professional development. The data, derived from reflections and experiences of 32 pre-service teachers, revealed significant insights into the multifaceted impact of engaging with playwork practices. It is crucial for practitioners in the playwork profession to continually engage in professional development and remain informed about current research and practices. Therefore, playwork as a professional field requires ongoing training and development to effectively support children's play and to meet their unique needs. Playworker training can have a significant impact on teachers' professional development, especially in the context of incorporating play-based approaches into educational settings. By providing teachers with training in playwork principles and practices, they can enhance their understanding of the importance of play in children's learning and development (Kennedy, 2016; King & Newstead, 2022).

First, the findings highlight a significant evolution in pre-service teachers' changes in Play Understanding. Presenting views similar to those of Hughes (2012), who advocates for the recognition of play's pedagogical value, is crucial in demonstrating their changing attitudes towards free play. This shift underscores the necessity to integrate playwork principles into teacher education curricula to cultivate a more nuanced appreciation of the pedagogy of play. The hands-on experience with playwork allowed pre-service teachers to witness firsthand the dynamics of child-led play and its implications for the play environment and using loose parts. This aligns with the work of Whitebread (2010), who emphasized the significance of play in developing educators' ability to create learner-centered environments. Social interactions and collaborative aspects of play also emerged as crucial elements, facilitating not only children's social learning but also enhancing pre-service teachers' abilities to foster an emergent curriculum. This finding resonates with the concept of "scaffolding," as discussed by Vygotsky (1978), illustrating how adult participation in play can support and extend children's learning experiences. In the context of play, this scaffolding can take various forms, including guiding

children's interactions, posing thought-provoking questions, and extending play narratives. Baker and Ryan (2021) found that playful participatory positively affects in terms of attitudes towards professional development; teachers' self-perception and identity; incorporation of play into teaching; and overall school culture.

When pre-service teachers actively engage in children's play experiences, they essentially act as scaffolders, providing the necessary support and guidance to enhance their learning. By participating in play alongside children, pre-service teachers can observe their social interactions, identify teachable moments, and tailor their interventions to effectively scaffold children's learning. The immersion of pre-service teachers in playwork practices represents a pivotal step in redefining their perceptions of play and its educational value. This study contributes to the growing body of literature advocating for the integration of playwork principles into teacher education, highlighting its benefits for both children's learning and teachers' professional development. Moreover, the findings underscore the necessity for teacher education programs to provide pre-service educators with opportunities to engage in playwork. Such experiences are instrumental in preparing them to employ play as a dynamic and effective pedagogical tool, capable of fostering holistic development in early childhood settings.

Each quote provides concrete examples of significant learnings and insights gained from the experiences of the teacher candidates. These examples can be said to contribute to the professional development of pre-service preschool teachers in developing understandings of play pedagogy and skills in creating environments that support creativity through play-based practices. During this process, the teacher candidates have also developed critical skills on how to contribute to children's learning processes, support their social and emotional development, and design effective learning environments. These skills are fundamental tools they will use throughout their careers and can guide them as they take their first steps into the teaching profession.

By fostering a positive transfer climate that values play-based approaches, teachers are more likely to implement playwork principles effectively in their teaching practices. Moreover, ongoing professional development in playwork can contribute to teachers' self-efficacy, self-awareness, and leadership identity, which are essential components of effective teaching practices (Day and Dragoni 2015). Not only does it enrich pre-service teachers' understanding and application of play, but it also equips them with the skills and insights needed to thrive in the evolving landscape of early childhood education. Encouraging a deeper engagement with playwork practices promises to cultivate educators who are not only adept at facilitating learning but are also champions of play's profound and multifaceted impact on child development.

The study's limitations include its reliance on self-reported data from a specific sample of pre-service teachers, potentially limiting the generalizability of its findings and introducing biases. The absence of longitudinal data and a control group restricts the ability to

ascertain the long-term impacts of playwork practices and their direct attribution to observed changes in perceptions and pedagogical approaches. Furthermore, its qualitative focus, while rich in insights, lacks quantitative measures that could provide a broader understanding of the effects. Future studies could address these limitations by expanding the sample size and diversity, incorporating quantitative methods, including control groups, and conducting longitudinal research to explore the enduring impacts of playwork practices on teacher development. Additionally, investigating the direct effects on children's learning outcomes and comparing different playwork interventions could enrich the field's understanding of optimal strategies for integrating play into educational settings.

This study stands out for its innovative focus on the transformative role of playwork practices in pre-service teacher education, offering a novel perspective on how hands-on experiences with play shape future educators' perceptions and approaches. Through its qualitative methodology, the research provides in-depth insights into the multifaceted impact of play on teacher development, spanning the sophistication and flexibility of play, autonomy and initiative in play, pedagogical significance, and creative dimensions. It highlights the practical implications for teacher education programs, advocating for the incorporation of play-based learning principles to prepare educators who understand and value the pedagogical benefits of play. Additionally, the study contributes significantly to the literature on play theory and education, emphasizing the importance of creativity, flexibility, and child autonomy in learning environments. Its comprehensive thematic analysis and evidence-based advocacy for play in education underscore the potential for pedagogical transformation, making a compelling case for rethinking educational practices and policies to better accommodate and leverage the inherent value of play in child development and learning.

In conclusion, integrating playworker training into teachers' professional development can have a transformative impact on educational practices, fostering a play-based approach that enhances children's learning experiences and promotes holistic development. Playwork training can also enhance early childhood teachers' professionalism, leading to improved play support practices. Professional development is crucial for enhancing teacher competence in early childhood education.

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