

# A Critical Evaluation of the Journal Article "Free Play in Early Childhood Education: A Phenomenological Study" by Selda Aras

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## ABSTRACT

*Free play is recognized as a vital aspect of early childhood education, significantly contributing to children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development. Teachers play a crucial role in facilitating free play, ensuring that it becomes a meaningful part of the learning environment. This article critically evaluates Selda Aras's 2016 study, which explores the perceptions and practices of early childhood educators in Turkey regarding free play. Using a phenomenological approach, Aras delves into the lived experiences of teachers, highlighting both the strengths and challenges they face in integrating free play into their curricula. The study, based on interviews and observations, reveals that while educators generally acknowledge the importance of free play, its effective implementation is often impeded by various constraints. These include limited time within the curriculum, insufficient training for teachers, and a lack of resources. Aras's findings emphasize the need for enhanced teacher training programs that focus on the value of free play and equip educators with the necessary skills to overcome these barriers. Additionally, the research suggests that raising awareness about the benefits of free play among educators, parents, and policymakers is crucial, along with providing increased administrative support in the form of time, resources, and flexibility within the curriculum. This critical evaluation examines the methodological strengths and weaknesses of Aras's study, including its research design, sampling strategy, data collection methods, and ethical considerations. By assessing the study's rigor and implications, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of free play's role in early childhood education and offers practical recommendations for improving its integration into educational settings.*

**Keywords:** *Free Play, Early Childhood Education, Teacher Engagement, Phenomenological Study, Play-Based Learning, Child Development, Educational Strategies, Teacher Training, Curriculum Integration, Qualitative Research, Methodological Evaluation.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Free play is recognized as a crucial element in early childhood education, allowing children to explore, create, and interact in an unstructured, voluntary, and child-initiated manner. This type of play fosters cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development, helping children build problem-solving skills, creativity, social competence, and self-regulation.

Teachers play a vital role in facilitating free play by providing materials, space, and guidance. To do so effectively, they must create a safe and engaging environment that promotes environmental awareness and allows children to select their favorite activities or play, fostering autonomy and involvement. Building enthusiastic relationships from the very beginning is also crucial for nurturing trust and collaboration (Cutter-Mackenzie and Edwards, 2013; Lee, 2006; Mourão, 2014; Sherwood and Reifel, 2013; Singer, 2015; Wood, 2014). Their ability to promote free play is influenced by their beliefs, training, available resources, and institutional constraints.

However, the integration of free play into early childhood curricula varies widely, especially in educational systems like Turkey's, where structured academic activities often dominate. This situation raises important questions about how early childhood educators perceive and implement free play.

This article evaluates a study by Aras (2016) that investigates Turkish early childhood teachers' perceptions and practices regarding free play. Using a phenomenological approach, the study explores teachers' experiences, strategies, and the challenges they face in implementing free play.

By analyzing Aras's methodology, findings, and implications, this article aims to enhance understanding of the role of free play in early childhood education. It highlights the need for systemic support and professional development to empower teachers to effectively integrate free play into their teaching, promoting holistic development in young children.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

This study, conducted by Aras (2016) within a phenomenological framework in Turkey, investigates the perceptions and practices surrounding the implementation of free play in early childhood education. Despite the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE) renewing a strategic plan in 2013 aimed at incorporating free play into the early childhood curriculum, substantial challenges persist in realizing this goal effectively. The study seeks to provide valuable insights for educators and policymakers to address these ongoing issues and improve the integration of free play into educational settings.

The researcher, who is a PhD candidate at Middle East Technical University and a Research Assistant in the Department of Elementary Education at TED University, embarked on this study to explore elementary teachers' understandings and practices regarding free play. Given that these teachers are the primary implementers of the curriculum in early childhood education, their perspectives are crucial for understanding the practical challenges and opportunities in fostering free play. The study is grounded in the belief that teachers' insights can significantly influence the successful incorporation of play-based learning within the structured educational framework.

The study follows a methodical approach, starting with an informative abstract that succinctly summarizes the research's objectives, methods, and key findings. It is supported by background information that contextualizes the role of free play in Turkey's educational landscape, alongside an exploration of teachers' active involvement in play. The significance of the study is highlighted, emphasizing its relevance to contemporary educational practices and policies. The research design is meticulously detailed in the methodology section, covering the processes of sampling, data collection, and data analysis. The researcher took deliberate steps to ensure the study's trustworthiness by presenting comprehensive findings, engaging discussions, and well-supported conclusions, all bolstered by an extensive range of references. Although the article mentions only minor limitations, these are acknowledged transparently, allowing readers to critically assess the study's scope and applicability.

A qualitative research method was employed, with interviews and observations serving as the primary tools for data collection. The study involved four early childhood teachers from diverse school settings, including both public and private institutions, to ensure the collection of a wide range of data. To further enhance the diversity of perspectives, the selected teachers had different educational backgrounds, including specializations in early childhood education, child development, and learning development. This approach was intended to maximize variation among participants, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and practices associated with free play.

The study's findings revealed that "free play in childhood education" is not being implemented as effectively as intended, despite the policy efforts to promote it. The study offers several key recommendations aimed at improving this situation: enhancing the quality of teacher training programs to better prepare educators for integrating play into the curriculum, increasing teachers' direct engagement in facilitating play, raising awareness among educators and policymakers about the critical importance of play in early childhood development, and providing additional time and resources for teachers to manage their administrative tasks without compromising playtime.

### 3. CRITIQUE OF THE STUDY

#### 3.1 Literature Review

A research literature review is described as "a systematic, explicit, and reproducible method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing the existing body of completed and recorded work produced by researchers, scholars, and practitioners" (Fink, 2005 cited in Blaxter et al., 2006, p.122). It is a critical component of any academic writing. According to Bryman (2016), a literature review encompasses current knowledge, findings, and theoretical and methodological contributions to a specific topic. Oliver (2012) likens a literature review to the cornerstones on which an assignment is built, providing readers with sufficient background knowledge to understand the specific topic thoroughly.

In this study, the literature review is meticulously crafted, reflecting the author's strong academic and professional background. The selection of 39 references, including seminal works and contemporary studies, provides a robust foundation for the research. However, while the review successfully integrates key sources, it could be further strengthened by including a more critical examination of the literature gaps. For instance, an analysis of the evolving perspectives on early childhood education over the decades could have offered richer insights into the current discourse. Moreover, exploring international perspectives alongside the national context of Turkey would enhance the global relevance of the study, positioning it within a broader scholarly conversation.

The author of the article has strong professional credentials, serving as a Research Assistant in the Elementary Education Department at TED University and pursuing a PhD at Middle East Technical University, Turkey. This background provided her with extensive experience in conducting relevant literature searches, which is essential for any research project (Hart, 2001). The author used keywords such as "early childhood teachers," "play," "involvement," "perception of teachers," and "implementations of teachers" for her literature search, resulting in 39 references listed. This strategic approach is beneficial for any research. Furthermore, an acknowledgment of the evolving nature of early childhood education practices would add depth to the literature review, reflecting an awareness of the dynamic educational landscape.

The study primarily used primary sources, and the selected literature is adequate, with well-defined and consistent concepts. The literature review clearly explains how the selected studies relate to the existing body of knowledge on the topic. However, not all referenced literature is up-to-date. The references span from 1972 to 2015, including one article from 1972, eight from 1980 to 1999, and the remaining 30 from 2000 onwards. The author cited a 1972 article by Bruner, a renowned figure in children's learning. While Bruner's work is significant, the author could have included endnotes for terms like "scaffolding," which might be unfamiliar to the general public. Additionally, a discussion on how older works continue to influence current practices and whether there has been a shift in pedagogical approaches over time would provide a nuanced understanding of the field's development.

The literature review contains some repetitions and minor referencing errors. For instance, although the references follow proper citation rules (e.g., using "et al." for more than two authors), the author lists a 2007 Ministry of National Education reference<sup>i</sup> that is neither cited in the review nor anywhere in the article. Additionally, the article is written in the local language, posing a problem for non-native readers. A more careful approach to referencing would have been beneficial. A backward search revealed that four references<sup>ii</sup> are not available on Google, and two<sup>iii</sup> of the sources found were in the local language, making them less accessible to a broader audience. The author mentions 39 references in the reference section but uses 40 in-text citations, indicating a need for more meticulous attention to detail in referencing.

#### 3.2 Methodology

Phenomenological research is well-suited for small-scale studies. It typically relies on in-depth interviews and does not require complicated or expensive equipment for data collection and analysis. Additionally, this type of research is often conducted in specific locations such as hospitals, schools, or industrial plants. It is cost-effective, requiring a low budget and the researcher themselves acts as the focal resource person (Denscombe, 2007). In this study, the researcher employed a phenomenological approach, which is appropriate given the need to thoroughly explain the research methodology.

The choice of a phenomenological approach is well-justified, as it aligns with the study's aim to explore the lived experiences of early childhood teachers during free play. This methodology allows for an in-depth understanding of teachers' perceptions and actions, which is crucial for a topic as nuanced as early childhood education.

### 3.2.1 Research Questions

According to Bryman (2016), a research question is a guiding element that directs the researcher in conducting the study. Discussing research questions often leads to diverse opinions, and through these questions, a researcher can explore a phenomenon (Blaxter et al., 2006; Marshall and Rossman, 2016). This study is driven by three research questions (Aras, 2016):

1. What are the perceptions and implementations of early childhood teachers on free play?
2. How do early childhood teachers involve themselves in their students' free play?
3. What decisions do early childhood teachers make in their involvement of students' free play?

These questions are concrete, concise, and specific, serving as key inquiries for the research. The author's thoughts are consistently linked to these questions throughout the study, indicating a focused effort to uncover what actually happens regarding this issue. Discussing the importance of research questions, Bryman (2016, p.7) states, "...what is it the researcher wants to find out." In this study, the author initially set three targeted questions aimed at teachers who support children, demonstrating that the questions were appropriately aligned with the research objectives.

In qualitative research, the researcher finds answers through investigation. This process shapes the study and guides the research path (Agee, 2009). However, the critique could further explore how these research questions integrate with the broader literature, potentially considering additional questions that might emerge from the initial findings. This reflection could reveal new dimensions of inquiry, enhancing the study's contribution to the field.

In qualitative research, the researcher finds answers through investigation. This process shapes the study and guides the research path (Agee, 2009). The clear articulation of research questions is a strength of the study, as it provides a coherent structure for the investigation. However, the critique could be extended by discussing the potential for these questions to evolve during the research process, reflecting the iterative nature of qualitative inquiry. This adaptability is often a hallmark of robust qualitative research, allowing the study to respond to emerging insights and shifting dynamics within the research context.

### 3.2.2 Approach

There are two primary research approaches: quantitative and qualitative. Both are empirical methods, but they differ in how data is interpreted. In quantitative research, data is interpreted numerically, while in qualitative research, data is interpreted in non-numerical forms (Punch, 2005, as cited in Blaxter et al., 2006, p.64).

For this study, the researcher used a qualitative approach to explore her topic. This approach is well-suited for understanding complex phenomena through detailed, descriptive data. According to Blaxter et al. (2006) and Denscombe (2007), there are four main techniques for collecting qualitative data: interviews, documents, questionnaires, and observations.

The selection of a qualitative approach aligns with the study's aim to delve deeply into the subjective experiences of early childhood teachers. Qualitative methods are particularly effective in capturing the complexities and nuances of human behavior, making them ideal for this research. The use of interviews and observations allows for a rich, textured understanding of the teachers' perceptions and actions, providing insights that quantitative methods might overlook.

The study's methodological rigor is significantly strengthened through the employment of various trustworthiness strategies, as outlined by Creswell (2007) and Marshall and Rossman (2016). The researcher utilized triangulation, peer review, and thick descriptions to enhance the study's credibility, ensuring a robust and reliable exploration of teachers' involvement in free play. Comprehensive data were gathered through observations and semi-structured interviews, which provided rich, contextual insights into the behaviors and perceptions of the teachers. A pilot study and external audits further contributed to the trustworthiness of the instruments used, while the involvement of an additional coder in analyzing the results reinforced the study's credibility. By using observations, the researcher was able to capture firsthand information on the teachers' interactions during free play, offering a nuanced understanding of their behaviors. The semi-structured interviews complemented this by delving deeper into the teachers' perceptions

and decisions, allowing for a flexible exploration of emerging topics. This combination of methods aligns well with the phenomenological framework of the study and is a key strength, as it provides a more comprehensive and credible view of the phenomenon under investigation.

### 3.2.3 Participants and Sample

The researcher used a purposeful sampling strategy<sup>iv</sup> to select four early childhood teachers as participants from different schools, each with varying backgrounds, to maximize diversity in data collection. This approach is commendable as it ensures a wide range of perspectives. The selected teachers were engaged with two age groups: one with five-year-old children and the other with six-year-olds, which is highly relevant to the topic.

However, the sample size of only four teachers is quite small. While qualitative research often benefits from in-depth exploration of a few cases, this limited number may not provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Typically, a sample size ranging from twelve to sixty participants, with a mean of thirty, is considered ideal for qualitative research (Adler and Adler, 2012 cited in Bryman, 2016, p.416). A sample that is too small can pose challenges for data analysis and may not fully capture the complexity of the phenomenon. Conversely, an excessively large sample can also be problematic, making data analysis unwieldy (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007 cited in Bryman, 2016, p.417).

While the small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings, it also allows for an in-depth analysis that can yield significant insights into the phenomenon under study. In qualitative research, small, accurately selected samples can provide rich, detailed data that enhance our understanding (Cohen et al., 2000; Patton, 2015). Although a larger sample size might have strengthened the findings, the small sample used in this study still offers valuable contributions to our understanding of early childhood teachers' perceptions and practices related to free play. Acknowledging how differences within the small sample—such as teaching experience, educational background, or school environment—contribute to the richness of the data, could make the critique even stronger.

### 3.2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher used observations and interviews to conduct the study. She prepared a semi-structured questionnaire with 13 questions to enhance the reliability<sup>v</sup> and validity<sup>vi</sup> of the research. Reliability and validity are crucial for achieving rigor in qualitative research (Whittemore, Chase and Mandle, 2001; Cho, and Trent, 2006; Creswell and Miller, 2000; Golafshani, 2003; Maxwell, 1992; Morse et al., 2002). Bell (2010) argues that the reliability and validity of data collection methods should be critically tested.

To ensure these measures, the researcher conducted a pilot study, peer reviews, and external audits. Initially, the teachers were observed, followed by interviews to gather additional information stemming from the observations. During data collection, the researcher used a video camera, took descriptive notes, and included her reflections and separate thinking, all of which were vital for this study.

The author employed triangulation during data analysis, a multi-method approach that verifies findings using alternative sources or methods, thus enhancing reliability and validity (Bell, 2010). Additionally, the researcher used inductive methods, open coding<sup>vii</sup>, and axial coding<sup>viii</sup> during data analysis. All participant transcriptions were meticulously read and annotated by the researcher. The results were also tested by an expert coder to further ensure accuracy.

Furthermore, the author included explicit descriptions of the interviews to assess their authenticity, adding depth to the analysis. Overall, the researcher used proper techniques to collect and analyze data, ensuring a comprehensive and reliable study.

### 3.2.5 Ethics

Researchers must adhere to ethical standards for every research project. Understanding and obtaining "informed consent" is essential before collecting data, as it is a key principle for the interviewer. Additionally, researchers should develop the necessary documents and verify them through consultation before starting data collection. These steps are crucial at every stage of data usage and analysis (Blaxter et al., 2006 cited in Bell, 2010, p.47; Oliver, 2003 cited in

Bell, 2010, p.46). Researchers must also seek permission from relevant authorities and ensure an equitable environment for all stakeholders, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity throughout the process.

In this study, the author did not explicitly mention ethical considerations. However, it can be inferred that ethical principles were followed. For instance, the author did not disclose any names of participants in the discussion or analysis sections, indicating an effort to maintain confidentiality and protect participants' identities. This suggests that the researcher likely adhered to ethical guidelines, even though specific ethical procedures were not detailed in the article.

### 3.3 Findings

The author presented her findings in three distinct steps.

**1. Teachers' Perception of Free Play:**

In the first step, the author discussed the findings related to teachers' perceptions of free play. This step provided insights into how teachers understand and value free play within the context of early childhood education.

**2. Teachers' Activities during Free Play:**

In the second step, the researcher highlighted the activities teachers engage in during free play. This section examined the specific actions and behaviors of teachers as they interact with children during free playtime.

**3. Teachers' Involvement in Free Play:**

In the third step, the author delved into the extent and nature of teachers' involvement in free play. This discussion focused on how teachers participate in and influence free play, including the decisions they make and their level of engagement.

The techniques used in the article are well-suited for a qualitative approach and effectively aid the reader's understanding. The author also included a table to identify five distinct roles of teachers during free play, which was meticulous and easy to understand. Additionally, she incorporated direct quotations from the participants, adding an interesting and authentic dimension to the findings.

The discussion of the findings is appropriate, well-organized, unbiased, and clear. The structured presentation helps in comprehensively understanding the teachers' perceptions, activities, and involvement in free play. Overall, the author's approach to presenting the findings enhances the readability and credibility of the research.

### 3.4 Discussion and Conclusion

The author systematically presented the discussion, addressing the perceptions and implementations of pre-primary teachers regarding free play, their involvement in it, and the decisions they make during students' free play. The findings were effectively linked to the research questions, ensuring that the discussion remained focused and relevant. The author's use of various references to substantiate her points was commendable, demonstrating thorough research and adding credibility to the study.

In the conclusion of the article, the author provided a well-aligned summary with the findings, reinforcing the evidence-based approach that lent credibility to the study's conclusions. However, the study's limitations were not addressed, which could have provided a more balanced view of the research. The author also made several recommendations for teacher education programs, including in-service training and additional support for teachers to improve the quality of free playtimes.

Overall, the discussion and conclusion in the article were well-crafted, offering plausible and credible conclusions. Despite the lack of identified limitations, the recommendations provided practical steps for improving the implementation of free play in early childhood education.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This critique has thoroughly examined the article, highlighting its strengths and areas for improvement. The study effectively brings attention to the global significance of free play in early childhood education. The article is presented in a clear and logical format, making it accessible to a broad audience. The relevant references and thorough research add credibility to the study.

The study evaluates a phenomenological, peer-reviewed article, addressing a phenomenon crucial for early childhood education worldwide. The author presents the article in a clear, understandable, and logical format, making it accessible to a broad audience. The references used in the article are relevant and effectively support the arguments, demonstrating thorough research and adding credibility to the study.

The study's systematic approach to sampling, data collection, and data analysis is commendable. Purposeful sampling, semi-structured interviews, and detailed observations ensure comprehensive data collection. The data analysis is rigorous, employing triangulation, inductive methods, and coding to ensure reliability and validity. Ethical standards were followed during the study, even though they weren't explicitly outlined in the report. The absence of participant names and the maintenance of confidentiality suggest adherence to ethical guidelines. However, the critique identified some weaknesses, including repetition within the text, the absence of information about funding, and the small number of participants. Addressing these issues could enhance the overall quality of the research.

Despite these minor limitations, the article makes a valuable contribution to the field. It provides insightful findings and practical recommendations for improving the implementation of free play in early childhood education, making it a significant resource for researchers and education practitioners alike.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Çocuk Gelişimi ve Eğitimi Serbest Zaman Etkinlikleri (Ministry of National Education, 2007)

<sup>ii</sup> 1. What preschool teachers do when children play (Erwin, Carpenter and Kontos, 1993).

2. Assessing and guiding young children's growth and development (McAfee and Leong, 2011).

3. Role of symbolic play on children's cognitive and social development. (Sevinç, 1999).

4. The effects of games on children's psychomotor development at the preschool (Ulutas, 2011).

<sup>iii</sup> 1. Sembolik oyunun 4 yaş çocuklarının dil kazanımına etkisi (Ahioglu, 1999).

2. Çocuk Gelişimi ve Eğitimi Serbest Zaman Etkinlikleri (Ministry of National Education, 2007)

<sup>iv</sup> Researchers select sites and participants to serve their purposes because they need to understand the real situation. They want to get the information in terms of key questions of the study. Based on these key questions, researchers shape a frame to meet their purposes upon this type of samples. Purposeful sampling is applied in qualitative study (Creswell, 2007).

<sup>v</sup> "Reliability is the extent to which a test or procedure produces similar results under constant conditions on all occasions..." (Bell, 2010, p.119).

<sup>vi</sup> "Usual definitions of validity are that It tells us whether an item or instrument measures or describes what it is supposed to measure or describe" (Bell, 2010, pp119-120).

<sup>vii</sup> Open coding is similar to Grounded theory approach. The main target of open coding is to find out different criteria/criterion to develop categories on account of various dimensions (Strauss and Corbin, 1990 cited in Denscombe, 2007, p.295).

<sup>viii</sup> Axial coding is "a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by marking connections between categories" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990 cited in Bryman, 2016, p.574). In the axial coding categories are built up by exploring a connection between categories and data by regularly moving backwards and forwards between them (Bryman, 2016).