

Immigrant Parents' Understanding of Play-based Learning

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Abstract

It is widely known within the field of Early Childhood Education that play lays a foundation for life-long learning in a child's life. Furthermore, the partnerships between a parent and educator are crucial for the holistic development of a child. This study explored immigrant parents' perceptions of play-based learning and analyzed their relationships with their child's educators. This qualitative study used a narrative design approach and collected data through semi-structured face-to-face interviews which took place with immigrant parents. The data revealed that the participants do not understand the full benefits of play-based learning. Four major themes emerged from the findings; social learning & outdoor play, academic success, restricted learning, and dissatisfied relationships with educators. The data also conveyed that some of the participants are not satisfied with the relationship they have with their child's educator, suggesting that their voices are not being heard. Through these findings, the researcher hopes this study can assist early childhood educators to effectively inform immigrant families about the importance of play-based learning and to build strong partnerships with immigrant families that encourage and respect their voices within the field of Early Childhood Education.

Introduction

Play is one of the most important ways in which young children gain essential knowledge and skills (UNICEF, 2018). Play "enables children to engage in higher-level thinking and develop skills in problem-solving, and applying knowledge/creativity" (Robertson, Morrissey, & Rouse, 2018, para.12). With Canada's growing immigrant population, the number of immigrant families entering early childhood education and care continues to grow. It is important to learn their understandings of play-based learning as these families are an important part of Canada's diverse identity. Through the extensive literature review, it was found that immigrant parents do not see the correlation between education and play, rather they view play and education as two separate aspects of early childhood education and care. The purpose of this study was to explore immigrant parents' perceptions and opinions of play-based learning in early childhood settings. The overarching research question was; *What are immigrant parents' understandings of play-based learning in early childhood settings?*

Literature Review

While reviewing the literature, three themes emerged. These three themes demonstrated immigrant parents' understandings of play-based learning and their relationships with educators and the field of early childhood education and care.

Theme 1: Play is good for social development but not school readiness

The first theme was the most consistent throughout the literature, it was seen that both immigrant and native-born parents want to see more visible signs of school readiness such as writing letters and numbers along with other literacy/numeracy skills (O'Gorman & Allwood, 2012). Furthermore, a research study that interviewed 8 parents concerning their thoughts on play in Queensland, found that parents felt outdoor play should be enough to gain benefits from play and the indoor environment should focus on activities that promote math and literacy (Breathnach, O'Gorman, & Danby, 2016). However, another study done in Canada found that the immigrant mothers believed play helped their children make friends (Yahya & Wood, 2016).

Theme 2: Immigrant parents' voices are being excluded

The second theme was seen in many studies. One of them (Heng, 2014) evaluated the interactions between Chinese families and preschool staff and found that "communication between schools and low-income immigrant families tended to be one-directional and instrumental in nature" (p.123). Furthermore, the study found that educators are quick to assume that parents understand certain policies and routines within the classroom. However, without the explanation of why certain policies and routines are in place, immigrant parents are excluded from learning about their child's education (Heng, 2014).

Theme 3: Immigrant parents place high importance on academic success.

The third theme indicated that immigrant parents place high importance on academic success. In a study by Areepattamannil & Lee (2014), the authors found the parents believed that "the best way for their children to succeed in a new country is to thrive academically" (p.55). The same study also noted that despite the country of origin, immigrant parents believe in the "importance of doing well in school and attempt to instill such an attitude in their children" (p.54). In conclusion, the themes that emerged from the literature guided this qualitative study and were also consistently seen during data analysis.

Summary Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore immigrant parents' perceptions and opinions of play-based learning in early childhood settings. The overarching research question was: *What are immigrant parents' understandings of play-based learning in early childhood settings?* A sub-question explored: *Are immigrant parents' voices heard in early childhood settings?*

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a qualitative methodology, more specifically a narrative design was used as it is open-ended and allows the participants to provide more detailed information.

Instrument

The researcher used face-to-face, semi-structured, open-ended interviews with 5 participants to collect data. The interviews were between 30-45 minutes in length and consisted of 11 questions designed to answer the research question and one sub-question. During the interviews, an interview protocol was used and interviews were audio-recorded for transcription purposes only.

Procedure

Phase 1: Recruitment

- Step 1: The researcher contacted potential participants who fit the requirements from the researcher's acquaintance list via email.
- Step 2: Participants who agreed to join the research study were given an Invitation Letter and Consent Form and Sound Recording Consent Form.

Phase 2: Data Collection

- Step 1: The researcher met with each participant at the agreed-upon location, day, and time.
- Step 2: The researcher had two copies of the Invitation Letter and Consent Form. Once the participant had reviewed and signed the letter, the researcher kept one signed copy and gave one copy to the participant to keep. The same procedure was done with the Sound Recording Consent Form.
- Step 3: The interview took place using the interview protocol.
- Step 4: Participants were contacted once the interviews were transcribed for member checking.

Phase 3: Data Analysis

- Step 1: Following member checking, each transcript was read and re-read. The researcher conducted a line-by-line analysis, first creating codes by highlighting 2- to 3-word sections of text. Next, codes were combined to create themes that emerged from the data.
- Step 2: The researcher triangulated the findings

Participants

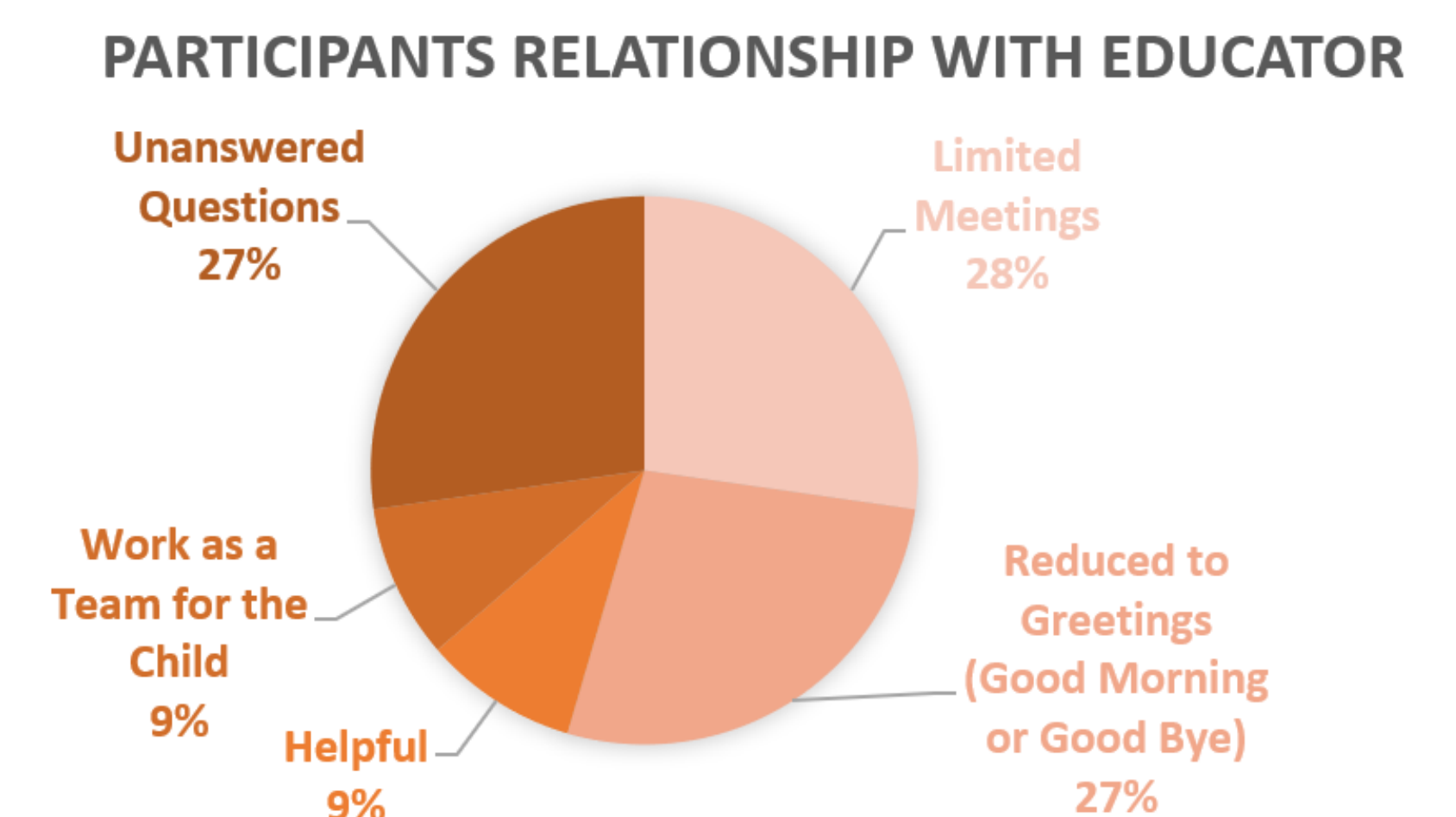
- Sampling Strategy: Homogeneous Sampling
- Sampling: Purposeful Sampling
- Participants: Immigrant Parents, who have immigrated to Canada within the past 10 years and who have had at least one child attend (or is currently attending) a childcare centre or full-day kindergarten within Ontario. All participants were members of the Sikh community (the Sikh community makes up a large part of the immigrant population from India as Sikhism is the 5th largest religion in the world).
- Sampling Size- 5 participants

The image on the right represents words and phrases participants used when asked; *What does play mean to you?*



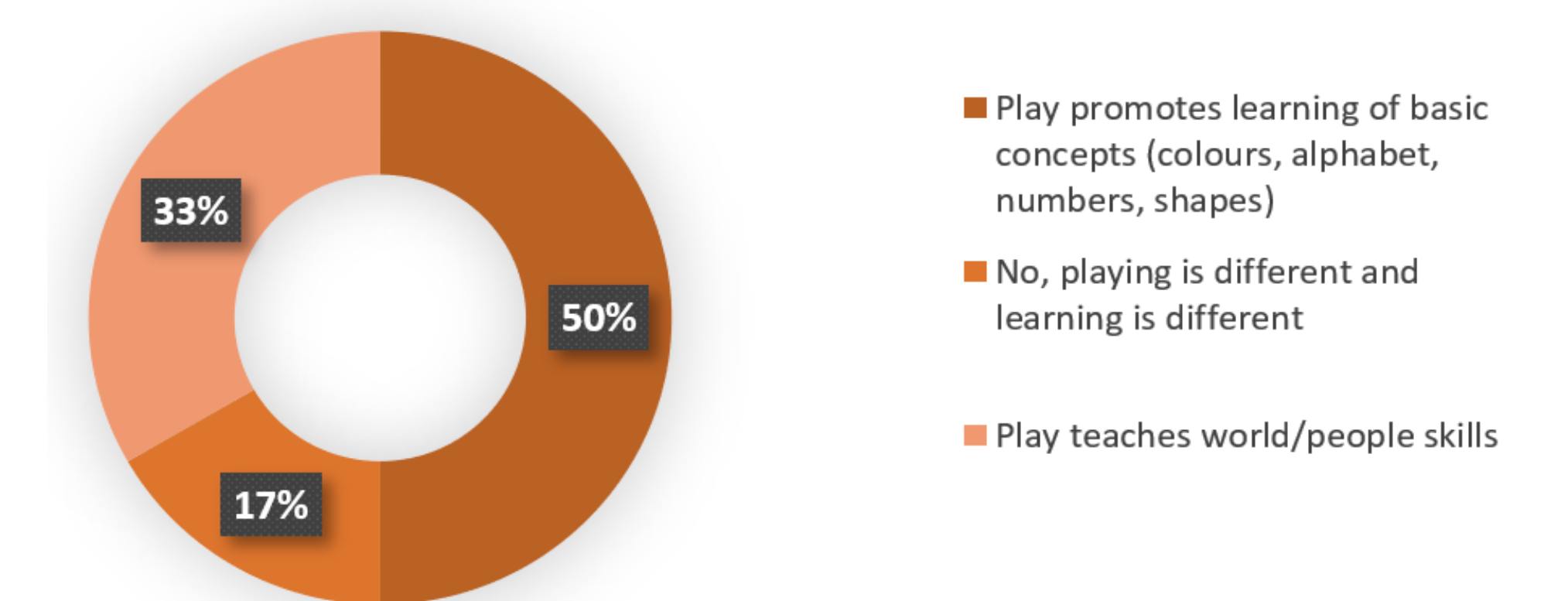
Results and Discussion

The results in this research study were quite similar to what was reflected in the literature. Overall, the participants shared many opinions and demonstrated that they did somewhat understand the basics of play-based learning, however, there is a lack of understanding the full benefits of play-based learning and the important foundation it lays in a child's life. Furthermore, another important factor in this study was examining the relationship participants had with their child's educators; it was seen that 3 of the 5 participants (60%) were not satisfied with the relationship they have with their child's current educators. The following pie graph demonstrates how the participants felt regarding this relationship and the contact they had with the educators;



Another important finding was seen when participants were asked if they think the terms play and learning are related; 4 of 5 participants (80%) described the relationship between play and learning with the following words; shapes, colors, numbers, alphabet, and puzzles.

DO YOU THINK THE TERM PLAY & LEARNING ARE RELATED?



All of these findings were merged into 4 sub-themes which were;

- Social Learning & Outdoor Play
- Academic Success
- Restricted Learning
- Dissatisfied Relationships with Educators

These themes were consistent with the themes seen in the literature, which indicated that participants from this study and immigrant parents from the studies in the literature review have a somewhat similar opinion of play-based learning.

Limitations

- The immigrant population was not represented as only Sikh immigrants were interviewed, limiting the opinions and understandings of other immigrants belonging to other races, ethnicities, and religions.
- The sample size only represents a small amount of Sikh immigrants as only 5 participants were interviewed within the Peel Region. To get a better understanding of immigrant parents' understanding of play-based learning it would have been more accurate to have a larger sample size throughout multiple regions of Ontario.

Implications and Future Research

- This research study encourages educators to build strong relationships with immigrant families and establish a respectful dialogue to ensure strong partnerships are built between both immigrant families and educators in the field of early childhood education and care.
- The researcher recommends future research on the important partnership between educators and parents (both immigrant and native-born). The research would help shed light on this partnership and its importance on a child's development.