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Play and Literacy Learning in Grades 1 and 2: An Exploratory Study of Teacher Perspectives

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Responding to concerns that play is at risk in the early years of education, this article investigates teachers' current use of play in language and literacy instruction in Grade 1 and 2 Alberta classrooms. It addresses what teachers say they need to make play part of school-based language and literacy education. Survey findings show a recognition of contested views on the role of play in instruction yet a press for play as a meaningful pedagogy in the early elementary grades. The article contributes teachers' perspectives on play in literacy teaching beyond preschool and kindergarten. It offers recommendations for conceptual, pragmatic, and research-focused supports that would allow teachers to leverage play in the development of children's literacies.

En réponse aux préoccupations selon lesquelles le jeu est menacé dans les premières années scolaires, cet article porte sur l'utilisation actuelle du jeu par les enseignants dans l'enseignement de la langue et de la littératie dans les classes de première et deuxième année de l'Alberta. L'article s'intéresse à ce dont les enseignants disent avoir besoin pour intégrer le jeu dans l'enseignement de la langue et de la littératie à l'école. Les résultats de l'enquête montrent que les enseignants reconnaissent que leurs points de vue sur le rôle du jeu dans l'enseignement sont contestés, mais qu'ils insistent pour que le jeu soit une pédagogie significative dans les premières années de l'enseignement au primaire. L'article présente le point de vue des enseignants sur le jeu dans l'enseignement de la littératie au-delà de la prématernelle et de la maternelle. Il propose des recommandations pour un soutien conceptuel, pragmatique et axé sur la recherche qui permettrait aux enseignants de tirer parti du jeu dans le développement de la littératie chez les enfants.

Play is an important aspect of children's lives, learning, and development. It is part of the characteristic dignities, protections, and rights to be afforded children around the world, commensurate with their rights to family, citizenship, care, and education (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, Article 31). Yet in many Western contexts, play and learning are increasingly decoupled in classroom experiences (Boldt et al., 2009; Kuschner, 2015; Sahlberg, 2012) as playful learning comes to be seen as "unaffordable and inefficient" (Whitebread, 2018, p. 238) in our "no nonsense" times (Wohlwend, 2009, p. 8). Furthermore, in popular thought, play is often viewed as the opposite of work, an immaturity that must give way to the real work of living and learning. When this work-play binary is unquestioningly accepted in educational settings, valuable and possibly irreplaceable opportunities for children's learning are lost.

Our understanding of play within classroom settings seeks to move beyond a work-play binary and to honour play as a meaningful way of being in and making sense of the world. Along with Sicart (2014), we see play as "a form of understanding what surrounds us and who we are, and a way of engaging with others" (p. 1).

In this article, we present findings from a survey exploring the use of play in literacy teaching experiences in Grades 1 and 2. We use elements from Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior to query teachers' instructional use of play and ask what teachers say they need to make play part of school-based language and literacy education. We are interested in the early elementary grades as a context in which the serious work of learning to read and write often overrides playful language and learning experiences and a setting rarely considered within play-based literacy studies. An underlying premise of the study is the notion that play is a critical element of learning at all ages (Bateson & Martin, 2013; OECD, 2019; Whitton & Moseley, 2019). Furthermore, regard for the value of play for literacy learning (Christie & Roskos, 2015; Yoon, 2019) is central to our examination of teachers' use of play in language and literacy instruction in Alberta Grade 1 and 2 classrooms. Findings from a survey of 58 teachers indicated a similar regard for play among participants, contested views on the role of play within their professional contexts, and heightened challenges to playful literacy learning arising from return-to-school protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic. Survey responses showed that play should be recognized as a meaningful pedagogy and source of professional distinction in the early elementary grades. In addition, the survey responses pointed to conceptual, pragmatic, and research-focused supports that would allow Grade 1 and 2 teachers to leverage play in the development of children's literacies and curricular learning.

Play and Literacy Learning

Play has long been considered the central means of engagement for learning in early childhood education (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Flewitt, et al., 2017; Moyles, 1989; Paley, 2004); however, concerns regarding a narrow "window of opportunity" for children to master skills of literacy, such as decoding and encoding text (Clay, 1991; International Reading Association & National Association for Young Children, 1998) has challenged the "classic" understanding of the place of play in early years (kindergarten to Grade 3) learning contexts in Western nations. Nearly a century ago, Maria Montessori (1964) famously stated, "play is the child's work" (p. 25). Jean Piaget (1962) similarly promoted play as the work of childhood. Many years later, world-renowned literacy expert Marie Clay (1991) drew attention away from play in the development of early childhood literacies by arguing for the necessity of children acquiring print literacy by the end of the second grade. Failure to achieve this milestone was seen as positioning a child to struggle with reading and writing for the rest of their education and to diminish their opportunities throughout life. These statements, flowing from the time-honoured research and practice of three of early childhood education's most prominent scholars, have intermittently guided early-years language and literacy practice in the Western world for decades and continue to do so. The philosophical and experiential wisdom that underpins these two ideas—namely, that children's play must be recognized as crucial to their learning and development, and the belief that a child quickly falls behind when they haven't learned the basics of reading and writing by the end of second grade—are foundational to what Russell (2011) termed the developmental and academic logics of instruction of early-years education. Based in different assumptions about the goals of the early years of school, these logics authorize different sets of instructional practices, materials, and pedagogical roles and are often

seen to be at odds with each other, particularly in the present era of quantitative accountability (Whitebread, 2018).

Juxtaposing play against literacy learning has become particularly problematic over the last two decades (Wohlwend, 2009), leading to a sharpened emphasis on academic learning and reduced opportunities for play in kindergarten programs (Bassok et al., 2016; Goldstein, 2007; Russell, 2011). Two factors seem to be driving this phenomenon: societal and governmental pressures to produce students who are ready for an uncertain knowledge economy have resulted in calls for "back to basics" education in which literacy (and numeracy) are taught as cumulative skills to be mastered (Thiel, 2019; Wohlwend, 2009). Additionally, a rigid adherence to outcomes-based education privileges reading and writing assessments over the processes of becoming literate (Boldt et al., 2009; Dyson, 2015). This continues despite a large body of literature that demonstrates literacy, as a social, cultural, and material practice, is best taught through a flexible balance between experiential learning (such as play) and attention to the skills of literacy (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Lindfors, 2008; Roskos & Christie, 2011; Rowe, 2018). It also continues despite official statements on behalf of play-based learning, such as the one offered by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC, 2010).

Canadian scholars note that play is at risk in Canadian schools. One pan-Canadian study found that while play is an integral part of some provincial kindergarten curricula, it is not explicitly mentioned in the curricula of other provinces, including Alberta (Peterson et al., 2016). References to "purposeful play" can be found in the *Kindergarten Program Statement* (Alberta Education, 2008) and on the LearnAlberta website; but knowing "A is for apple" is currently framed as the literacy purpose of such play (Government of Alberta, 2022b). Alberta is a participant in the "academic transformation of the kindergarten" (Dyson, 2015, p. 199). The "landmark features" of kindergarten (Goldstein, 2007)—play and the broad cognitive, social, and emotional domains of student development—are being de-emphasized as kindergarten is incorporated into elementary curriculum documents focusing on discrete elements of knowledge and skill (Government of Alberta, 2022a).

A lack of attention to play in the early years of school is of critical note in Alberta where there is relatively low participation in preschool programs (Akbari et al., 2020); kindergarten is not a required component of children's education, and children may be transitioning directly from home to the structured learning of Grade 1 classrooms. Furthermore, pandemic experiences have heightened concerns about the early years of schooling as extended absences and multiple shifts between online and face-to-face instruction have disrupted students' learning experiences and unusually large numbers of children have not attended kindergarten (Alphonso, 2021).

Currently, educational research in Western nations is experiencing a renaissance of interest in children's play (Whitebread, 2018); a resurgence that stands in the face of the dramatic loss of play in school curricula over the last two decades (Boldt et al., 2009). Play has been identified as that which enhances creativity (Bateson & Martin, 2013; Brown & Vaughn, 2010; Egan & Judson, 2015; Russ, 2017; Vecchi, 2010) and critical engagement with learning (Liu et al., 2017; Mahar, 2003; McNamee, 2009; Nelson, 2009), and as that which nurtures self-regulation (Whitebread & Jameson, 2015) and social inclusion (Bangsbo et al., 2016). In literacy education, play is noted to promote school readiness and vocabulary growth in young children (Barker et al., 2014; Han et al., 2010; Hughes et al., 2015). It is seen to help children develop cognitive skills and processes needed in learning to read and write (Christie & Roskos, 2015) and to be an important bridge between orality, reading, and writing (Dyson, 2016; Morrow & Schickedanz, 2006; Nicolopoulou, 2017; Portier et al., 2019; Wohlwend & Peppler, 2015; Yoon, 2019). Imaginative play is recognized

as a compositional act in which children develop facility with narrative structures, characters, and plots (Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2019; Nicolopoulou, 2016; Paley, 1990).

The benefits of play in literacy learning are bolstered by equally compelling research that finds early instruction in the specific skills of reading in kindergarten to Grade 1 that excludes activities such as painting, drawing, and cooking; music; and teacher-led oral story-telling correlates with weaker reading comprehension scores by age 11 (Suggate et al., 2013; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). These studies, and others, suggest that a focus on language-rich (Dockrell et al., 2010; Sénéchal et al., 2006) and embodied (Roessingh & Bence, 2018; Suggate & Stoeger, 2014; Wolf, 2018) learning activities in the early years of school creates readers with more robust reading comprehension in the later grades.

International research is turning attention to the relationships between play, language, and literacy learning in contexts beyond preschool and kindergarten (Mardell, et al., 2016; Playful Learning Center, 2015); yet, with the exception of two studies focused on kindergarten to Grade 2 students in northern rural communities (Peterson et al., 2015; Portier et al., 2019), such research in the Canadian context is scant. Given the numerous cognitive, social, and literacy learning benefits that accrue when play is embedded in learning contexts, key questions for leveraging play's benefits within the instructional and assessment requirements of elementary provincial curricula remain.

Study Design and Methods

The purpose of this paper is to present findings from a survey exploring two research questions: a) How are teachers currently including play in language and literacy teaching experiences in Alberta Grade 1 and 2 classrooms? and b) What do teachers say they need to make play part of school-based language and literacy education? The survey specifically draws on the experiences and perspectives of classroom teachers, recognizing that beyond official curricula, the inclusion of play in school settings is contingent upon teachers' "pedagogical preferences and knowledge" (Peterson et al., 2016, p. 2) and that "understanding what literacy educators say they need is crucial in advancing the literacy profession and helping to shape the future of literacy instruction" (International Literacy Association, 2020, p. 3).

Participants and Procedure

Grade 1 and 2 teachers in Alberta were invited to complete an anonymous 15-minute online questionnaire about their current use of play in literacy and language instruction, and the factors that supported or constrained them in doing so. Teachers were recruited through posters shared on the researchers' personal social media pages (Twitter and Facebook) and in two prominent Facebook groups for Alberta teachers. Snowball sampling was encouraged, such that teachers who completed the questionnaire could retweet or share requests for participation to other interested parties. Eligibility criteria required interested participants to be teaching Grade 1 and/or 2 in Alberta at the time of the survey or have been teaching Grade 1 and/or 2 within the previous two years. Recruitment messages invited the participation of teachers with positive, negative, neutral, or uncertain perspectives on play in Grades 1 and 2 literacy learning.

Fifty-eight complete responses were collected from consenting participants.[1] The participants had substantial teaching experience in Grades 1 and 2 (M = 7.25 years, SD = 7.10 years), and in their overall teaching careers (M = 12.70 years, SD = 8.13 years).

Survey Design

In querying participating teachers' use of play in Grade 1 and 2 classrooms, the survey focused on factors familiar to teachers, resonating with the influences of broad instructional logics (Russell, 2011), and bridging between play, language, and literacy (Roskos & Christie, 2011). These factors include the use of materials in literacy learning, adult-child and child-child interactions during literacy events, and children's agency within pedagogies of play. To structure these content questions, the survey drew on Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior. It first explored the importance teachers assigned to different aspects of play within school-based literacy learning, then asked about their confidence in making those same aspects of play part of their literacy teaching, and finally asked about their use of those same kinds of experiences in their literacy teaching. Other questions explored the supports teachers experienced within their professional environments, the supports they thought would be helpful, and what made it difficult to incorporate play within their literacy teaching (within and beyond COVID-19 return-to-school protocols).

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) is a social psychological theory that posits that individuals' behaviours are a function of their beliefs and their evaluation of salient information about a particular behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). TPB proposes that an individual's *behavioural intentions*, the motivational factors that influence behaviours, are a major determinant of whether such a behaviour occurs. Behavioural intentions are informed by individual *attitudes* (i.e., whether that individual positively or negative evaluates the behaviour); *subjective norms* (i.e., whether the individual feels that important others, such as colleagues, approve or disapprove of the behaviour); and *perceived behavioural control* (i.e., how easy or difficult it would be to actually perform that ability). In addition to influencing behavioural intentions, perceived behavioural control has also been demonstrated to influence behaviours directly. TPB has been used extensively to predict and understand behaviour in various contexts including business (e.g., Araten-Bergman, 2016), education (e.g., Hyde et al., 2013), health (e.g., Conner & Sparks, 2005), and psychology (See Armitage & Conner, 2001 for a meta-analytic review).

As the implementation of playful experiences into literacy practices in the classroom often requires deliberation and planning, we felt it was important to consider the theoretical structure of TPB in the development of our survey items. Although it was not our aim to explicitly evaluate the TPB in the context of playful literacy learning or make the TPB the focus of our data analysis, incorporating its theoretical elements provided a valuable way to access and explore influences on the inclusion of play in teachers' instructional work. Our questions surrounding the importance of play experiences in literacy teaching relate to individual attitudes. The question surrounding colleagues' support partially taps into subjective norms. Our measures of teachers' confidence in the implementation of play experiences and their confidence in teaching various aspects of literacy development strongly relate to teachers' perceived behavioural control.

Measures

Teaching Background

Following confirmation that participants were currently teaching or had recently taught Grade 1 and/or 2 in Alberta, we asked about the participants' teaching experience, as well as any previous professional learning experiences exploring play in language and literacy instruction.

Importance of Play Experiences

We then assessed attitudes towards the importance of various types of experiences (see Appendix A for complete measures), as they pertained to literacy learning in school contexts using nine items (α = .78). A question stem assessing these attitudes was "I think it is important for Grade 1 and 2 students to have these kinds of experiences as part of literacy learning at school," with response scales ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly Agree*). Experiences queried included free play; guided play; playing alone; playing with others; playing with words and language; playing with storytelling manipulatives/materials/objects; playing with art materials; playing with digital storytelling tools and apps; and playing with ideas, characters, and situations in texts. Participants were also invited to contribute additional play experiences.

Confidence in Enacting Play Experiences

A single item was used to assess whether teachers felt confident in making the nine literacy experiences (listed above) part of their literacy teaching. Participants were asked to select all experiences they had felt confident enacting.

Colleague Support

A single item was used to assess perceived colleague support for play in literacy. The item stated, "I feel that my colleagues support the use of play in literacy teaching for Grade 1 and 2 students" (again using the same response scale, 1 [*Strongly disagree*] to 6 [*Strongly agree*]).

Teaching Behaviour

A nine-item measure (α = .86) was used to assess the frequency of which each of the nine various types of playful literacy teaching experiences were utilized (1 [*Never*] to 6 [*Everyday*]).

Confidence in Instructional Practices

A five-item measure (α = .77) was used to assess participant confidence in teaching various aspects of language and literacy development through play (1 [*Strongly disagree*] to 6 [*Strongly agree*]). The aspects considered were oral language, narrative structures, reading skills, writing skills, and visual representation.

Support Queries

A single open-ended question was provided to query what would support participants in incorporating play (or more play) into their language and literacy programs. Two additional open-ended questions were provided to assess what difficulties they faced incorporating play in their language and literacy programs generally and related to COVID-19 return-to-school protocols. A final question was provided to allow for any additional thoughts on playful literacy teaching and learning.

Results

Teachers' Current Use of Play in Language and Literacy Instruction

Survey results for measures of the importance of play experiences, confidence in enacting play experiences, colleague support, teaching behavior, and confidence in instructional practices provide a multi-faceted view on teachers' current use of play. The results are first provided here as descriptive summaries based on the frequency of participant responses. They are then combined with results related to the participants' teaching background and professional development in play and literacy learning and analyzed for correlation. The survey results we share here are not seen to be representative of the whole of Alberta's Grade 1 and 2 teaching population but provide information about the experiences of the responding teachers. Appendix B summarizes many of the results as an infographic.

The Importance of Play in Literacy Learning

Teachers completing the survey indicated they saw multiple forms of play as important parts of literacy learning for Grade 1 and 2 students. As shown in Table 1, more than 85% of surveyed teachers indicated agreement or strong agreement for the importance of six of the nine types of play identified in the survey. The most frequently indicated results were for playing with words and language, playing with others, and playing with art materials. With the exception of playing alone and playing with digital storytelling materials and apps, indicators of strong agreement were also notably more common than agreement. Although recruitment efforts encouraged teachers with multiple perspectives on play in language and literacy learning to complete the survey and indicators of disagreement with the importance of play were noted in survey responses, the self-

Table 1

Percentage of Teachers Agreeing/Disagreeing with the Importance of Literacy Play Experiences

Play experiences	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don' t Know/ Unsure	Total of Agree + Strongly Agree
Playing with words and language	0	0	0	1.7	19.0	79.3	0	98.3
Playing with others	1.7	0	1.7	3.4	15.5	77.6	0	93.1
Playing with art materials	0	0	0	6.9	25.9	67.2	0	93.1
Playing with ideas, characters, situations in texts	0	0	0	8.6	34.5	55.2	1.7	89.7
Playing with storytelling manipulatives	0	0	3.4	8.6	12.1	75.9	0	88.0
Guided play	1.7	0	0	10.3	25.9	60.3	1.7	86.2
Playing alone	1.7	1.7	0	20.7	32.8	41.4	1.7	74.2
Free play	1.7	0	3.4	20.7	15.5	58.6	0	74.1
Playing with digital storytelling materials and apps	3.4	3.4	6.9	22.4	39.7	27.6	0	67.3

selected and snowball elements of survey participation may have contributed to the inclusion of participants with positive inclinations toward play and literacy experiences.

Playing alone, free play, and playing with digital storytelling materials and apps were less frequently identified as important than other forms of play. Additional forms of play identified as important in participants' open comments were outdoor play (seven mentions), musical/theatrical play (five mentions), and playing with science and math materials (two mentions).

The overall high importance survey respondents indicated for playful language and literacy learning stands in contrast to their perceptions of its importance in their larger professional context. As shown in Table 2, when asked if they felt their colleagues supported the use of play in literacy teaching for Grade 1 and 2 students, 36.8% of respondents indicated agreement or strong agreement, 36.8% indicated they somewhat agreed, and 24.6% indicated some degree of disagreement.

Confidence and Practice with Play in Literacy Learning

Table 3 shows the frequency with which survey participants indicated confidence using the forms of play previously considered in terms of their importance. Playing with others and playing with words and language were the two areas in which participants most frequently indicated

Table 2

Percentage of Teachers Agreeing/Disagreeing that Colleagues Support Play in Literacy Teaching

Extent of agreement/disagreement	Percentage
Strongly disagree	1.8
Disagree	3.5
Somewhat disagree	19.3
Somewhat agree	36.8
Agree	26.3
Strongly agree	10.5
Unsure/don't know	1.8

Note. One survey participant did not respond to this question

Table 3

Percentage of Teachers Confident Using Play Experiences in Literacy Teaching

Play experiences	Percentage
Playing with others	82.8
Playing with words and language	81.0
Playing with storytelling manipulatives	70.7
Guided play	70.7
Playing with art materials	69.0
Playing with ideas, characters, situations in texts	65.5
Free play	63.8
Playing alone	60.3
Playing with digital storytelling materials and apps	25.9

Table 4

Percentage of Teachers Using Play Experiences in Literacy Teaching Every Day or Several Times a Week

Play experiences	Percentage
Playing with words and language	72.4
Playing with others	70.7
Playing alone	51.7
Guided play	46.6
Free play	44.8
Playing with storytelling manipulatives	31.0
Playing with art materials	29.3
Playing with ideas, characters, situations in texts	29.3
Playing with digital storytelling materials and apps	6.9

Table 5

Percentage of Teachers Confident Using Play Experiences to Teach Language and Literacy Skills

Aspects of language and literacy development	Percentage
Oral language	70.7
Narrative structures	56.9
Reading skills	63.8
Writing skills	63.8
Visual representation	62.1

confidence. Playing with digital storytelling materials and apps stands out among the results in this table with only 25.9% of teachers indicating confidence with play in these digital contexts. Table 4 shows the frequency of participant responses indicating they used these forms of play several times a week or daily within their instruction. Playing with words and language and playing with others again gathered the strongest results, and playing with digital storytelling materials and apps, the lowest result. Also of note among the results is that although playing with art materials and ideas, characters, and situations in text were third and fourth most frequently indicated as important in Table 1, they were less frequently used in practice (seventh and eighth place in Table 4). Conversely, less valued forms of play such as playing alone and free play appeared more frequently in indicators of practice.

Teachers' reported confidence in using play to teach different aspects of language and literacy development within Alberta English Language Arts curricular structures for elementary grades at the time of the survey is documented in Table 5. The relatively higher confidence survey participants expressed for teaching aspects of oral language appears consistent with the importance, confidence, and use of playing with words and language reported earlier. The relatively lower confidence survey participants expressed in teaching visual representation and narrative structures also appears consistent with the earlier results related to art materials, storytelling manipulatives, and digital storytelling materials and apps.

Relations Between Variables

Bivariate correlations were used to assess the relationships between various quantitative measures. A complete summary of correlational analyses and results can be found in Table 6. For all multi-item measures, mean scores were computed. The internal consistency reliability of multi-item measures was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. This can be found on the diagonal of Table 6. All reliabilities ranged from adequate to good ($\alpha > .75$). Several notable results are briefly outlined below.

Professional development opportunities related to the incorporation of play in language and literacy instruction were moderately positively associated with importance of various play experiences in teaching literacy and confidence in implementing such experiences. They were strongly associated with actual use of playful experiences in literacy teaching. The use of playful experiences in literacy teaching was also strongly and positively associated with participant attitudes towards the importance of play, their confidence in being able to enact such experiences, and very strongly associated with their confidence in teaching important aspects of language and literacy development through play (e.g., reading skills, writing skills, oral language, etc.). Also of note, participants' perceptions of whether their fellow colleagues supported the use of play in literacy teaching was moderately positively associated with their own perceptions surrounding the importance of play and their confidence in teaching various aspects of language and literacy development through play.

What Teachers Say They Need to Make Play Part of Language and Literacy Education

Open-response questions asked teachers to describe what would support them in incorporating play (or more play) in their language and literacy program and what made it difficult to incorporate play. Difficulties were queried both generally and from the perspective of COVID-19 public health protocols. Forty-five participants described what would support them in incorporating play in their teaching, and 49 participants provided responses to each of the two questions about what made it difficult to do so. These responses were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process, with attention given to the descriptive language used in individual responses. Themes were determined inductively as affiliations were

Table 6

Correlations Between Explored Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Overall Teaching Experience	1							
2. Grade 1/2 Teaching Experience	.70***	1						
3. Professional Development Experience	.26+	.15	1					
4. Importance of Play	.23+	.17	.38**	(.78)				
5. Confidence Enacting Play	.23+	.30*	.36**	.51***	(.76)			
6. Colleague Support	.00	.06	-.04	.37**	.21	1		
7. Teaching Behaviour	.27*	.15	.49***	.52***	.59***	.08	(.86)	
8. Confidence in Instruction	.29*	.22+	.39**	.48***	.67***	.26*	.66**	(.77)

Note. *** $p<.001$, ** $p<.01$, * $p<.05$, + $p<.10$. N = 57-58. Diagonal denotes alpha reliabilities where applicable.

noted across responses. Peer debriefing was used to verify the themes as both key and prevalent within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Responses to each question were analyzed individually, then responses to the question about supports and non-COVID challenges were analyzed together as a combined response to the question of what teachers say they need to make play part of language and literacy education. Results for the survey question about difficulties attributed to COVID protocols are presented separately.

Four prevalent and connected themes are found in what teachers say they need to make play part of language and literacy education: conceptual endorsement, professional learning, resources, and an integration of playful learning with other institutional expectations. An additional theme was apparent in responses that attributed difficulties in incorporating play to student-based factors. COVID-specific difficulties were described in terms of access to classroom play experiences and through impacts on the types of play that became more and less possible for students as provincial and local public health protocols were implemented. As we report on the themed results, illustrative comments are provided to highlight important elements within the themes and to provide a richness of description through teachers' own language.

Conceptual Endorsement

The need for play to be recognized as a valid way of learning in Grades 1 and 2 was a resounding refrain in responses to the question of what would be supportive. The absence of such conceptual endorsement was repeatedly identified as a factor making it difficult for teachers to include play in language and literacy learning. As seen in the illustrative comments below, teachers identified the need for this supportive conceptual endorsement to come from other teachers, leaders, and students' families. These comments were received from teachers who both agreed and disagreed with the overall statement about colleagues supporting play in literacy teaching for Grades 1 and 2 students.

What would be supportive to play in language and literacy learning?

- "Admin accepting this philosophy as a valid teaching practice and supporting the use of free play."
- "Supportive admin, supportive parents."
- "Having more wide-spread knowledge among schools and school boards about the value of play, especially outside kindergarten."

What makes play in language and literacy learning difficult?

- "Grade team with a different understanding of play, do not see the value - grade team that is focused on all students and classes doing the same lessons at the same time."
- "Not all teachers/administrators understand the purpose and role that different kinds of play bring to the classroom."

Some respondents characterized the need for support and endorsement as a matter of others' knowledge and experience limiting aspects of their practice. Other respondents felt a more pronounced and active de-valuing of play that made their interest in playful practices something to be kept out of the sightlines of others' disapproval. Their comments spoke of play "being looked down on" and even of the "stigma of play in an educational setting".

Professional Learning

In identifying what would support play as part of their language and literacy instruction, teachers sought increased understanding for themselves and their teaching colleagues, modelling and examples of playful literacy practice, and time to practice and reflect together. Details about the types of professional learning experiences that would be supportive were framed in collegial and collective terms. Teachers identified that they were seeking learning not just for themselves but for and with others. Responses identified the need for "more PD system-wide," "professional learning networks," "seeing colleagues and students engaged in this type of learning," and "time to flesh out ideas with colleagues."

Resources

Teachers also identified a need for resources that encourage the use of playful pedagogies. They identified the need for materials and manipulatives that students might play with and more classroom space for students to play in. The call for support for the material nature of play was particularly strong, as was the sense that any existing allocations of school funds for play materials was limited to supporting kindergarten classes (e.g., "Often they buy materials that are used for play in K and we get nothing except math cubes in Grade 1 and up."), and that the literacy play manipulatives they did have were because of their own financial investments and material contributions.

Integration with Other Expectations

The differences between kindergarten and the more defined expectations of Grades 1 and 2 figured prominently in survey responses in which teachers identified the need for professional learning and practice to be integrated with "curriculum content and expectations." They wanted to understand how to extend play into the curriculum outcomes and assessment responsibilities that defined their time and much of their accountability. Time pressures, time to cover curriculum outcomes, and time to make play meaningful all featured in the teachers' survey responses, particularly in identifying what made it difficult to incorporate play in their classrooms. One teacher explained, "In Grade 2, the outcomes become more specific so we don't always have time for deep meaningful play as well."

Student Factors

When describing difficulties that affected the use of play in classroom literacy learning, a number of responses focused on student factors, specifically student behavior and class dynamics. Although these comments might be read as positioning students themselves as difficult, we hear in them echoes of the idea that play is disruptive to the serious work of learning. They highlight tensions between the images of an orderly classroom characterized by didactic instruction and the disorderly nature of play. We also hear in these comments a reminder of the risk of naively valorizing play. They serve as a reminder that valuing play is a necessary yet insufficient element for incorporating play in the classroom in meaningful ways, and that supporting playful learning is a demanding form of pedagogy.

Language and Literacy Play in the Context of COVID-19

Since the beginning of the pandemic, students, teachers, and families have participated in learning experiences across multiple modalities, locations, and circumstances. At the time the survey was conducted, schooling in Alberta was primarily, although somewhat tenuously, occurring face-to-face/mask-to-mask in physical classrooms, with online learning as an available option. Shifting circumstances and decisions at provincial and community levels resulted in varying classroom experiences as students and teachers moved in and out of classroom-based and online learning, and school districts implemented masking, cohorting, cleaning protocols, and other health measures in different ways and for different periods of time. In asking how return-to-school public health protocols affected possibilities for playful literacy learning in classrooms we expected to hear about requirements for physical distancing and limitations on children sharing materials in schools. Indeed, these factors were clearly identified by teachers working in physical classrooms.

For some, the limitations were bluntly experienced, nearly eliminating playful literacy learning or making it seem impossible.

- "Physical distancing, unable to share materials, constant cleaning."
- "They have almost eliminated it. Students cannot share materials or use any non-washable tools. There is no opportunity for group work/interaction."
- "Social distancing, cleaning and sharing protocols make it impossible."

For others, the limitations created difficulties more than impossibilities.

- "Much of what I would have done has become more difficult to do. Magnetic letter and stamps can't be shared for instance. Students have to be spaced out. Soft puppets and toys are not allowed. It's a bit like reinventing the wheel!"
- "I have had to get creative with how to include it. Without being risky and without increasing my own personal workload too much. Rather than sharing materials and loose parts, each child has their own box that they use on their own. I would prefer they get to play with others. I also do not change the materials out as often as I would like because it involves more sanitizing."
- "I have modified all centres and social interactions."

Amidst these modifications and creative solutions to managing space, materials, and cleaning, teachers recognized that classroom play experiences themselves were being modified.

- "This hinders the natural flow of the kids and has caused free play to become more guided play. Although they are choosing their own free play activity, they are choosing from a prescribed list of options and cannot organically move around the room to follow their curiosities."
- "Less interaction among peers. More guided practice than free play and exploration."

Teachers working online also identified challenges related to physical distancing and material limitations, and again highlighted limitations to practice arising in a lack of shared understanding of the possibilities for play within defined learning outcomes.

- "I'm teaching online so play is extremely limited, especially playing with others. Also having students play at home is difficult when wanting to incorporate specific curriculum because of the different resources each student has."

- "I was reassigned to online teaching for g2. Parents at home have not been willing to engage in this type of learning. They want cut and dry, straightforward, target focused learning."

Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first survey of Grade 1 and 2 teachers' perspectives on play and literacy learning in Canada. As such it provides valuable empirical information about the ways in which play is currently viewed, practiced, supported, and constrained within Grade 1 and 2 literacy instruction. It also provides teachers' perspectives on how play could be increasingly leveraged as part of language and literacy learning in the early elementary grades.

Teachers' Current Use of Play in Language and Literacy Instruction

Consistent with the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), we found that teachers' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control were associated with the implementation of play in literacy teaching. Looking at details within participants' responses to the survey measures we note three key findings.

First, teachers participating in the survey see play as important to language and literacy learning. They particularly value opportunities for students to play with words and language and with others. Having students play with art materials, story manipulatives, and ideas, characters and situations in texts is also important to them. Guided play is more frequently seen as important than students playing alone or engaging in free play. Play with digital storytelling tools and apps is seen as a less important form of play.

Second, the value teachers play on various forms of play does not always carry over to their instructional practice. Teachers participating in our survey shared information indicating the most valued forms of play (playing with words and language and with others) were also regularly used in the classroom. However, they provided information indicating that other forms of play they saw as important (playing with art materials and playing with ideas, characters, and situations in text) were less frequently used than less valued forms of play (playing alone and free play).

Third, the value participants placed on play in language and literacy learning is not perceived to be widely shared among their colleagues.

What Teachers Say They Need to Make Play Part of Language and Literacy Education

The support of their fellow teachers, leaders, and parents is a significant aspect of what teachers said they need to make play part of their instruction and students' learning experiences. They also identified resources, particularly materials and manipulatives, collaborative, co-invested, active, and reflective professional learning, and practical guidance on how play can be integrated into the curricular and assessment requirements of Grades 1 and 2. These needs appeared in different ways and with a heightened emphasis on materials as the teachers considered their experiences returning to school during the pandemic but remained similar in their themes.

A Press for Play

The teachers' survey comments echo concerns brought forward in research exploring "the academic transformation of the kindergarten" (Dyson, 2015, p. 199). The loss of play in favour of a dominant focus on didactic pedagogies and interventionist approaches to meeting defined literacy skills is well documented in kindergarten settings (Bassok et al., 2016, Brown et al., 2020). Situated outside the kindergarten environment, the participants in our survey experience the academic press (Russell, 2011) of early-years education but do so differently than their kindergarten colleagues. When voicing their recognition of the pressures of literacy performance expectations, achievement benchmarks, and testing on classroom practices, our participants focused less on incompatibilities between the affordances of play and defined outcomes for print-based literacies, and more on *seeking to understand and enact playful pedagogies on behalf of those outcomes*.

With formalized literacy expectations well established in Grades 1 and 2 (and setting COVID aside for a moment) the participants in our survey were not working through the loss of the landmark features of their instructional context. They were not negotiating pronounced shifts in the institutional logics of their work and professional identities (Goldstein, 2007; Russell, 2011). They themselves were seeking to create such shifts, looking to play as a way forward. The participants in our survey were seeking to enliven possibilities in the pedagogical landscape of Grade 1 and 2 classrooms, and in the foundations of their professional credibility.

While there is a tenuous, even contested, relationship with pedagogies of play apparent in the teachers' descriptions of the current context of Grade 1 and 2 language and literacy instruction, there is also a call to renegotiate that relationship. There is a press for play to be sanctioned and supported as a meaningful classroom pedagogy, and for the creation of a distinctive space between the developmental and academic logics of instruction of early years education (Russell, 2011).

Limitations and Recommendations

The results of our exploratory study open a multitude of questions and caused us to look back at its design with new ideas: additional demographic questions we might have asked, "why questions" we might have framed, details in the interpretation of categories we might have asked about, follow-up interviews we might have offered, and additional languages and technologies through which we might have reached a broader group of participants. We understood the survey would not be representative of the population of Grade 1 and 2 teachers but from those who responded we have learned a great deal. Drawing on the responses within the survey we offer a cluster of actions to support a press for play and move the pedagogical possibilities of play forward in language and literacy learning in the elementary grades.

Develop a Shared and Expanded Sense of Play

With nearly a quarter of respondents indicating their colleagues do not support play as part of literacy instruction and a prevalence of responses seeking broader recognition of what play can offer literacy learning, the survey's findings suggest that moving playful language and literacy learning forward requires a context of shared understanding. This is further emphasized in the correlation found between such a sense of collegial support and the use of play in instructional practice. We propose that responding to this need involves addressing what is evoked in and

through the word play as well as the role of play within language and literacy learning.

Commonly held definitions, rooted in works by Huizinga (1949/2014) and Vygotsky (1978), emphasize play as free, self-directed, intrinsically motivated, and guided by its own goals and purposes. These definitions highlight important aspects of play yet do not always sit easily with the pre-defined and purposeful goals of schooling. Left unquestioned, such definitions may perpetuate the assumption "that there are only two options available for education: either to give in to the desires of the child or to subject the child to the desires of society; either total freedom or total control" (Biesta, 2013, p. 3). We suggest that undoing the hold of the work/play binary in educational contexts and exploring pedagogical possibilities between the developmental and academic logics of instruction involves considering how play both disrupts the status quo and creates new forms of equilibrium. We further suggest attention be given to how play's expressive capacities can aid in effective and respectful engagement with the purposes and goals of serious objects and contexts (Sicart, 2014).

Such considerations must be thoughtful about the differences between play as an end in itself and play as a way to mobilize and enrich children's literacies. Focusing on play's role as well as its characteristics, collective conversations might ask what play can do, where play might take language and literacy learning, and where it cannot. These conversations will require the participation of educators, leaders, families, scholars, communities, and children. They will require participants who can engage in the possibilities of playful language and literacy learning within formalized curricular expectations while also recognizing its limits. The dialogic task we propose will need to proceed amidst the pragmatic supports teachers seek and the classroom practices the conversations themselves help generate. We propose recursive conversations that inquire into modes of being playful in the physical and digital places in which children are and become literate.

Promote Collaborative Professional Learning

Quantitative results from our survey suggest that participation in previous professional development played a role in providing the skills and confidence needed for playful literacy teaching. Teachers' appreciation of and advocacy for professional learning experiences was also strongly represented in their descriptions of what did and could support the inclusion of play in language and literacy instruction.

The teachers' emphasis on collaborative professional learning is a direction we see as significant, particularly as part of building new images of instruction and a shared sense of professional knowledge and practice. We envision this collaborative professional learning to build on the features and experiences the teachers identified (modelling, the use of examples, and time to practice and reflect together) to become locations of both pragmatic investigation and active theorizing.

Professional learning experiences for Grades 1 and 2 teachers may be seeded with ideas, practices, and images from preschool and kindergarten environments, community play initiatives, international contexts, and theoretical works, but elementary teachers and their students must lead in working those ideas, developing and evaluating their place and role in Canadian elementary classrooms. As part of professional learning experiences, space must be opened for teachers to design, articulate, and document the pedagogies of play that support the literacy goals of their institutional contexts and bridge the spaces between the forms of play they see as important and the ones they enact. These experiences can push on what constrains practice

and divides thinking and build understandings of how adults and children can be engaged intellectual participants in the dynamics of playful literacy learning.

Review Classroom Resources

Teachers' comments about playful literacy learning include ideas about playmates, playthings, and play spaces. Accentuated by the influences of COVID-19 restrictions, play materials and the connected nature of play and literacy learning feature strongly in what teachers say they and students need. The request for resources is integral to working with teachers to clarify and document the pedagogical possibilities of play in language and literacy learning.

In outcomes-driven images of education, literacy is seen as an individual, human accomplishment and materials are positioned as aids to support the development of literacy skills. Like the math cubes one teacher mentioned, literacy materials can also be physical representations of targeted skills. A call for materials can mean a call for the instrumentality of wooden alphabet letters and sequenced story puzzles. Approaching the call for materials through the insights of posthuman scholars, materials can be seen less as instruments of outcomes and more as participants in play (Kuby et al., 2015, 2018; Lenters, 2016, 2019; Thiel, 2015, 2019). *Playing-with* materials can be a means of *thinking-with* human and more-than human others (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2017) and can open different possibilities in the teachers' call for/to materials.

Our recommendation is to include materiality as a visible element in conversations about what play is and can do in Grade 1 and 2 literacy learning, and in the professional learning experiences and classroom actions informed by and informing those conversations. We acknowledge the teachers' requests for tangible, financial investments in materials, yet are cautious about highly curated collections of materials that risk becoming adult invasions into the space of play, curbing the literacy learning they mean to encourage (Roskos & Christie, 2001). The art materials that teachers value as part of play and other flexible resources that open imaginative spaces, stories, and narrative learnings, offer promising places to begin.

Conclusion

This study inquired into teachers' use of play in Grade 1 and 2 Alberta classrooms and what teachers say they need to make play part of school-based language and literacy education. Participants saw value in multiple forms of play and the results of the survey resonate with the voices of teachers committed to re-imagining possibilities for play, language, and literacy learning. Participants also reported that their interest in playful literacy learning is not shared by all their colleagues or fully accepted in their instructional contexts. The study's findings point to a way forward through critical and generous conversations, professional learning, and theoretical and pragmatic supports for action, evidence gathering, instructional reflection, and resources.

As noted in our recommendation for broad and inclusive professional conversations about the nature and role of play in early elementary literacy learning, research exploring the multiple perspectives of educators, leaders, families, communities, and children is needed to extend the questions and understandings our survey has begun to explore. Researchers have much to learn from and as part of those conversations, and from professional learning experiences responding to and developing the commitment and curiosity our participants have shared.

Through play, many of the participants in our study are seeking to build new classroom

learning capacities as well as new forms of professional knowledge and identity while honouring existing professional, familial, and public investments in young children's literacy achievements. Their voices, and those not yet heard, invite additional attention to play's position in Canadian elementary schools, and the ways in which play and literacy learning might be enacted together. A broad research program, working from multiple theoretical and conceptual perspectives and through diverse methodologies and methods can help bring play and the serious work of education together, and help the character and role of each be more fully understood.

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Note

1. The study was reviewed and approved by the University of Calgary's Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. An approved digital consent form was used via the online Qualtrics survey application. All data in the paper comes from consenting participants.

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Appendix A: Survey Measures

Background

D0. Do you currently, or have you recently (within the last 2 years) taught grade 1 and/or 2 in Alberta? (Yes, No).

D1. Please indicate the number of years you have been teaching grade 1 and/or 2 below)

D2. Please indicate the duration you have been teaching grade 1 and/or 2 in years below

D3. Have you been provided any professional development opportunities focusing on incorporating play in language and literacy instruction? (Yes, No, Unsure)

If yes,

D3a. Please briefly describe any professional development activities focused on incorporating play in language and literacy instruction that you have had an opportunity to engage in. (Open-ended text box)

Question 1

I think it is important for grade 1 and 2 students to have these kinds of experiences as part of literacy learning at school. (Strongly disagree [1] to Strongly agree [6], [7] Unsure/Uncertain)

- Free play
- Guided play
- Playing alone
- Playing with others
- Playing with words and language (exploring different forms, meanings, and uses)
- Playing with storytelling manipulatives/materials/objects (e.g., puppets, figurines, natural materials, loose parts, costumes and props)
- Playing with art materials
- Playing with digital storytelling tools and apps
- Playing with ideas, characters, situations in texts (print, audio, visual, multimodal)

Question 2

Are there any other kinds of play experiences, not listed above, you feel are important for literacy learning in grade 1 and 2 classrooms? If so, please describe them below. (Open-ended text box)

Question 3

I feel confident in making these kinds of experiences part of my literacy teaching
(Please select all that apply)

- Free play
- Guided play
- Playing alone
- Playing with others
- Playing with words and language (exploring different forms, meanings, and uses)

- Playing with storytelling manipulatives/materials/objects (e.g., puppets, figurines, natural materials, loose parts, costumes and props)
- Playing with art materials
- Playing with digital storytelling tools and apps
- Playing with ideas, characters, situations in texts (print, audio, visual, multimodal)

Question 4
I feel that my colleagues support the use of play in literacy teaching for grade 1 and 2 students (Strongly disagree [1] to Strongly agree [6], [7] Unsure/Uncertain)

Question 5
I include these kinds of experiences in my language and literacy teaching (Never [1] to Everyday [6], [7] Unsure/Uncertain)

- Free play
- Guided play
- Playing alone
- Playing with others
- Playing with words and language (exploring different forms, meanings, and uses)
- Playing with storytelling manipulatives/materials/objects (e.g., puppets, figurines, natural materials, loose parts, costumes and props)
- Playing with art materials
- Playing with digital storytelling tools and apps
- Playing with ideas, characters, situations in texts (print, audio, visual, multimodal)

Question 6
In my instructional practices, I feel confident teaching these aspects of language and literacy development through play
(Strongly disagree [1] to Strongly agree [6], Unsure/Uncertain)

- Oral language
- Narrative structures
- Reading skills
- Writing skills
- Visual representation

Question 7
Are there **other aspects** of language and literacy development, **not mentioned above**, you teach during play? If so, please list them below. (Open-ended textbox)

Question 8
What would support you in incorporating play (or more play) in your language and literacy program? (Open-ended textbox)

Question 9
Outside of impacts of Covid-19, what makes it difficult for you to incorporate play (or more play) in your language and literacy program? (Open-ended textbox)

Question 10
ow have the return-to-school protocols (re: Covid-19) impacted your ability to include playful literacy learning in your class? (Open-ended textbox)

Question 11

If you have other thoughts on playful literacy teaching and learning, please share them below. (Open-ended textbox)

Appendix B: Survey Results Infographic