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Kindergarten Teachers' Perceptions and Implementation of Free Play at the Armenian
Schools of Lebanon

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A Thesis

**Kindergarten Teachers' Perceptions and Implementation of Free Play at the
Armenian Schools of Lebanon**

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the degree Master of Arts.

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Abstract

Recent literature in Early Childhood Education underscores the importance of play, in general, and free play, in particular, in the early years of children's lives. However, little is known about free play and its implementation in Lebanese Kindergartens. This research involved a qualitative case study of Kindergarten teachers' perceptions and implementation of free play in the Armenian schools of Lebanon. Data sources included a questionnaire with open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews. Twenty-five KG teachers from 8 schools participated in the study by completing the questionnaire and of which 22 were interviewed. Data was coded, patterns were identified, and themes emerged through conducting thematic analysis. The results assured the implementation of free play in the Kindergartens of the Armenian schools of Lebanon; however, differences were noticed with regards to time and place of implementation as well as the teachers' role during free play. The teachers considered that free play is crucial in early childhood and that its benefits suppress its disadvantages. However, they gave little time for free play. Moreover, at times, free play was replaced with structural play, because the teachers thought that the latter would lead to more learning. The findings of the present study are discussed in light of the existing literature. Culture-specific contribution is highlighted as well as recommendations for future research and policy.

Keywords: Armenian schools, early childhood education, free play, kindergartens, teachers' perceptions.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Play is an essential part of the children's lives especially in the early years of their development (Miller & Almon, 2009, Ploof, 2011; Podolefsky, Rehn, & Perkins, 2012). It is considered a basic means for learning (Tongson, 2014). Throughout history, many prominent scholars, such as Piaget and Vygotsky, have emphasized the importance of play in the child's development. Through playing, children become social and communicate with other children of their age; act out and express their emotions; solve problems or conflicts; learn to think and analyze; use their imaginations and explore; and use their fine and gross motor skills while running, climbing, playing (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978). Froebel, the German educator and psychologist, is the founder of the kindergarten system. According to him, the kindergarten is the place where students learn social interactions with other children through creative play. According to Froebel, play is very crucial at early age because it is the highest level of expression for a child.

Education is growth from within and development of any learning is possible through activity and practice. A Froebelian approach to early childhood education would encourage children to develop self-discipline that helps children to concentrate well and to learn effectively. Children should be given choices and be allowed to make both errors and decisions. Help is offered to children only when it is needed. (Froebel, 2020).

Different types of play exist during which children use imagination, creativity, exploration, or inquiry; alone or with others (Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012). However, teachers give more importance to the academic skills like reading, writing, and testing rather than giving time for play (Ashiabi, 2007, Miller & Almon, 2009). This also occurs

in the kindergartens of Lebanon, where there is emphasis on academic skills rather than play (UNESCO, 2007). This is true even though it is the child's right to play and learn through play since play helps in the development of their knowledge and skills (Brooker & Woodhead, 2013; UNICEF, 2018; Woodhead, 2005). According to Ashiabi (2007), the problem rests in teachers' perceptions because their perceptions would influence both the implementation and children's learning.

According to Santer, Griffiths & Goodall (2007), free play is one type of play that enhances the emotional, social, as well as cognitive development of the children. When children are playing with no adult control, they are free to express their own feelings, communicate with their friends, solve conflicts and problems, and interact with children of their age. In this kind of play, children are free to choose how to play, what to do, and how to solve problems without any adult interference or guidance (Santer, Griffiths & Goodall, 2007).

Research has shown that structured or guided play supports the curriculum and academic learning (White, 2012). Most research in early childhood education emphasizes the importance of structured play, through which children gain and learn certain types of information. Examples include using block to learn counting or puzzle to learn about shapes, etc. However, according to Ginsburg (2007) play should be child-centered, and should depend on the child's desire and interest. Children grasp and understand better when they explore and discover what interests them, rather than being told what to do or how to do it (Ginsburg, 2007).

During an observation of free play in kindergartens operating in England, the

children's ability to think and act independently was underestimated along with the children's dependency on teachers; imitating and acting out like them (White, 2012). It must be noted that the teachers' role and interactions with the children must change according to the needs of the children. The teachers should be flexible and know when to and when not to interfere. Most children stop playing when the adults engage more than they should. Therefore, it's the quality of interaction that matters rather than the quantity (White, 2012).

Different teacher roles have been observed in the classrooms such as the onlooker role in which teachers stay nearby, watch the kid's play, and from time to time give a comment. Other listed roles include stage managers' role in which the teachers don't get involved in the play but help the child in preparing the setting of the play; a co-player role in which a teacher plays with the child; and finally, a play leader role during which the teacher guides the child in how to play or what to do (White, 2012). During free play, the teacher must be an onlooker or a stage manager, or else it's not free play. When teachers' perceptions were recorded regarding their role and practice in kindergarten, they stated that their practices in classrooms were dependent on their own experience rather than on knowledge of theories. Importantly, they emphasized outdoor play for students. During the outdoor free play, the teachers' role was to provide a safe environment for the kids to explore. Teachers were also worried about reaching their target or objectives of the curriculum at schools (Santer, Griffiths & Goodall, 2007). Therefore, during the implementation of free play, indoor or outdoor, the teachers' involvement must vary and it's the teachers who have to decide the right degree of

involvement. Teachers have to observe and supervise what children are doing, support their efforts, and get involved only when necessary (Ashiabi, 2007).

Context of the Study

Little research has been conducted about free play in Armenian schools in Lebanon and especially in Kindergartens. To provide context to the study, an overview and description of this population must be studied. Most Armenian schools are private and follow the Lebanese curriculum. According to Attarian (2014), little research exists about Armenian schools and education in Lebanon. The number of the Armenian schools had become 25 in 2012-2013. However, now, in 2019, the number of schools has declined into 15 schools only. The number of Armenian parents sending their children to Armenian preschools is decreasing and that is noticed by any observer. As for faculty, few of the kindergarten teachers have university diplomas whereas the majority has TS or BT technical degrees (Attarian, 2014). As an educator in an Armenian school, it's important to understand the teachers' perceptions about free play because the teachers are the ones implementing the play and working with children.

This research was conducted in Armenian schools of Lebanon in which little studies have been conducted about the implementation of free play and the perceptions of the Armenian schools' KG teachers on free play in Kindergarten classes. Consequently, this research will explore how free play is implemented in Armenian schools and what the KG teachers' perceptions are about free play.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study is to explore the KG teachers' perceptions and implementation of free play at the kindergartens of Armenian schools of Lebanon. This is

important because many teachers know and understand the importance of different types of play, yet they still minimize play time (Jung & Jin, 2014). What is noticed in recent years is that children spend most of their time in the classrooms writing, reading, and learning letters, and, unfortunately, they have very short time of play (Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012, Hunter & Walsh, 2014). Since free play is one kind of play, it's important to understand how it is implemented and what the KG teachers' perceptions are, because teachers play an important role in the implementation of free play in the schools. Teachers are inseparable parts of the school and the children's lives.

Research Questions

This study answers the following two research questions:

1. How do the KG teachers implement free play in kindergartens of Armenian schools of Lebanon?
2. What are the perceptions of the KG teachers of the Armenian schools of Lebanon regarding free play?

Rationale

The current research adds to the repertoire of studies since more interest is growing precisely regarding free play and how is it implemented in the early lives of the children. Another reason is that it was held in Lebanon and was specific to a certain community which is the Armenians in Lebanon. Even though the sample is adequate, the research might lead to further studies in the future about teachers' perceptions in the Armenian schools and help the KG teachers implement free play correctly.

Most research and studies tackle different types of play with recent interest in research on free play. A number of research studies have been done regarding the

different play types especially educational games (Woolf, 2011), guided play by teachers (Miller & Almon, 2009; Skar & Krogh, 2009; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2013), role playing for teaching language (Hope-Soutcott, 2013; Tongson, 2014; Yang, 2013), playing with blocks to understand mathematical concepts (Brandt, 2013), and group play therapy for children to help children overcome shyness (Bratton & Ray, 2000). Moreover, free play has several benefits. There are lots of research about group play helping in emotional wellbeing in the school (Woolf, 2011), play helping in socio-emotional development of preschool children (Ashiabi, 2007), and social and cognitive play of children of kindergarten (Rubin, Watson & Jambor, 1978). As we notice from research cited, most of these play types are either teacher oriented or guided.

Recent research has shown that free play can help children learn different skills such as communicating, sharing, and working within a group as well as dealing with anxiety and solving problems. For instance, Johnson (2015), an early childhood scholar, described in his chapter *how free play* will let the children “naturally select play activities that will help them to cope and master anxieties and to make progress with developmental tasks of one kind or another” (p. 182). Therefore, free play leads to learning of real-life skills as well as academic skills.

Free play is also crucial for the healthy development of children. It contributes to the physical, as well as cognitive, social and emotional development (Ginsburg, 2007). However, Ginsburg (2007) claims that most free play has been replaced by academic learning.

It's important to find out how free play is implemented in the kindergartens of Armenian schools of Lebanon and to ensure its contribution to the cognitive, social, as well as physical development of the children.

Kindergarten teachers of Lebanon believe in the importance of play; especially guided play. The research study that interviewed, questioned, and observed nursery and Kindergarten teachers of Lebanon regarding their beliefs and their practices in the classrooms proves that many teachers in Lebanon even if they believe in importance of play in early childhood years. However, when teachers have to practice it, they don't give time for free play but they rather emphasize structured or purpose play to teach a skill or an academic concept (Faour, 2003). Hence, the research about the implementation of teachers' perceptions about free play in KG classrooms in Armenian schools in Lebanon is necessary.

In Lebanon, the early childhood teachers' beliefs and practices were studied by Faour (2003), in which 135 Nursery and Kindergarten teachers answered a questionnaire from twenty-one private schools. From these 135 teachers, 6 were interviewed and 18 were observed in the classroom while practicing their beliefs. Many interesting results were found at the end of the study especially the one that is related to free play precisely. The free play almost didn't exist for many teachers because they concentrated on guided or structured play. So, I believe, my study about free play is crucial to inform and shed light on the importance of free play in Kindergartens and highlight the implementation in a specific context with a specific community that is the Armenian school KG teachers.

Consequently, and as discussed in this section, the research aims to fill the gap regarding free play, implementation of free play by KG teachers, and KG teacher's

perception in the context of Armenian schools in Lebanon. It also aims to add to the existing recent research on free play and Armenian schools in Lebanon.

Significance

Professional Significance

This study about free play in KG classes in Armenian schools in Lebanon is significant as it will add to the existing research given that little qualitative research on KG teachers' perceptions about free play has been conducted. Wood (2014) suggests that practitioners should analyze the choices children make in free-play and refer to the research on the decisions that children make during free play. This will help those teachers better understand and implement children's free play (Wood, 2014).

Moreover, the study is of significance because it is about the KG classes of Armenian schools in Lebanon and few studies are conducted regarding this topic in Lebanon. According to Attarian (2014), only some research exists on Armenian schools and education in Lebanon. In other words, insignificant research has been conducted in Armenian schools and specifically in the Kindergartens. Attarian (2014) recommends that qualitative research is conducted based on this statistical study in order to create child-centered learning environments in Armenian schools in Lebanon. Consequently, the study responds to Attarian's recommendation.

Classroom Implications

Attarian (2014) recommends that more qualitative research needs to be conducted to support a change in Armenian classrooms in Lebanon and to inform teachers. The research cannot be generalized; however, it might mostly lead to more research in this area later on. To top it off, in the future, this research aspires to help Armenian schools to

consider free play more seriously and suggest new changes in the implementation of free play. Hence, the underlying aim is to understand the teachers' perceptions and describe how teachers can implement free play in the Kindergartens in Armenian schools in Lebanon, so children benefit from free play rather than merely emphasizing traditional teaching methods.

Operational Definitions

Play. Play is the process of children being engaged in an activity for fun, enjoyment, experimentation and recreation.

Free play. Free play is the process where children are choosing to do what they want to do and how to do it with no adult imposing any goals or curriculum according to Play England¹ (Santer, Griffiths & Goodall, 2007). This is sometimes referred to as “unstructured play.”

Kindergarten. In Lebanon, preschool means Nursery, KG1, KG2 (Faour, 2003). In this study kindergarten is considered KG1, KG2, and KG3 that is children of ages 3-6 years old.

Teachers' perception. Teachers' perception is the views, expectations, and assumptions of the teachers (Kagan, 1992). It is usually subjective and affects a person's behavior and attitude.

¹Play England is a project of the Children's Play Council, part of the National Children's Bureau, and is supported by the Big Lottery Fund in England.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this chapter, different studies related to free play, its implementation, and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of free play are discussed, along with research that focuses on practices in the kindergartens of Armenian schools in Lebanon.

Importance of Free Play

Free play is the play during which the child is free to choose the type of play, what to play, and how to play without adult interference. The child independently chooses the toys, the place, and what to play (Catalano, 2018). Through years, the word play is defined differently by various educators. According to Gleave and Cole-Hamilton (2012), "The definition of play is both complex and contested" and there is no one way or false way of play. According to Jarrett & Waite-Stupian (2009), through play the children develop different skills that lead later on to learning. These skills are developed while exploring and discovering, interacting, expressing their emotions and feelings, using their prior knowledge, or solving problems. There are different kinds of play during which children use imagination, creativity, exploration, and inquiry. It can be alone or with others. Free play is one kind of play that can be used in schools, at home, indoor or outdoor.

Fortunately, in the last few years, research is returning to focus on the importance of free play and how it affects the children's behaviour in the classroom. Finland, which has one of the best academic scores, emphasizes free play more than any other type of play. Teachers give frequent short breaks to children. For example, elementary classes have forty-five-minute classes and fifteen minutes break outside the classroom even if it

is a rainy day (Walker, 2013). Children's attention, cognitive abilities, and behaviours were tested from grades 3-5 before and after recess, and findings showed that free play during a recess is crucial for the children to be more attentive given that the individual differences had been noticed as well (Brez & Sheets, 2017). The author of the study suggests that children get tired of long hours of learning, so they need a break during which they engage in free play time to run, engage in physical movement, laugh, practice decision-making, socialize, and have fun.

Pros and Cons of Free play

Research highlights more advantages than disadvantages of free play. Besides, researchers who question the implementation of free play are not completely against it. Instead, they provide guidelines for improved implementation.

The cons of free play encompass discussions on its feasibility and safety. Some researchers believe that free play is not feasible. For instance, according to Wood (2014), there is no free choice or free play because play is always controlled by the teachers since teachers provide the space and the resources. However, the author of the study disagrees with this argument because even though the teachers give the space and the resource, it is the child who has the freedom of how to use them or what to use. They can use their imagination along with problem solving to play.

One of the major reasons why adults are afraid of implementing free play time for children is because adults think that they have less control and are concerned about safety issues such as children falling or hurting themselves. This fear or concern might lead to less free play time for children. Injury could be one disadvantage of free play. According to Brussoni, Oslen, Pike, and Sleet (2012), adventure playgrounds can be too risky for

children as it is essential to create a safe environment. However, they clarify that this disadvantage can be prevented. Free play could be risky as injuries might occur; however, this is how children learn safety rules. Consequently, risky free play is accepted as long as there are safety measures taken. Researchers add that the three types of free play which are physical activity, object, and pretend play all enhance the physical and mental well-being of young children (Brussoni et. al 2012). Likewise, a small-scale exploratory study by King and Howard (2010) was held about free play in different contexts like home and school playground and 12 children answered a questionnaire regarding who they play with and how do they control their play and safety. The results showed that the children had less control while playing in the playground and when the number of students was larger, and this is a safety issue. However, social and group play types are essential and occur during free play at the playground (King & Howard, 2010). Therefore, this proves the positive effect and importance of free play in the development of the social skills of the children.

Weighing the pros and cons, free play proves to be favorable. Wood (2014) states that free-play emphasizes child agency and choice which enables children to make decisions in a child-centered educational setting. This consequently enhances children's self-regulation and control as a group and as individuals. To elaborate, children during free play create their own imaginary situations, rules, and logic. Children in such a setting use people and objects to play and create their own scenarios. They set the rules, learn the rules, and follow the rules. Children exercise agency through including and excluding players, being sociable or not, order and disorder, and such.

Free play has several other advantages and benefits. Outdoor free play is crucial for physical development of the children. To clarify, obesity is one of the major health concerns nowadays even among children of ages 2 to 5, who will most probably continue being overweight during adolescence. This problem could be decreased and solved by increasing the time of physical free play. It was noticed during research that children are physically active mostly during outdoor free play while running, jumping, and climbing (Spencer & Wright, 2014). Similarly, according to Skouteris, Edwards, Rutherford, Cutter-MacKenzie, Huang, and O'Connor (2014), outdoor free play allows children to take part in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity which further enhances their health. They conducted an observational study on a sample of 500 children from 14 childcare services in Australia and concluded that increasing physical activity opportunities within a week enhances the fitness level of children in childcare who are between 3 and 6 years old. Their research reinforces the importance of free play for the healthiness of the children.

Free Play and its Implementation

Teachers play a vital role in the implementation of free play in such a way that fosters child's freedom and decision and consequently yields positive outcomes. Play is important because it is a fundamental right of all children around the world according to UNICEF 2018. Every child has the right for recess or free play according to United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child. According to Article 31, the children have the right to have free time to participate in free play and activities appropriate for their age. Therefore, children must be free to play. However, many teachers misuse the

concept of free play as they guide children or tell them what to do. It is essential that teachers understand and implement free play correctly.

Research recommends increasing the implementation of free play. However, this is not reflected in classroom practices. Despite studies showing the importance of recess, outdoor free play, or free play in general; still most schools have reduced the free time play to concentrate more on academic skills (Ginsburg, 2007).

KG Teachers' Perceptions About Free Play

Teachers are major components of a school and hold an important role in the classroom environment, culture, and practice. To top it off, their perception about free play is critical. Teachers' perceptions might affect their practices and implementation in the classrooms. Most teachers have positive attitudes regarding free play yet whenever it comes to the implementation of it the results are not the same (Ploof, 2011). Many of the reasons are due to teachers' background, pressure at school, administration, rules, academic goals, and curriculum.

The practice and perceptions of the teachers differ due to different reasons, one of which is the school policy. For example, Lynch (2015) had a qualitative ethnographic study of Kindergarten teachers' perceptions regarding play and found out that teachers deal with profound pressure from teachers, parents, principals as well as school policies that lead to limit play and emphasize more on academic goals.

One major study that has been done in Lebanon regarding early childhood education and kindergarten teachers was a mixed method research by Faour (2003) in which 135 nursery and Kindergarten teachers completed a questionnaire from twenty – one private schools. 6 teachers were interviewed and 18 were observed in the classroom

in a context which makes their perceptions visible. Several interesting results were found at the end of the study, especially the one that is related to free play. Unfortunately, free play almost didn't exist for many teachers because they concentrated on guided or structured play. In this research, the researcher had reviewed the small number of researches that were done regarding early childhood education and concluded that teachers have more appropriate perceptions and beliefs than what they practice. Teachers' perceptions and practices are influenced by their background and education as well. Faour's study also found out that when children have specialized teachers, they have better education. This is due to the fact that specialized teachers can effectively implement their perception of free play.

Teachers' perceptions and the curricula of the kindergarten vary and emphasize the importance and the role of play differently. According to Pyle and Bigelow (2015), in Canada, the teachers have a major role in the integration of play in the classrooms because of their perspectives. According to Baker (2014), findings show that definitions of play differ from one teacher to another, but all of them know the play's value in the children's learning and growth. However, there are different factors that force less play in kindergarten such as teacher time, pressure of academic goals, and assessment.

While talking about teachers' perceptions, Reding (2004) had a research on the perceptions of parents, preschool teachers, and kindergarten teachers, the results of it showed that parents and preschool teachers stressed more on academic skills whereas the KG teachers cared more for the social skills.

However, for the advantage of the children, the teachers' job is to not force or tell children what to do or how to do it during free play. All what teachers have to do is to

make available the chances and opportunities, places, and the time to play (Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012). Therefore, when it comes to the implementation of free play, we should consider the teachers' role, the child's free choice and decision, and the place.

This review of teachers' current perceptions might sound discouraging. However, there seems to be profound research on the importance and advantages of free play along with the emphasis put on the proper implementation of free play. Consequently, teachers' perception can be rendered positive when they have a clearer understanding of free play.

As per the literature reviewed in this section, one can conclude that free play has been proven to be beneficial during kindergarten school years. To better implement free play and support children in Armenian schools in Lebanon, one needs to examine how free play is implemented in this setting and what are the current perceptions of KG teachers on free play.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore Kindergarten (KG) teachers' perceptions and implementation of free play at the Armenian schools of Lebanon. This chapter presents the research design adopted in this study as well as a description of the procedures that were followed in participant selection, data collection, and data analysis.

Research Design

The present study pursued the qualitative case study design as it examined KG teachers' perceptions and implementation of free play at the Armenian schools of Lebanon. The qualitative case study was adopted since the study investigated the perceptions of a specific group of people, a 'particular' community (Stake, 1995), who were the KG teachers, and in a specific context, which was the Armenian schools of Lebanon. A study confined to a specific case and with a limited sample size enabled the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of participant experiences and to develop a thick and rich description of those experiences (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 1998).

Procedures of the Study

Selection of Schools

Eight Armenian schools in Lebanon formed the case of this study. All 15 Armenian schools that currently operate in Lebanon were contacted. However, only eight accepted to participate in this research. The main reason that the other schools refused participation was the COVID- 19 pandemic, the lockdown in the country, and school closures. Seven out of the participating eight schools are located in the Greater Beirut

area, while one is located in the Bekaa valley. Three of the participating schools are run by the Armenian Orthodox Prelacy of Lebanon, two are Evangelical, two are Catholic, and one is a school that does not belong to any religious denomination. Western Armenian is the main language of instruction in the kindergartens of these schools. Two out of these eight schools teach French and Arabic in addition to Western Armenian, while the remaining six schools teach English and Arabic in addition to Western Armenian. The number of the students differs from one school to another according to its size. The eight schools are presented below.²

Schools 1, 2, and 3 are run by the Armenian Orthodox Prelacy in Lebanon, two of which are situated in the Metn area and one in Anjar, Bekaa Valley. School 1 was the result of unifying several smaller schools in the area. The schools accommodate the needs of the 21st century. They follow the Lebanese curriculum. The goal of these schools is to prepare new generations of Lebanese-Armenians through providing them with pre-university education. They also aim to prepare students to become morally strong, fully educated, committed, and dedicated Armenians.

Schools 4 and 5 are Evangelical schools. Their aim is to provide high-quality education to new generations in an Armenian Christian atmosphere. The schools equip students with a quality Christian Armenian Education, adhering to the Lebanese official curriculum, in addition to maintaining the orientation set by the Armenian Evangelical Educational Council. They aim to educate the whole person, preparing the student to attain the highest possible educational level, or the alternative of a technical career. They also provide experiences for the students to learn the Armenian language, literature,

² Websites and Facebooks of the Armenian schools were consulted to describe them.

history, cultural, heritage, and religion. The schools support the mental, physical, moral, and spiritual development of its students.

School 6 is a secondary school currently located in the Metn area, Lebanon. Since its establishment, the aim was to provide a general education to the younger generations, especially an Armenian upbringing, to instill a healthy national spirit, to keep alive the love of the Armenian language and culture in the souls of the students, and to make them acquainted with the Armenian values. The school follows the Lebanese as well as the French (for secondary classes) curriculum. One mission of this school is to educate "good people and good Armenians," dedicated to Armenia and the Armenian Cause, and to prepare future intellectual generations who are committed for the preservation of the Armenian identity in the Diaspora, the Armenian language and literature, and the Armenian culture.

School 7 is currently located in Rawda, Metn district, Lebanon. It is inspired by the educational and cultural legacy of more than 300-year-old Mekhitarist Congregation, which is monastic order of the Armenian Catholic Church. It offers the 21st century learners high academic standards along with socio-emotional learning. An emphasis is put on the learning of emotional knowledge, that helps the students express their feelings freely. It follows the Lebanese curriculum while applying teaching methods from Finland. Its goal is to ensure academic excellence and leadership and the Armenian Spirit. It also fosters social skills as well as socio-emotional learning. Their aim is to help each learner grow into a capable and empathetic leader and to benefit from the academic excellence through the Finnish teaching methodology.

School 8 is an Armenian Catholic school. It is located in Fanar, Beirut, Lebanon. The school is faithful to the tradition of excellence, offering its students a quality education, based on Christian and Armenian values. It aims to build the personalities of its students, making them responsible individuals in Lebanese society and in the Armenian community in Lebanon, the Middle East, and the world.

All Armenian schools implement the Lebanese national curriculum. They have Kindergartens, which have three sections. All the Kindergartens have indoor and outdoor playgrounds. Some have gardens as well.

The kindergartens have specific curricula, based on modern educational strategies i.e. children learn through play and activities. The daily activities are around central topics or themes. The curricula aim for the holistic development of the children through providing experiences in which they can develop cognitively, emotionally, socially, morally, physically, and artistically. The Kindergarten curriculum includes languages, science, math, dance, music, fine arts, and physical education. Basic skills are taught in Western Armenian. The languages taught are Armenian, Arabic, and English or French. The Kindergartens focus on the “child-centered approach” in which children are autonomous. They practice self- directed learning, active exploration, and manipulation. The children learn through play.

Selection of participants

After seeking approval from the school principals, email invitation letters were sent to the Kindergarten teachers with a consent form and the questionnaire attached (Appendix A).

The targeted participants were Kindergarten teachers from the eight Armenian

schools which agreed to take part in the study. Twenty-five teachers accepted to participate by completing the questionnaire and 22 were interviewed. All participants in this study were volunteers and no financial offers were given. Most participant Kindergarten teachers were homeroom teachers. The years of experience of the teachers ranged between 1 to 35 years. Table 1 summarizes the years of experience of the participant teachers.

Table 1

Summary of the Years of Experience of the Participant Kindergarten Teachers

Years of experience	Number of teachers
1-5 years	8
6-10 years	5
11-20 years	7
Above 21 years	5
Total	25

The educational level of the participants ranged from no high school completed to having a Master's degree. Table 2 summarizes the educational levels of the participant Kindergarten teachers.

Table 2

Frequency of Participant Teachers According to Their Educational Level (n=25)

Educational level	Number of teachers
Master's degree	1
Bachelor of Arts Degree (BA)	10
Bachelor of Arts Degree (BA) + Teaching Diploma (TD)	3
Technical education (TS/ BT)	7
High School	3
Not completed High School	1

Note: Summary of the Years of Experience of the Participant Kindergarten Teachers and their educational level is presented in Appendix B.

Data Sources

Two data sources were used in this study: A questionnaire (Appendix A) and an online interview (Appendix C). According to Faour (2003), questionnaires and interviews together are a good source of data. Interested teachers filled out the questionnaire and the consent form. After sending the completed questionnaires, a date for the Zoom meeting was decided. The questionnaires and the interview questions were translated to Western Armenian and retranslated to check their reliability. Afterwards, they were double checked by two Western Armenian language educators to check their reliability and validity. The interviews were audio-recorded. Total of 22 interviews were conducted in Western Armenian, while only one interview was conducted in English.

Questionnaire. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data about teachers' perceptions of free play (Appendix A). According to Faour (2003), self-administered questionnaires are convenient to collect large amount of data in a short and limited time (Faour, 2003). The first part of the questionnaire targeted the demographic information of the participants i.e., their gender, marital status, date of birth, years of experience, level of education, and teaching grade level. This was crucial to understand the background of the teachers and the source of their perceptions, because the teacher perceptions are the views, expectations, and assumptions of the teachers and affect the person's behavior and attitude (Kagan, 1992).

The second part of the questionnaire included eight open-ended questions. Open-

ended questions give teachers the freedom to express their perceptions of free play and its implementation in kindergartens without any restrictions by using descriptions and examples. To formulate the questions, the author of the current study was guided by the literature on free play. According to Baker (2014), findings show that definitions of play differ from one teacher to another, but all of them acknowledge the play's value in the children's learning and growth as well as according to Gleave and Cole- Hamilton (2012) "The definitions of play is complex and contested" and there is no one way or false way to play. Hence, question 1 was asked to define free play. Questions 2 and 3 are on free play implementation and are guided by Gleave and Cole-Hamilton (2012)'s study, who discussed the implementation of free play and the notion that we should consider the teachers' role, the child's free choice and decision, and the place. Questions 4 and 5 are guided by Ginsburg (2007) who mentioned the reduction of free play time in schools to be replaced by academic skills. Questions 6,7, and 8 are related to the cons and pros of free play, since the literature has highlighted more advantages than disadvantages of free play. Ginsberg (2007), Walker (2013), and Brez and Sheets (2017) have highlighted the advantages of free play on mental, physical, social and emotional development of the children. On the other hand, Brussoni et. al (2012) emphasized the safety issues and that injury could be one disadvantage of free play. Therefore, all of the eight questions of the questionnaire were formulated from the literature.

Semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used to elicit individual perceptions, capture teachers' unique perceptions, and allow them the opportunity to discuss and describe the implementation of free play in depth (Meriam 1998; Patton, 1990; Seidman, 1998) (Appendix C). The aim of the

interview was to have in-depth discussions with the teachers on the answers that they provided in the questionnaire. Moreover, it was used to check for the data that was self-reported in the questionnaire. Merriam (2009) supported interviewing as a part of qualitative study, whereas Patton (1990) asserted that researchers conduct interviews to learn things that couldn't be observed directly and to understand participants' experiences.

The author of the study used the guidelines used in research on teachers' perceptions on free play and its implementation in order to generate the list of interview questions (Faour, 2003; Lynch, 2015). The interview questions were based on the important themes found in the literature review, such as the defining of free play (Baker, 2014; Catalano, 2018; Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012) (Interview Question 1), importance of free play (King & Howard, 2010; Walker, 2013) (Interview Question 3), implementation of free play (Brez & Sheets, 2017; Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012; and Ploof, 2011) (Interview Question 2), the time and place of free play (Ginsburg, 2007; Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012) (Interview Questions 6 and 7), exploring and discovering during free play (Jarrett & Waite-Stupian, 2009) (Interview Question 8), the decrease of free play time (Faour, 2003, Reding 2004) (Interview Questions 9 and 10); and the cons and pros of free play (Brez & Sheets, 2017; Brussoni et. Al., 2012; Ginsberg, 2007; Walker, 2013;) (Interview Questions 4 and 5). These semi-structured questions allowed flexibility and informative conversations (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2004). This further helped the teachers voice their perceptions in depth and interpret free play in practice. The interview was conducted and guided by Patton's (1990) "interview guide approach." The topic was specified in advance, yet the interviewer decided the way

to answer the interview. Finally, notes were taken during each interview. These notes provided data on what was seen and heard outside the context of the interview.

Data Collection

The data collection took place between September 2020 and March 2021. It was done online because of COVID-19 restrictions.

In the initial recruitment phase, before data collection, the author of the current study discussed and explained the purpose of the study and ensured secrecy of the participants. Then, the teachers completed the self-administered questionnaire and were interviewed and audio recorded. Teachers, who didn't know Armenian, completed the questionnaire and the interview in English. All the questionnaires and the interviews answered in Armenian were translated to English.

Pilot Study. Prior to the data collection and the interviews, the author of the current study conducted a pilot study with five teachers who were not participating in the study. The five teachers completed the questionnaire and one was interviewed in order to check their understandings of the questions and to make any necessary changes. The teachers had no problem in understanding the questions in Armenian. No changes in the questionnaire were applied.

Data Analysis

Data collected from interviews were recorded, then transcribed and analyzed. The questionnaires were coded and analyzed as well. Interviews and the questionnaires that were conducted in Armenian were translated into English and then analyzed. The data analysis followed the inductive thematic analysis process (Braun and Clarke, 2006) (Appendix D). The data underwent several stages of analysis to reach a reasonable

interpretation. I followed the six-phase framework for doing thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). The phases of thematic analysis include familiarizing yourself with the data, generating initial codes, generating themes, reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first two phases i.e. generating themes, reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, and producing the report i.e. familiarizing yourself with the data, generating initial codes were presented in this chapter. While the other phases, i.e. generating themes, reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, and producing the report were presented in Chapter 4. The coded data of the questionnaire was compared to the interview and triangulated.

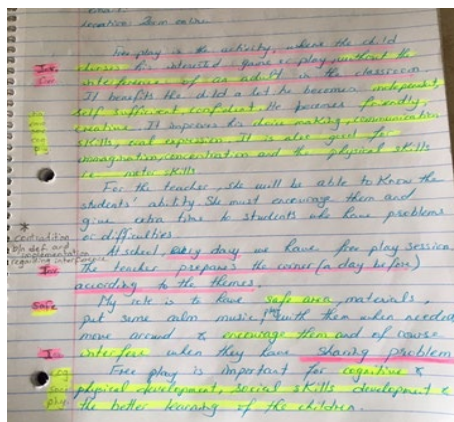
Phase 1. After all the data was collected, phase 1 began. During phase 1, first, all the data collected from the questionnaire and interviews were translated to English. Then, I got familiar with the data. I listened to the audio records of the interviews for several times and rechecked for “accuracy” by note taking and transcribing. The transcriptions and the questionnaires were read several times, so I became familiar with the content. This provided deep attending and involving with the research data. The data from interviews and questionnaires were triangulated which established trustworthiness. The initial ideas and the identification of some segments started during this phase. In this way and the repeated re-reading of the transcripts, I became familiar with the data and the participants' perceptions.

Phase 2. After getting familiar with the data, phase 2 i.e., generating of the initial codes began. The transcripts of the interviews were coded using inductive coding approach (Figure 1). Initially, repeated words, sentences, and concepts were highlighted and coded. The coding schemes were developed according to the repeated topic ideas and

words in the interviews. This process occurred many times to reassure the thoroughness and inclusiveness of the coding. The coding of the questionnaire of each participant was analyzed with the codes of the interview for triangulation, trustworthiness, and accuracy. Then, I analyzed data collected by comparing the data of each participant. Each section of the texts was highlighted with different colors according to the research question they are relevant to. This was to facilitate the identification. Then I looked for similarities and differences between the data, looking for patterns so that the themes emerged (Table 3).

Figure 1

Sample of Transcription and Coding of an Interview



Phase 3. Phase 3 included the searching of the themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) themes are identified as “something important in relation to the overall research question” (p.81) therefore; the themes emerged from the data. Patterns were searched from the questionnaires and the interviews, which were compared and combined to each other until the themes were emerged.

Phase 4. During phase 4, the themes that emerged from the interview transcripts and the questionnaires were reviewed for several times. Some themes were not in fact themes; some were grouped to make one theme (See Table 7 and Table 8). Creating a

thematic map in relation to initial themes within each research question was crucial to finalize the thematic map that was satisfactory.

Phase 5. During phase 5 defining and naming of the themes occurred. From the categories four main themes emerged. The themes were gathered and compared to analyze and represent the findings of the study guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. These themes had been checked against each other and back to the main data to make sure that the themes were consistent and distinctive. Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that "data within themes should cohere together meaningfully" (p. 91).

Phase 6. Phase 6 was the last phase which was the phase of producing the final report that was narrative and it was a part of the data analysis. This long process included reviewing, writing, and rewriting to strengthen the relation between the categories and the themes.

The next chapter presents the findings of the study. All the codes, patterns of the coding, and the themes emerged are represented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4

Findings

This study aimed to explore the Kindergarten teachers' perceptions and implementation of free play from eight Armenian schools in Lebanon. This chapter presents the answers to the two research questions under study based on the questionnaires and interviews conducted.

The current chapter includes a summary of the results based on the data collected from the participants. The data was analyzed using inductive thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the first part of this chapter the patterns of the codes and how the themes were emerged are presented. In the second part, the results are presented in relation to the two research questions:

1. How do the KG teachers implement free play in kindergartens of Armenian schools of Lebanon?
2. What are the perceptions of the KG teachers of the Armenian schools of Lebanon regarding free play?

Codes, Patterns, and Themes

After collecting the data, the content was translated from Armenian to English. Then after getting familiarized with the content, the interview transcriptions were coded. The codes were defined. The patterns of the coding of the interviews of the participants were presented in a table to emerge the themes. The findings of the patterns of the coding are presented below in Table 3.

Table 3

The patterns of the coding of the interviews of the participants

<i>participants</i>	<i>Imp</i>	<i>Inv</i>	<i>Cha</i>	<i>Free</i>	<i>Inout</i>	<i>tim</i>	<i>Adv</i>	<i>Safe</i>	<i>Emo</i>	<i>Phy</i>	<i>cog</i>	<i>Soc</i>
<i>T1</i>	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	-	+	+	+	+
<i>T2</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	+	+
<i>T3</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	+	+
<i>T4</i>	+	-	-	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
<i>T5</i>	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+
<i>T6</i>	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	+	+
<i>T7</i>	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	-	+	+	+	+
<i>T11</i>	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	+	+
<i>T12</i>	+	+	-	-	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	+
<i>T13</i>	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	-	+	+	+	+
<i>T14</i>	+	+	+	-	+	-	+	-	-	+	+	+
<i>T15</i>	+	-	+	+	+	-	+	-	+	+	+	+
<i>T16</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
<i>T17</i>	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
<i>T18</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+
<i>T19</i>	+	+	-	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	+
<i>T20</i>	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	-	+	+	+	+
<i>T21</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+
<i>T22</i>	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
<i>T23</i>	+	-	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+

T24	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+
T25	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+

Note: this table demonstrates the coding of the transcriptions of the interviews of the 22 teacher participants. The - represents the non-existence of the code. The definitions of the abbreviations of the coding are represented in table 4.

Table 4

The Description of the Codes

Code	Description
Imp	importance of free play
Inv	involvement of a teacher or adult during free play
Cha	the character of the child
Free	free choice and decision of the child
Inout	place of the free play: indoor and outdoor play
Tim	the time spent per day more than 30 min.
Safe	safety or injury problem, disadvantages
Emo	emotional development, feelings of a child
Phy	physical development of a child
Cog	cognitive development of a child
Soc	social development of a child
Adv	advantages of free play

The same codes presented in Table 4 were used for coding the questionnaires. The

T17	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
T18	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+
T19	+	+	-	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	+
T20	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	+
T21	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+
T22	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
T23	+	-	-	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+
T24	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+
T25	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	+

Note: this table demonstrates the coding of the questionnaires of the 25 teacher participants. The - represents the non-existence of the code. The definitions of the abbreviations of the coding are represented in table 4.

The patterns of the codes from the interviews and the questionnaires were compared and combined according to the research questions. Table 6 below presents the patterns of the codes from interviews and questionnaires.

Table 6

The patterns of the codes of the Interviews and questionnaires

Implementation of free play	<i>Teachers n=25</i>
Place of Implementation	
In the classroom	25
Outdoor	25
Time of implementation	
The time scheduled is enough	23
Time of free play has decreased	5

Free play is Child Centered

His/ her decision	25
Needs	20
Interests	25
Choice	25

Teacher's Role

Supervising	25
Guiding and directing	25
Questioning	7
Co-player	3

The teachers' perceptions about free play *Teachers*
n= 25

Free play is crucial. 25

The Advantages of free play:

Child's social development	24
Child's linguistic development	25
Child's mental development	25
Child's physical development	20
Child's emotional development	17

Disadvantages:

Chaos and noise	3
Quarrel or Bullying	6
Physical danger (not safe)	7
Loneliness	1

Development of cognitive skills:

Imagination	25
Creativity	25
Critical thinking	5
Concentration	5
Logic	2

Solving problems	20
Decision making.	18
<hr/>	
Development of social skills:	
Solving problems	1
Communicating with friends	20
Interacting with others	20
Sharing	6
<hr/>	
Development of personality:	
Choice taking	25
Discover	1
Being independent	23
Exploring	3
Confidence.	12
<hr/>	
Emotional development:	
Happiness	7
Empathy	2
Feeling safe.	3
<hr/>	
Physical development:	
Fine motor skills	8
Gross motor skills	2
Physically healthy	4
<hr/>	

The patterns of the codes of both interviews and questionnaires were compared and looked for similarities and repetitions. Some of the coding were combined during this process and the themes emerged. The main themes that emerged from the patterns of the codes were: Improvement of child development, advantages of free play, disadvantages of free play, child-centered play, importance of free play, the teachers' role, place and

time. Table 7 presents the themes and combined codes that lead to that emerge. Then these themes were presented according to the research questions they answered in Table 8.

Table 7

The Themes Emerged from the Patterns of the Codes

Themes	Combined Coding
Improvement of child development	emo, phy, soc, cog
Advantages of free play	Adv
Disadvantage of free play	safe
Child-Centered	cha, free
Importance of free play	Imp
Teacher's role	Inv
Place	Inout
Time	tim

Table 8

The themes emerged according to the research questions.

Research Question	Theme	codes
Research Question 1	Child-centered	cha, free
Research Question 1	Place and time	inout- tim
Research Question 1	Teacher's Role	inv
Research Question 2	Importance of free play	Imp

Research Question 2	Disadvantages	safe
Research Question 2	Advantages	Adv
Research Question 2	Improvement of the child Developmentally	phy-emo-soc-cog

In this second part, the findings of the study are presented according to the two research questions.

Findings of Research Question 1

The findings that answered the first research question of the study were: Definition of free play, a typical free play session, teacher’s role in free play, place and time of free play.

How do the KG teachers implement free play in kindergartens of Armenian schools of Lebanon?

Definition of Free Play

Participant teachers defined free play differently. No precise definition was found. All teachers agreed that it is the kind of play in which the child has the choice of playing with what interests him/ her. However, many participants couldn’t define it; instead, they just stated the benefits of free play.

The teachers who defined free play stated the importance of child’s choice and freedom. According to T3 “Free play means to give the child the chance to choose his favorite play without causing harm to another child”(Q)³. T7 stated, “Free play means let the child play freely by his choice...” (Q). T11 defined that “Free play is the creative

³ Q denotes questionnaire

activity of spontaneous free improvisation by children” (Q). And according to T13, “Free play is the activity where the child without adult interference and planning, inside the class, chooses the play he wants and plays” (Q). T17 mentioned that “Free play is when the child decides the play he wants and plays with the friend he chooses and goes to the corner he prefers in the classroom” (I).⁴ T2 states that “Free play is the play that develops the imagination of the child. He expresses what he prefers or wants through play and it takes him to an imagination world” (I).

A Typical Free Play Session

According to all the participant teachers, free play is implemented in the kindergarten of their schools. They described the implementation in the classroom as well as outdoor. It was interesting that many schools had it in the early morning, when students arrived to school or after finishing the lesson. T1 explained, “We have special play corners. In the morning when the students arrive, they start playing freely with toys of their choice. They also can have free play outdoor where they can play with soil, watch and get to know the nature around” (Q). T13 stated, “...even if they finish the lesson can have free play time” (Q). T16 described the free play session “The children play in the corners of the classroom with their friends or alone. They choose and play the toy they want like Legos, puzzles...” (I).

It was crucial to have a description of a free play session to understand the implementation of free play in the Kindergartens of Armenian schools of Lebanon. Most participants described similar free play session, where the child had to play in the classroom by choosing the play corner and the toys of his/her choice, that were prepared

⁴ I denotes interview

ahead of time by the teachers according to themes of the month. T1 stated, “We have corners like doll corner, kitchen corner, jobs corner etc. The kids approach the corner they feel comfortable at or are interested in, and they play. Sometimes free play takes place at the outdoor playground, where the child can play with soil, sand, and leaves according to the season and availability” (I).

However, some teachers confused the implementation of the free play with an activity they had decided. For example, T7 (Q) explained how she hanged a white paper all along the wall and the children would paint on it to express themselves. However, she gave the instruction of the activity and told them to be careful not to dirty the floor or their friends. On the other hand, while describing the implementation of free play, T5(Q) explained how she divides the students into two groups and gives them Legos to play with, however she encourages them to be creative. The same teacher had stated, “I explained the game to the students and showed them the toys and explained how to play with them and what to do” (Q). T12 explained that the free play can occur in the middle of the period, “... they have free play, when they dance or sing or through play discuss with the teacher...” (I). Some teachers, although stated the meaning of free play, however when it came to implementation, there was no free play. It was just another activity decided on and planned by the teacher to enhance their creativity.

Teacher's Role in Free Play

The questionnaire stressed on how the teachers looked at their role during the implementation of free play. The analysis of the questionnaires showed different teacher roles mentioned and emerged through the discussions and descriptions of the free play activity. T13 stated that “Free play is the activity where the child without adult

interference and planning, chooses to play inside the classroom with a toy of his choice” (Q). However, the same teacher had added later, “I watch, go near them, and sometimes ask questions, I play, encourage and interfere whenever needed.” T23 had stated, “I support kids’ free play, but I also think, there must be indirect guidance, or guided play.... teachers should model...” (Q). T19 wrote, “During free play, the teacher will be the guide...” (Q) T3 stated, “I supervise the students and interfere when needed...” (I). T22 (I) stated that the teacher has to participate and play with the children during free play to help the children learn. The teachers’ responses showed that they prefer modeling, guiding the students, and interfering as if there is one correct way of playing. This means the concept of free play is not clear, where the child is free to play in the way they want to.

Place and Time of Free Play.

While describing the free play periods, the teachers noted the place of the play and how much time they had. This differed from one teacher to another and from one school to another.

Place. The place of the free play differed according to the weather, space, and the theme. It was limited to three places: classroom, playground, and garden. Some schools had gardens where the children had the ability to play, explore, and discover nature. However, not all schools had big gardens or access to nature. So, basically, most schools used the corners in the classroom for free play as well as their playgrounds. As T1 stated, “we have corners like doll corner, kitchen corner ...” and added “there are three types of free play: free corner play, free in nature, and free drawing” (Q). T13 stated, “In the morning, when the child enters his classroom, he approaches his favorite corner, chooses

a toy and plays” (Q). T22 (I) stated that free play can happen outside in the playground or in the classroom. Therefore, the implementation of free play occurred in different areas in the school but mostly in the classroom. T1 stated, “When the weather is nice, we go out to the outdoor playground where they can play with soil, leaves...” (Q). Similarly, T22 claimed, “we have the playground where there are slides, swings and they play there” (I).

Time. According to the teachers, the time of the free play is usually scheduled ahead of time. The amount of time the students spend free playing differed from one school to another. It ranged from 30 min per day to 2 hours according to the flexibility of the teacher and the needs of the students. Most have it early in the morning, after arriving to school, and during the recess. However, additional free play time is given when the planned lesson or structured learning has finished. The time differed from one school to another. The time spent on free play was also related to the curriculum. In other words, the teachers indicated that the time of free play had been decreased to fulfill it with other educational or structural activities. According to T17, “free play is done once a day 30-40 min.” (Q). Emphasizing the impact of curriculum T1 stated that the students’ free play periods “are usually in the morning when the kids come to school. They have 30 min of free play until the class begins” and added that “30 min is enough for KG1 because we have a curriculum to complete” (I). On the other hand, T2 stated, “if we have more time during the day, I would like to increase the free play time” (I). On the other hand, T12 stated that “out of six periods 2 periods are considered free play” (Q). There is no common time of free play, it differed from one school to another.

Therefore, while analyzing the interviews and the questionnaire answers regarding the first research question about the implementation of free play in the

kindergartens, three main themes were found: typical free play session, the time, and the place of free play.

Findings of Research Question 2

The findings that answer the second research question: What are the perceptions of the KG teachers of the Armenian schools of Lebanon regarding free play? are presented. The main themes were: Importance of free play for the child's development, advantages of free play, disadvantages of free play, characteristics of free play, and need for free play.

As a result of the thematic analysis of the questionnaires and the interviews of the kindergarten teachers, the following themes emerged answering the research question 2.

Importance of Free Play for the Child's Development.

All teachers had emphasized and agreed on the importance of free play and its impact on the improvement of the child's development. They mentioned that free play contributes to the child's development cognitively, emotionally, physically, linguistically, and socially. While T20 asserted that "free play contributes to the mental improvement of the child. His creative abilities and imaginations are revealed, and he becomes self-sufficient" (Q). T11 stated: "Free play encourages cognitive development and child's ability to solve problems; children learn to solve problems for themselves, their brains thrive on the challenge, creativity and imagination flows, and they develop their own thinking skills and invent interesting and different ways of resolving situations" (Q). Another teacher claimed that through free play "the child becomes free and confident, makes free choice, learns sharing, becomes creative, expresses his feelings, develops

social skills, and develops different abilities like memory, imagination, logic, concentration, and develops physical abilities” (T13, Q).

T1 stated, “Free play is crucial because it is the child’s world, where he gets acquainted with his own personality and self” (I). T15 asserted that “Free play is very important. It improves the cognitive skills, social skills. It teaches helping others, respecting, caring and loving their friends” (I). Similarly, T17 said, “It [free play] is important. It improves the mental and physical development, social skills and helps the kids learn better” (I). T22 (I) mentioned that learning occurs during free play and that’s where the children feel comfortable and express themselves freely.

Therefore, all teachers agreed on the importance of free play in early childhood years.

Advantages of Free Play.

All teachers agreed that free play has lots of advantages and benefits for the children. Many benefits were mentioned. Most teachers discussed the advantages of free play in relation to the emotional, cognitive, social, and physical development of the child. All teachers emphasized the use of imagination and creativity of the children, the development of motor skills, communication with their friends and sharing toys, as well as critical thinking and problem solving, although whenever they had problems, the teachers interfered. T3 stated, “it improves confidence and self-esteem, grows personal resilience, social skills, sharing, self-control, and it encourages expression of views, experiences, frustrations” (I). T5 answered, “It improves the child’s thinking, social life, communication, exchanging ideas, and language” (Q). T13 stated, “The child becomes free, confident, makes free choices, learns to make decisions, learns sharing, becomes creative, and expresses himself, develops social skills, improves his abilities like

memory, imagination, logic, concentration, and improves his physical skills” (Q).

According to the teachers, free play leads children to express themselves freely by using their imagination and creativity. In this regard, T15 mentioned, “It [free play] improves the cognitive skills, social skills. It teaches helping others, respecting, caring and loving their friends” (Q). Whereas T17 stated, “It [free play] improves the mental and physical development, social skills and helps the kids learn better” (Q). T24 stated that “Children become independent and more social. They express themselves” (I) and T 5 stated that during free play the children use their imagination and creativity and they express their feelings as well” (I). So, according to the teachers’ perception, free play has many advantages.

Disadvantages of Free Play.

While describing the free play period, all teachers agreed that free play was important and had benefits. However, some teachers mentioned that free play can be dangerous or cause harm while students fight together. “The disadvantages of free play are classroom chaos, noise, disagreement of students, quarreling for a toy, and high risk of trouble like falling, hitting each other” stated T15(Q). Adding on the disadvantages of free play, T23 claimed that “It could lead to social bullying & exclusion. Children can be mean to one another. It may not lead to learning” (Q). T 24 mentioned that some children get bored (I). Some had answered that free play had no disadvantage (T1, Q; T2, Q; T8, Q; T9, Q; T10, Q; T13, Q; T14, Q; T21, Q).

Characteristics of Free Play.

According to the analysis of the teachers’ interviews and the questionnaires, it was revealed that free play is child-centered; it depends on the child’s interest, choice,

and decision. The child is the person who decides how to play during the free play. “The child plays with what he likes and interests him from the play corners...”, stated T1(I). T 22 said, “During free play there are no rules. The children can run or slide or climb, i.e. do whatever they like or want to” (I). Similarly, T13 claimed that “free play is the activity where the child chooses the type of play or toy he wants to play without adult interference” (Q). T24 stated, “Free play means the students have the freedom to choose their toys without being imposed on them with any limitations” (Q). T 7 added, “Free play means let the child play freely by his choice” (Q).

Impact of Free Play on Children's Learning.

The teachers were convinced and agreed that free play helps in learning. However, many mentioned that more learning would occur through structured play rather than free play. That's why the role of the teacher in preparing the classroom corners according to the themes the children had learned was emphasized. T2 said, “During free play they implement what they have learned, like acting out or modeling” (I). T1 stated that “Children explore through play and learn” (I). Similarly, T17 said, “It [free play] improves the mental and physical development, social skills and helps the kids learn better” (Q). T12 stated that during free play “child to child, they learn sharing, understand each other, and even learn each other's personalities” (I). However, T24 stated that “children learn through play, however, during free play the teacher must play with them so that learning occurs” (I).

Need for Free Play.

Answering the question about whether free play has decreased or increased in KG classes, most teachers had mentioned that there were no changes in the time given for

play, while few mentioned that it has decreased. Few teachers mentioned that the free play time given was enough in the school because the children had come to school to learn and that structured play helped them more. It is worth mentioning that the same teachers had mentioned the various benefits and advantages of free play. Few added the need for more play time however; the reason of the decrease of free play is the curriculum and the number of themes to be completed and skills to be taught in the kindergartens. T13 stated, "I think free play time is enough because they have to learn languages and have a curriculum to complete" (I). T2 stated, "The schedule is full; there is no extra time to add for free play" (I).

After the analysis of the findings of the interviews and the questionnaires, the following categories were evident: (1) Advantages and disadvantages of free play; (2) importance of free play for child's development; (3) Free play is child-centered; and (4) the teacher's role. Table 7 presents a summary of the themes.

Table 9

Summary of the Themes

Themes	Description
Advantages and disadvantages of free play	<p>Advantages: Child's development: social, linguistic, mental, physical, emotional</p> <p>Disadvantages: Chaos and noise, bullying, physical danger (not safe), loneliness</p>
Importance of free play for child's Development	<p>Development of cognitive skills: Imagination, creativity, critical thinking, concentration, logic, solving problems, decision making.</p>

Development of social skills: Solving problems, communicating with friends, interacting with others, sharing and helping.

Development of personality: Choice taking, discover, being independent, exploring, and confidence.

Emotional development: Happiness, empathy, and feeling safe.

Physical development: Fine motor skills, gross motor skills, and physically healthy

Free play is child-centered

The teacher's role

His decision, needs, interests and choice

Supervising, guiding and directing, exploring, questioning and co-player

The next chapter discusses the findings, concludes the research study, and presents recommendations for future studies.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusions

In this last chapter the findings of this study are discussed and compared with the literature. The chapter also concludes the research study and presents recommendations for future studies. It is divided into two sections addressing the two research questions:

1. How do the KG teachers implement free play in kindergartens of Armenian schools of Lebanon?
2. What are the perceptions of the KG teachers of the Armenian schools of Lebanon regarding free play?

Implementation of Free Play

The findings of this case study show that free play is implemented in the Kindergartens of Armenian schools of Lebanon. The results indicate that teachers put special emphasis on (a) the place of free play, (b) the time allocated for free play, and (3) their role in it, which are presented respectively.

The teachers consider free play to be an important endeavor for all children. This aligns with UNICEF's (2018) recommendations, according to which play is a fundamental right of all children around the world. Every child has the right for recess or free play according to United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child. In accordance with the Convention's 31st Article, which states that all the children have the right to have free time to participate in free play and activities appropriate for their age, all the eight kindergartens of the Armenian schools of Lebanon implement free play, even though it differs from one another in relation to time. According to the teachers, free play in most of the schools takes place in the classrooms where there are play corners, and the

children are free to play with the toys of their choice by using their imagination and creativity.

Although teachers think that free play is important, their definitions differ from the actual implementation of free play. Moreover, the definition of free play differs from one teacher to another; however, all teachers understand its importance and benefits for the child's learning and development. This finding aligns with Baker's (2014) study which showed that definitions of play differ from one teacher to another, but all of them know the play's value in the children's learning and growth.

Indoor and Outdoor Free Play

Teachers' description of free play sessions indicates the presence of commonality in the place of the implementation, i.e., mostly indoor in the classroom. Indoor free play is mostly implemented in the classroom as a break time from finished work or recess. Mostly the children choose how to play and with what toy they want to play. The Kindergarten classrooms have play corners, which have thematic games and toys. The results also indicate that free play rarely takes place in a special playroom or outdoor, despite the presence of outdoor playground or gardens at some of the schools. The free play time spent there is less because of weather. The outdoor playgrounds have toys like slide, swing, seesaw where the children can run, climb, and play. Therefore, although outdoor play involves more physical activity, it differs from one school to another according to the size and the place. The gardens usually are not utilized for free play; they are used for other learning goals, such as observing the flowers, according to educational themes or topics learned. Lastly, results show that few teachers are concerned about the gross motor skill. Kindergarten children have very little outdoor free play, and

this is a concern because research has shown that children are physically active mostly during outdoor free play while running, jumping and climbing (Skouteris, Edwards, Rutherford, Cutter-MacKenzie, Huang, and O'Connor, 2014; Spencer & Wright, 2014) and it enhances their health.

Free Play Time

Findings show that the time spent for free play differs from one school to another as well as from one level to another. It ranges between 30 minutes to 2 hours per day and it decreases in KG3 because of more writing and learning requirements due to the curriculum. This goes in line with Baker's (2014) findings which indicated that there are different factors that force less play in kindergarten such as teacher time, pressure of academic goals, and assessment. Most teachers agree that the time of free play is enough for the children since they believe that children had to learn and study at school. However, as research has shown through years, children learn through different types of play better rather than through simple instructional learning. So, this might lead to future questions and studies regarding the structured play in the Kindergartens of the Armenian schools of Lebanon. Even the teachers who agree on the importance of free play still minimize play time. This is important because many teachers know and understand the importance of different types of play, yet they still minimize play time (Jung & Jin, 2014).

Findings indicate that although most teachers think that free play is crucial, they believe that if much time is given for free play, it would cause problems like fighting and quarreling between students and few think it would become boring. Most teachers prefer to implement structural and educational play rather than unstructured or free play.

Research recommends increasing the implementation of free play. However, this is not reflected in classroom practices. Despite studies showing the importance of recess, outdoor free play, or free play in general, still most schools have reduced the free time play to concentrate more on academic skills (Ginsburg, 2007). This is validated by the findings of the study, which reveal that only few teachers think that children need more time of free play. This is explained by the broadness of the Lebanese ECE curriculum, so while managing the schedule timetable, the free play time is replaced by other sessions like art, or music, or language.

Teacher's Role During Free Play

Findings of this study show that most teachers consider themselves as guides or role models during free play, even though their definitions of free play emphasize that free play is a play decided by children freely without adult interference. Few teachers had emphasized the role of the teacher as on-looker or stage manager.

The results of the study indicate that many teachers confuse the concept of free play with structured play, since they consider free play as something planned ahead of time. For most of the teachers, giving the child a choice is considered free play. The definition of free play and its concept are crucial. Most teachers interfere or get involved with the children's play to show them how to play or what to say, because according to them children need guidance to do things correctly. Many teachers have a misunderstanding of free play, where children had to quarrel, discuss, and try to discover the correct answer. In creativity, there is no right or wrong, so I think teachers have to interfere only if there is danger or risk of an injury to not let any harm occur. According to the reviewed literature, the teachers' job is to not force or tell children what to do or

how to do it during free play. All what teachers have to do is to make available the chances and opportunities, places and the time to play (Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012). Therefore, when it comes to the implementation of free play, we should consider the teachers' role, the child's free choice and decision, and the place.

Teachers' Perceptions Regarding Free Play

According to Pyle and Bigelow (2015), teachers have a major role in the integration of play in the classrooms because of their perspectives. The findings of the second research question regarding teachers' perceptions of free play show that teachers understand the importance of free play and its benefits. Although many believe that free play has no disadvantages, some teachers are worried about certain problems or safety issues. According to the findings, the advantages suppress the disadvantages and this empowers the importance of free play.

Importance of free play and its implementation

According to the teachers' perceptions, free play is very important and as important as other types of play. Children learn through play. This aligns with UNICEF's (2018) recommendations, according to which play is a fundamental right of all children around the world. However, the teachers emphasize on the importance of the structural play and learning as well. With all the benefits of free play, the teachers are convinced that the time given for free play is enough in the kindergarten since they have a certain curriculum to finish. This aligns with the research of Ginsburg (2007) who claims that free play has been replaced by academic learning. This study's findings show that free play is scheduled in the kindergarten class, and extra sessions are added whenever needed, like when the children finish their lesson, activity, or are tired. The teachers have

freedom to decide the place of free play in the classroom, playground or garden.

However, free play in reality almost didn't exist for many teachers because they concentrated on guided or structured play, or got confused between these two types of play.

Advantages and disadvantages of free play

Findings indicate that all teachers agreed on the advantages and benefits of free play. It improves the child's development emotionally, cognitively, physically, and socially. This finding is aligned with Ginsburg's (2007) study, in which he discussed that free play contributes to the physical, as well as cognitive, social and emotional development. The findings of this study show that free play also improves the child's character. He becomes confident, expressive, independent, and a leader. He makes his own decisions and choices. He learns through trial and error. This means the children are learning real life skills as well as academic skills through free play. This is aligned with Johnson (2015), an early childhood scholar, who described in his chapter how free play will let the children "naturally select play activities that will help them to cope and master anxieties and to make progress with developmental tasks of one kind or another" (p. 182), and therefore, free play leads to learning of real-life skills as well as academic skills.

Some teachers had concerns related to safety and harm of the children during free play. Their concerns were about bullying, fighting, falling, and hurting themselves. However, only few teachers were concerned about it. Many solved this issue by interfering, or preparing the free play area in a safe way, or setting rules. I think the quarrel; small risks are part or real-life skills. Children face them and learn to solve it. This will make their personality grow and they become more confident and independent.

Teachers' Role in Free play

Findings show that most teachers discuss about their involvement during free play. However, this differs from one teacher to another in its level and ways of involvement. Some just supervise, but interfere whenever there is necessity; others guide the play by telling the students how to play or what to play. Still others play with them, while others model for the children. However, according to Gleave and Cole-Hamilton (2012), all what teachers have to do is to make available the chances and opportunities, places, and the time to play. Teachers misunderstand their role and keep on interfering and guiding, which is the reason why little free play implementation existed in the kindergartens, it was replaced by structured play or guided play to teach academic skills. This confirms Faour's (2003) study that indicates that free play almost didn't exist for many teachers because they concentrated on guided or structured play.

It is crucial to pinpoint the uniqueness of these findings. While discussing about the advantages of free play, few participant teachers mentioned the role of free play in the improvement and development of critical thinking as well as problem solving, emotional development of the children, exploring and discovering during free play, and the physical development. The reasons behind this result could be cultural. As mentioned in the goals of the Armenian schools, their aim is to ensure academic excellence and prepare good and educated Armenians, which, according to the teachers, needed emphasis on the academics: writing, reading and speaking rather than emphasizing on emotions, the independence of discovering new concepts, thinking critically, and solving their own problems. Hence, they raised the importance of the children coming to school to learn and not to play.

Conclusions

Free play is implemented in the Kindergartens of Armenian schools of Lebanon. However, little time is given for free play and it has decreased through the years. The place of the implementation is in the classroom, although the best place for children to play freely is outdoor where they have enough space to move around, run, climb, and explore. During free play, the teachers' role differed from one teacher to another. Most teachers defined free play as being the child's choice and with no adult interference; however, most teachers still emphasized that the teacher must guide the students. One concern of some teachers was the safety of the students or being hurt during free play. It's crucial to mention that the benefits of free play surpass the disadvantages. Free play is very crucial for the emotional, physical, social as well as cognitive development of the children. It is child-centered play that enhances the building of the child's personality and character. All these improvements occur during free play according to the perceptions of the teachers. Nevertheless, the practice of implementation of free plays session differs from their perceptions. Hence many prefer structural play rather than free play.

This research is significant because few research studies had been conducted regarding free play in Lebanon, in general, and within the context of the Armenian schools in Lebanon, in particular. Caution needs to be practiced for generalization, because the conclusions of this study are specific to the case that was studied. The findings of the present research add to the existing literature through a culture-specific contribution and through providing insights regarding this matter by which other contexts

can benefit from. The research adds to the repertoire of studies regarding free play and how is it implemented in the early lives of the children.

This study is crucial to inform on the importance of free play in Kindergartens and highlight the implementation in the Armenian school kindergartens. Consequently, this study fills a gap regarding free play, its implementation by KG teachers, the teachers' perceptions in the context of Armenian schools in Lebanon, and the differences between the perceptions and implementation of free play. It also adds to the existing recent research on free play in Lebanon as well as to the research in Armenian schools in Lebanon.

Future studies need to involve observations in order to find out how free play is implemented at the schools and how the actual practices align with the teachers' perceptions. I recommend conducting observations of free play in the kindergartens, observing the children's play and the teacher's role, and interviewing the children to understand their perceptions regarding free play. I also recommend future studies to explore the perceptions of school administrators and parents about free play, as they are important stakeholders who might influence the teachers' decisions regarding free play. In terms of policy development, I recommend school-level policies at the Armenian schools in Lebanon that underscores the important role of free play and suggest directions and guidelines for the implementation of free play. Another question raised is how the teachers' perceptions differ from their practice. Is this related to their educational level? It would be interesting to conduct additional studies to find out if there is a relationship between these two. In sum, this study raises new set of questions to be tested in the future.

Finally, this study raises questions regarding the heavy curriculum of the kindergartens in Lebanon. Children are learning three languages and different skills at a young age. This was a valid concern coming from the teachers and is considered one of the reasons of decrease of free play time. Therefore, the role of the ECE curriculum in shaping the teachers' perceptions and implementation of free play is an important area for consideration in future research.

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Appendix A
Questionnaire

Complete the following questionnaire about Kindergarten teachers' perceptions about free play and its implementation at Armenian schools of Lebanon. Part A of the questionnaire includes information about the participant's background. Part B of the questionnaire includes 8 open-ended questions.

Part A.

Your Background.

Please provide information about you and the school you work at.

1. Gender: male female other
2. Marital status: single married divorced widowed other
3. Year of birth: -----
4. School's Name: -----
5. Years of teaching experience: ----- years
6. Grade level you are teaching: -----
7. The number of students in your class: -----boys ----- girls
8. What is your highest level of education?

----- Brevet

-----Bacc 2 or high school diploma

----- BT

-----TS

-----Bachelor's degree

----- Masters' degree

----- Doctorate

----- other (specify)

9. If you have university degree, what is your major? -----

10. Do you have Teaching Diploma? -----

Part B

Answer the following questions.

1. What does free play mean?

2. Think about a recent session in which you engaged your students in free play.

- a. Describe the session in which you engaged your students in free play.
- b. Did you plan in advance for this session? If yes, how did you plan for this session? If no, why didn't you plan?
- c. How did you implement the session? Please provide details.
- d. Did you evaluate the progress and outcomes of this session? If yes, how? If no, why didn't you evaluate this session?
- e. As a teacher, what did you learn from engaging your students in free play?

3. What do you consider your role as a teacher when your students are engaged in free play?

4. How much time per day do your students spend playing freely at the schools?

5. Do you think time spent by your students in free play at school is low, average or high? Why?

If you were to change the amount of time devoted per day for free play, what would it be?

6. In your opinion, what are the advantages of engaging your students in free play?

7. In your opinion, what are the disadvantages of engaging your students in free play?

8. Based on the advantages and disadvantages that you described, as a teacher how important do you consider engaging your students in free play? Why?

Appendix B
The Participants' Qualifications

Participant	Years of teaching	Qualification
T1	19	Technical education (TS)
T2	26	High school
T3	5	BA
T4	2	BA+ TD
T5	4	BA + TD
T6	35	High school
T7	3	BA
T8	10	Technical education (TS)
T9	5	BA
T10	20	Technical education (BT)
T11	11	BA
T12	4	MA
T13	16	BA
T14	10	Technical education (TS)
T15	10	BA
T16	27	Not completed high school
T17	8	BA
T18	18	BA
T19	19	Technical education (TS)
T20	33	Technical education (TS)

T21	7	Technical education (TS)
T22	1	BA
T23	29	BA + TD
T24	13	High school
T25	4	BA

Appendix C

Interview Questions

Interviewee:

Email of interviewee:

Cellular number:

Interviewer:

Date:

Location:

Topic of Interview:

Time begin/end:

Note: L= the interviewer

T= the interviewee (teacher)

Questions

1. What is free play in your opinion and what are its characteristics?
2. Is free play implemented in your school? How? Give examples.
3. Do you think free play is important for children? Why?
4. Do you think your kids learn better when they have more free play time? Give examples.
5. What are the benefits of free play precisely for children?
6. How much time do children spend free playing? Do you think it's enough?
7. Where do the KG students have their free play?
8. Is the environment suitable for exploring or discovering the nature in your school?
9. Do you think free play has decreased or increased in the Kindergarten classes? Why?
10. Do you think more free play time is needed?

Appendix D

Thematic Analysis Process Checklist (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Transcription	1	The data has been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for 'accuracy'.
Coding	2	Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.
	3	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach) but, instead, the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.
	4	All relevant extracts for all each theme have been collated.
	5	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.
	6	Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.
Analysis	7	Data have been analyzed rather than just paraphrased or described.
	8	Analysis and data match each other- the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.
	9	Analysis tells a convincing and well-organised story about the data and topic.
	10	A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.
Overall	11	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once- over- lightly.
Written report	12	The assumptions about ThA are clearly explicated.
	13	There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done-i.e. described method and reported analysis are consistent.
	14	The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.

	15	The researcher is positioned as active in the research process: themes do not just 'emerge'.
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