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Redefine the Concept of Play in Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

The concept of play is currently understood by teachers, but the practice of play in ECE is different and emphasizes calistung-oriented (reading, writing, and counting). Therefore, it is necessary to reflect on the concept of play by the teacher so that it can support early childhood play practice. The concept of play This article is aimed to explore the concept of play that ECE teachers understand through play pedagogy. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method through interviews and grounded theory analysis. The results of the study show that the teachers have an understanding of playing. However, in its implementation, the teachers consider several factors that cause learning to focus on activities to introduce reading, writing and counting. Factors influencing it include the teacher's academic qualifications and parents' demands. Parents demand that their children be academically successful and have calistung (reading, writing and counting) skills. So the concept of play for teachers is essential to support the calistung skills and early childhood development. Therefore, a teacher guidance program is needed to help teachers understand the implementation of play pedagogy in ECE. And the impact of this research is expected to be able to increase the pedagogical competence of teachers in restoring the nature of early childhood which cannot be separated from their playing activities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Play is a fundamental right of children whose needs must be met. The world of children is playing because, through play, children can explore knowledge through free and fun learning experiences. In line with this, Lai et al., (2018) stated that playing is a fun activity that children can freely choose and do based on how they think. Children carry out socialization activities with their peers through play activities in which they find pleasure, communicate their knowledge about their world, perfect their skills, and show their needs (Loizou, 2017). Play is also interpreted as a child's activity to explore new experiences and knowledge that children gain (Hewi dan Asnawati, 2021).

Play activities for some parties are considered essential. They need to fulfil the fundamental rights of children, but for some parties, play is an activity that is less meaningful because time is just wasted. In line with this, Murtiningsih (2013) revealed that children's fundamental rights to play are considered insignificant and are often forgotten by adults. Play is considered a waste of time when children are at school, there is plenty of time to play at home, and school should be a place for learning (Bodrova and Leong, 2005). This perception departs from the lack of awareness of parents and teachers towards fulfilling children's fundamental rights, the play has a close relationship with child development, but this is even often neglected (Murtiningsih, 2013).

In addition, it can be caused by a person's narrow view of educational goals, which only focuses on academic achievement (Murtiningsih, 2013). Based on this perception, parents demand schools so that children can read, write and do arithmetic as a reference for their child's school success (Pertwi et al., 2021; Rachman, 2019). This has implications for implementing learning activities in ECE, which causes learning to focus on the *drilling methods* (Asiah, 2018; Farikhah dan Ariestina, 2020).

Teachers' knowledge about play is often understood, but in practice in the field, many teachers still see play as not being the main focus of ECE (Asiah, 2018; Farikhah dan Ariestina, 2020). Not only that, the practice of play in ECE is dominated by teachers, one of which is a play filled with "rules" which prohibit activities that are liked by children (Iskandar, 2021). Further research has been conducted by Iskandar (2021) regarding the teacher's conception of managing play activities in early childhood education. The results of Iskandar's research show that the game is currently packaged in such a way that it looks exciting and fun, but it is considered too controlling and limits space that can eliminate the natural nature of *play*, which usually means that the child is free to do the game he likes.

Recently, kindergarten teachers have been on the front lines, facing the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic for almost two years. The pandemic has significantly impacted their roles as educators, requiring them to adapt their teaching methods and find creative solutions to ensure the safety and education of their young students. These dedicated teachers have had to navigate the uncertainties of remote learning, finding ways to engage and connect with their students virtually. They have also taken on the responsibility of supporting the emotional well-being of their students during these challenging times, providing reassurance and maintaining open lines of communication. Despite the difficulties, kindergarten teachers have shown remarkable resilience and dedication in their commitment to providing quality education and care to their students amidst the pandemic.

Early childhood education units have adopted adjustments to habits formed in this situation. This relates to children's learning activities at school. The teaching and learning process was carried out online at ECE, one of which was a kindergarten in Cugenang District, Cianjur Regency. Learning for children using the play method at school cannot be carried out.

However, the alternative that ECE institutions use is to provide calistung-oriented (reading-writing- counting) activities and produce works such as making crafts. After the pandemic situation has begun to be more manageable, schools began to reopen, but still considering the health protocols.

Even though learning activities have been carried out in kindergarten, they still emphasize *calistung* (reading-writing-counting) activities and pay little attention to play activities. The demands and perceptions of parents are a factor in *calistung* activities. Many parents prioritize academic skills and believe that early exposure to calistung activities will give their children a head start in their educational journey. As a result, kindergarten programs often place a significant focus on structured learning tasks, leaving limited time for unstructured play.

This is a familiar problem, primarily since the existence of kindergartens in Cugenang, Cianjur Regency, which is located in a rural area. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic situation is still one of the inhibiting factors for activities because the implementation of activities must be based on strict health protocols so as not to endanger the target audience. Based on this, the target audience has the potential to support research activities to provide pedagogic guidance programs for teachers.

In connection with the phenomenon of play in the world of early childhood education, play should be understood not as something threatening but as a tool or method used to prepare for learning in the future. Research conducted by Hardiyanti (2021) states that play activities have decreased in early childhood education (ECE) classes, even though these play activities are used as a method in the learning process. In line with Zaini (2019), who stated that playing is one of the methods used in learning in ECE.

The playing method has an influence on improving aspects of child development such as imagination, physical motor, social, and emotional and children can be guided and directed (Amiran, 2016). In addition, the play method can also be used in a development-oriented learning process that frees children to learn correctly (Rozalena dan Kristiawan, 2017). Based on this statement, the educational component, even parents, should be able to understand its role in creating a meaningful learning process through play.

In addition, if the teacher is one of the primary keys in a meaningful child's play experience, then the teacher's perception of play and experience is something that needs to be considered in realizing play practice towards "play-pedagogy" (Hadley, 2002; Weisberg et al., 2013). Play pedagogy is broadly defined as how early childhood education teachers provide a play-while-learning approach, how the teachers design play or learning environments by considering all pedagogical aspects where the role of adults is involved in planning play while paying attention to freedom and the meaningfulness of the play itself (Li, 2022).

Adults' role certainly influences children's play activities; even the power from an adult's perspective can change the concepts of freedom, children's rights or child autonomy if not properly organized. The research conducted by Kontos (1999) stated that the most frequent involvement of teachers in children's play activities is to play a role in forming playgroups, determining rules such as the roles played and their dialogue or conversations during free play activities.

In line with what was expressed by Loizou (2019), play can be a means of learning where the teacher can arrange space and material and provide an environment for children to play while learning. Furthermore, Loizou (2017) suggested that teachers should be enriched in experience and understanding of playing for children rather than just managing their playing environment. The teacher's experience and perspective on playing can provide a significant role in the success of the early childhood learning process (Hardiyanti, 2021).

Based on the statement which is stated above, the teacher needs to create play activities that involve them in a meaningful learning process for children but not dominate the activity so that it has an impact on changing the concepts of freedom, children's rights or child autonomy. To support teachers in this effort, we must reflect on the concept of play carried out by teachers in supporting early childhood play practice. The purpose of this research is to determine the teacher's understanding of the concept of play in early childhood play practice and redefine the concept of play based on that play practice which respects the context of actual play.

2. METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method. Qualitative research was chosen because the research aims to find out more about the ECE teacher's understanding of the concept of play through a fundamental understanding of experience. Then the researcher interprets the data based on the meaning of the surrounding environment (Gerring, 2017). Based on the teacher's understanding, the researcher will see how the concept of play is carried out in ECE.

Then the researcher chose the appropriate method for this research, namely the case study method. The research departs from a simple case, namely the misconception of ECE teachers between the concept and practice of playing at school. Therefore, researchers use case studies to examine cases to produce a redefinition of the concept of play in ECE.

The research was conducted on ECE teachers in Cugenang District, Cianjur Regency, West Java. This study's participants were six teachers, namely 2 Kober (playgroup) teachers, 2 Kindergarten teachers, and 2 SPS (other ECE equivalent institution) teachers.

Data collection techniques using interviews were then analyzed using grounded theory. Grounded theory was chosen because it is to know inductively data that is not guided by a predetermined theme. The analysis will develop based on the data found in the field, as it is understood that grounded theory develops a theory based on the acquisition of field data (Lewis, 2015). This means that grounded theory can be developed inductively based on data so that it is responsible for developing theories that emerge from field observations. In this approach, the researcher tries to reach a conceptual understanding of the concept of play in ECE teachers.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In interviews conducted with 6 ECE teachers in Cugenang District, Cianjur Regency, findings were found that were interrelated between the answers of one participant and those of other participants. After conducting an analysis using grounded theory on the research data, the researchers found themes that became the core findings based on field data. The findings are divided into five findings, namely: (1) ECE teachers' understanding of play, (2) practice (play pedagogy) in ECE, (3) play is used as a method of introducing calistung, and (4) play as a directed learning, and (5) misconceptions about play in ECE.

The following is a presentation of the findings and analyzes of the researchers.

3.1. ECE Teacher's Understanding of Play

Play is an activity used for early childhood learning at school. Play can be understood based on the various perspectives of a person. Every human can think about constructing knowledge through experience, and knowledge gained, and social processes (Saripudin, 2019). Likewise, the teacher's perspective on play constructs their understanding based on their teaching experience. The teacher builds the construction of knowledge about the play that is

inseparable from the factors behind the teacher's understanding of the concept of play in ECE. Educational factors and teacher teaching experience influence one's understanding (Darman, 2017).

Play is essential for children's growth, development and early childhood learning. In line with this, Altun (2018) argues that play is an essential and integral part of children's growth, development and learning. This means that children live in their world, namely playing (Iskandar, 2021). Children play all day long because playing is their life (Susanti, 2019). This conception can be based on knowledge construction that understands the characteristics of early childhood. In this discussion, the researcher will explain in more detail how the teacher's perspective on playing in ECE is based on the construction of understanding obtained.

The findings show that almost all ECE teachers who were research participants mentioned the exact definition of play. Play is a fun children's activity. As stated by the participant:

"Play is a child must be happy; if the game is tense, the child becomes tense, so playing must be fun" (Interview with Mrs Y, 19 July 2022).

"Play is a fun activity, not only for children but also for teenagers and adults" (Interview with Mrs R, 19 July 2022).

Based on the data above, the researcher translates that the teacher already understands the concept of play, which is relevant to play characteristics. An activity can be said to be playing if it has characteristics, namely fun, intrinsic motivation, process-oriented, spontaneous and voluntary, as well as physically and mentally involved in doing it (Yogman et al., 2018). This shows that the teacher has good knowledge of playing. Knowledge is constructed by ECE teachers based on the education they receive, both through formal and informal education, such as training and workshops to improve their competence as early childhood educators (Darmadi, 2015).

ECE teachers in Cugenang District, Cianjur Regency, have various educational qualifications ranging from junior high school, high school, and bachelor degrees. The teacher's educational background is essential in acquiring knowledge about teaching (Sya'dullah, 2014), especially in ECE. The teacher's perspective on playing emphasizes the elements of fun activities. Play activities for children are a way for them to find pleasure; socialization occurs with peers so that children can communicate their knowledge about their world, perfect their skills, and show their needs (Loizou, 2017).

Opinions about play are understood as an activity based on children's interests. This element shows that children play spontaneously and voluntarily. This means that children play freely. As mentioned by one of the participants:

"Play is a child playing whatever he wants because children's preferences are different" (Interview with Mrs M, 19 July 2022).

An alternative perspective describes play as a child's opportunity to internalize and explore academic concepts, where teacher involvement is an opportunity to improve children's learning achievement (Pyle and Danniels, 2017).

3.2. The practice of Play (Play Pedagogy) in ECE

The practice of play in ECE is held as a learning method for early childhood. Learning materials are included in the practice of play, so children learn about their surroundings (Safitri dan Lestarinigrum, 2021). This was clarified by one of the participants who said:

"... we also arrange the learning process not like a child is studying but playing, even though there are learning contents there." (Interview with Mrs R, 19 July 2022). Learning content refers to learning themes derived from the curriculum.

From the results of interviews with teachers, the average school implements play in ECE in the Cugenang District of Cianjur Regency by playing while learning. The concept appears in each participant's answer. However, it is still questionable whether the practice of playing while learning is fully implemented in learning activities in ECE. McArdle et al., (2019) explained that the term children learn through play is a spell, which means learning is playing. Furthermore, the problem arises to what extent the teacher teaches through playing with children. Talking about the concept of learning while playing is something that takes work to do. If playing is understood as a natural, free and non-school activity, then logically, teaching by the teacher is unnecessary (McArdle et al., 2019). Likewise, this problem arises in this finding.

The implementation of the practice of play in ECE is a form of early childhood learning method. Learning in ECE uses a way of playing, namely approaches, strategies, and methods to teach learning material (Susanti, 2019). The participant mentioned that *"Playing at school is playing while learning"* (Interview with Mrs Y, 19 July 2022). Play at school indicates improving students' academic abilities so that it is not playing but learning that is packaged through games (Hardiyanti, 2021).

In formal education in ECE, learning is guided by a curriculum with teaching content for children. In theory, playing gets support in the early childhood learning process to be included in the ECE curriculum (Hardiyanti, 2021). Therefore, playing at school in the learning setting has nuances of play, not in the meaning of playing, which is not meaningful, but learning arrangements are organized through play activities. This was found from the results of an interview with one of the participants who stated that:

"...trying according to the curriculum that the government has determined. So it is not arbitrary to make activities that are not directed..." (Interview with Mrs R, 19 July 2022).

Furthermore, playing in ECE is supported by structuring the environment and learning media. This aims to carry out good playing practices in schools.

"This environmental arrangement is prepared for children to be interested in playing there" (Interview with Mrs R, 19 July 2022).

ECE teachers in Cugenang District, Cianjur Regency, stated that the practice of playing (learning) used the STEAM approach, centre models, loose part media and natural materials. As the participant said: *"...we usually make, or we use whatever is found in nature."* (Interview with Mrs S, 14 July 2022), *"play activities are packaged into an event or centre model at school"* (Interview with Mrs Dw, 16 July 2022). Playing as a method of early childhood learning requires media to support packaged children's learning through games. Loose-part media is among the most in-demand by teachers in supporting learning activities while playing. This is because loose-part media can stimulate and be used by children to be creative (Safitri dan Lestarinigrum, 2021).

3.3. Play is Used as a Method of Introducing Calistung

The findings show that parents send their children to early childhood education, both Playgroup, Kindergarten, and SPS (equivalent) in Cugenang District, Cianjur Regency, so their children will be good at academics, namely being able to read, write, and count (calistung). Mrs S mentioned in an interview that: *"Their goal is to send their children to school, they want to be smart, they want to be able to read, they want to be able to write"* (Interview with Mrs S, 14 July 2022).

This opinion shows that parents influence ECE institutions with an emphasis on learning activities. As a result, learning activities emphasize academic material, almost eliminating playing, which has fun and voluntary elements based on the child's perspective. However,

playing is used by teachers to package academic learning activities with the discourse that playing is helpful as a way of introducing calistung to children.

Based on the teachers' understanding, playing can help teachers to introduce reading, writing, and arithmetic (calistung) to children. Playing activities have the benefit of stimulating development, as stated by the participant: *"...children know the concept of numbers, recognize the concept of literacy, though usually playing with games such as singing..."* (Interview with Mrs S, 14 July 2022). Through play activities, children are invited to observe, explore, discover and use something they find while playing (Susanti, 2019).

Based on the teacher's understanding of playing at school, playing is fun. According to the teacher's perspective, fun activities refer to learning activities packaged in games (Hardiyanti, 2021). This perspective helps develop all aspects of child development, including language, social-emotional, and cognitive skills, that show academic achievement in early childhood (Myck-Wayne, 2010; Pyle and Danniels, 2017). In line with this, one participant stated:

"...through playing we can stimulate aspects of development in children, from their habituation to religious morals, for example in regulating children's emotions related to children's social emotions, in other words, we can stimulate all child development..." (Interview with Mrs D, July 19, 2022).

3.4. Play as a Directed Learning Activity

Playing practices in schools today lead to learning activities while playing organized by teachers for children. This argument is supported by the results of Mrs R's interview, which stated that *"we like to direct the game, what is the child playing here? For example, at this table, we direct children to get to know literacy, numbers and letters"* (Interview with Mrs R, 19 July 2022). The statement explains that early childhood education units have academic goals. Entering academic skills at the ECE level will create a significant gap in achieving them because teachers will focus on teaching based on training and practice, which is not relevant to early childhood development (Hardiyanti, 2021). Therefore, the play approach to learning in ECE has tension with the goals of structured curricula in various countries (Wood, 2014).

The teacher has a dominating role in setting play activities while learning. The concept of a child-centred approach has not been reflected yet in the practice of playing at ECE in the Cugenang District of Cianjur Regency. This is because the child-centred concept values free play and free choice for children. What is currently happening is that this concept conflicts with policies that maintain a discourse on uniform activities that children can participate in because they refer to predetermined curriculum policies. In line with this, other findings emerged in the following interview conversation, *"depending on his interests. However, if possible, we can still guide them. For example, "let's try it at this centre first, so we can all play."* (Interview with Mrs S, 14 July 2022). Researchers interpret that the teacher gives freedom of choice, but the teacher still maintains his power so that all children try all the activities offered.

Freedom in play should be based on voluntary choice and on motivation within the child. The free element in play is defined as something that is relatively free from adult interference and direction, allowing them to exercise agency, self-regulation, ownership, and control, and can direct their learning (Wood, 2014). Directed learning in the connotation of "playing" in PAUD dominates so that the free element fades in practice. As stated by Ailwood (2003), free play in the context of early childhood education is largely unavailable.

The children are free to play games offered by the teacher at certain times, such as breaks. Mrs R mentioned in her interview, *"during recess; children can play freely. We also provide games"* (Interview with Mrs R, 19 July 2022). The role of the teacher in schools that dominates

children choosing and building their learning is a discourse that often occurs in every ECE unit. Based on the sociopolitical point of view, it is evident in the study of children's choice that refers to the post-structuralist theory of the relationship between teachers and children at school, where there is a gap in power relations held by teachers (Wood, 2014). The meaning of choice for children, agency, power, and whose interests are exercised or marginalized is seen in the power relations between children and between children and adults (Reynolds and Wang, 2005).

What is more, the teacher's position in play activities as a form of directed learning, they are not much involved in the game. Most teachers position themselves outside of children's play. A typology of play is presented, which includes the teacher's closeness to children's play; the teacher's intention is in line with the child's intention; the teacher follows the children's games; teachers engage in continuous collective play; and the teacher is in the children's imaginary play (Fleer, 2015).

In addition, directed play activities are activities that produce work. ECE teachers in Cugenang Sub-District, Cianjur Regency, call the concept of playing in class a learning activity that is packaged as if it were playing where the learning outcomes are in the form of children's work. An example of an activity that explains this argument is as follows: *"Like a mosaic, for example, we first give directions to the parents, then the parents give directions to their children. Later the task will be photographed."* (Interview with Mrs S, 14 July 2022).

Based on the discussion above, these opinions lead to a teacher's need for more clarification about the actual concept of play for children.

3.5. Misconceptions of Play in ECE

Early childhood education provides educational services that can assist children in their growth and development through appropriate stimulation. Early childhood education aims to prepare children to enter the next level of education (Ariyanti, 2016). Early childhood education is organized by considering children's characteristics; namely, children need to play (Susanti, 2019). In the previous discussion, this study found that playing while learning is the method chosen for teacher teaching. However, since the changing curricula in several countries of early education for children have included academic skills, the concept of playing in ECE is different from the genuine concept of play from a child's perspective (Wood, 2014).

Playing at school is never considered, so playing while learning still needs to be fully implemented (Hardiyanti, 2021). Sometimes academic values are contained in playing practices such as teaching reading, writing, and counting which are exercises. Even though the participant mentioned in the interview that they are introducing those skills indirectly, as stated below, *"not directly through writing or dictating"* (Interview with Mrs D, July 19, 2022). The point is that the concept of play carried out in ECE aims to provide developmental stimulation and teaching materials to children.

While in other findings, the participants were inconsistent with the answers given. Participants previously emphasized that learning was play-based, but in the following questions, they answered activities that reflected academic practice. This statement is demonstrated based on the following interview, *"In Group B usually we have stabilization such as learning to read and write while the activities are through imitating the pictures provided at school"* (Interview with Mrs D, July 19, 2022).

The statement explains that playing in ECE does not really happen. Under these conditions, researchers interpret that certain factors can cause teachers' misconceptions about play. Indeed the teacher already understands the meaning of play in early childhood. This is caused by the demands of academic success expected by parents (Rachman, 2019). The results of

other studies reveal that ECE teachers feel pressure from other teachers, principals, and school policies to focus on academic goals and that this pressure makes them limit playing (Lynch, 2015). Play-based learning in schools can be successful if there is support from parents and maintaining a balance between the three education centres.

Misconceptions in implementing play-based learning are just a label, so the ECE unit has the principle of play. In fact, from the results of the participant's answers, they stated that they "usually not using drilling, sometimes also using worksheets complete with the guidance" (Interview with Mrs D, July 19, 2022), "sometimes using worksheets, sometimes not, sometimes only occasionally use worksheets" (Interview Mrs M, July 19, 2022). This statement indicates that the principle of play that is carried out does not occur in early childhood.

Based on the discussion of the findings above, playing in ECE currently has a different definition. Furthermore, the researchers formulated a redefinition of the concept of play in ECE according to the findings that have been described. The concept of play in this study directs understanding to structured activities by the teacher in which there is direction and guidance in choosing play activities. Play is also defined as a learning method in which teachers are not much involved in their activities, so they act as learning facilitators.

4. CONCLUSION

The misconception of play in ECE has occurred in the teacher's understanding and practice of play. This is reflected in the understanding of ECE teachers about play, practice (play pedagogy) in ECE, playing is used to introduce calistung, playing as directed learning, and misconceptions about playing in ECE. So the concept of play, according to this research, is redefined that play is a structured activity carried out by the teacher, in which there is direction and guidance in choosing play activities, where the teacher is not much involved in the activity. Therefore, a guidance program is needed for teachers to understand play pedagogy which can overcome misconceptions about playing in ECE.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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