

The Examination of Special Education Teachers' Views On Teaching Play Skills to Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Abstract: The current study aims to understand how the special education teachers define play skills, examine their views on the teaching of play skills to children with ASD, and determine their experiences in teaching play skills to children with ASD. The phenomenological design, one of the qualitative research methods, was used in the study. The participants were 14 special education teachers working in a special education school. A semi-structured interview was used to collect data. The findings reveal that the special education teachers defined the play skills as entertaining and teaching activities; they found the play skills are essential and should be taught to children with ASD. They also think that the play affects the psychomotor, language and communication, social-emotional, and cognitive development of children with ASD positively, play skills can be taught in any age and anywhere by teachers, parents, and caregivers. The findings also indicate that most of the teachers involved play skills training in individualized education programs of their students. They used peer tutoring, in-vivo and video modelling, dramatization, response prompt strategies, and incidental teaching as an intervention. Based on the results, it can be suggested that teachers should receive training and seminars on teaching play skills to children with ASD and that teachers should be encouraged and supported to include play skills goals when designing an individualized educational program for children with ASD.

Keywords: Autism spectrum disorder, play skills, special education teachers, teacher opinions

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Introduction

Play is an enjoyable activity that allows children to learn, improve their creativity, burn their energy and initiate social interactions (Gunes & Tugrul, 2012; Taylor, Rogers, Dodd, Kaneda, Nagasaki, Watanabe, & Goshiki ; Tekin & Tekin, 2007). Labelling an activity as “play” requires the fulfilment of the following criteria: the child should start the play himself; he should be willing to play; he should accept the rules of the play; and he should have fun while playing (Ingersoll, 2012; Warreyn, Van der Baelt & Royers, 2014). Although “play” is defined in various literature, some common points stand out in these definitions. Among these commonly stated points are a) to support physical, mental, social-emotional and language development, b) to give a sense of pleasure and relaxation, c) to have unique rules, d) to allow making free choices, e) to take place in a specific place and time, f) to join on a voluntary basis, g) to contribute to socialization and learning, h) to facilitate to take part in natural environments (Kasari, Chang & Patterson, 2013; Nelson, Nelson, McDonnell, Johnston, & Crompton, 2007; Oncul, 2015; Tufekcioglu, 2013; Wolberg & Schuler, 2006; Wong & Kasari, 2012). These common issues mentioned in the definitions clearly indicate the importance of “play” in educational environments. In addition, preschool teachers often highlight its role and significance in the development of children, especially during pre-school period (Ingersoll, 2012; Trawick-Smith, Swaminathan & Liu, 2016).

Apparently, “play” has a significant role in education since it favorably supports child development (Aras, 2015; Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Bowdon, 2015). The following findings listed in the related literature also support this opinion by emphasizing that plays contribute to children’s a) cognitive skills such as creative thinking, problem-solving and imagination b) social skills such as collaboration, sharing, and conflict solution, c) motor skills such as hand-eye coordination, assembling, walking and running, d) communication skills such as initiating the communication, turn-taking and chatting (e.g., Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Bowdon, 2015; Dilekmen & Bozan-Tuzun, 2018; Marais, 2016; Oncul, 2015; Sandberg & Samuelsson, 2005; Singer, Golinkof & Hirsh-Pasek, 2013; Turkoglu & Uslu, 2016). Since it contributes to all development areas and meets children’s need for learning, play is one of the basic components of a well-organized educational process, so teachers inevitably make use of plays in their teaching (Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Kocyigit, Tugluk & Kok, 2007; Marais, 2018). The approach suggesting that children develop and learn through plays suggests that designing educational environments by integrating plays into teaching process is one of the responsibilities of a teacher (Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Bowdon, 2015; Dilekmen & Bozan-Tuzun, 2018; Marais, 2016; Sandberg & Samuelsson, 2005; Turkoglu & Uslu, 2016). Since play is an important tool for development, teachers can effectively employ plays while teaching and supporting children’s development by doing so (Broadhead, 2006; Dilekmen & Bozan-Tuzun, 2018; Durualp & Aral, 2010; Ozdemir & Ramazan, 2012; Pehlivan, 2005; Ulutas, 2011). In addition, teachers can have the opportunity to discover hidden talents of their students and make valuable contributions to their education (Sandberg & Samuelsson, 2005).

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental deficiency characterized with difficulties in social communication and social interaction as well as repetitive and restrictive behavior, interest and activity patterns (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition [DSM-5], 2013). These diagnostic symptoms affect play skills development of autistic children; thus, their play activities considerably differ from those of children displaying typical development (Rutherford, Young, Hepburn & Rogers). Play is important for development of children with autism spectrum disorder just like it is for that of the development of children with autism spectrum disorder just like it is for normal children (Patterson & Arco, 2007). Children with ASD experience problems in initiating and maintaining a conversation as well as adapting to different social environments. They prefer to be alone, are interested in objects instead of people, are excessively interested in some objects and prefer not to share his interests and emotions (Cardon, 2007; DSM-5, 2013; Hobson, Hobson, Malik, Bargiota, & Calo, 2013; MacDonald, Clark, Garrigan, & Vangala, 2005; Paterson & Arco, 2007; Sucuoglu, 2009; Terpstra, Higgins, & Pierce 2002; White & Roberson-Nay, 2009). Therefore, autistic children might encounter problems in making friends and learning how to play due to above mentioned potential problems in their social interactions (Boutot, Guenther & Crozier, 2005; Kircaali-Iftar, 2013; Mazurek, 2014; Sucuoglu, 2013; Terpstra & Tamura, 2007). In addition to these general characteristics, autistic children experience constraints in their play skills, including taking part in a play, initiating the play by grasping a toy, using toys for their original purposes and playing with other children (Boutot Guenther & Crozier, 2005; Kircaali-Iftar, 2007; Ulke-Kurkcuglu, 2012).

Plays differ according to children's ages, and the skills required for a specific play change as age increases (Ingersoll, 2012; Warreyn, Van der Baelt & Royers, 2014). Although typically developing children spontaneously learn how to play and acquire the necessary skills for specific play by themselves or by observing adults and peers in their environment (Hobson & Hobson, 2007; Hobson, et.al., 2013; Warreyn, Van der Baelt & Royers, 2014), autistic children may need systematic instruction enriched by games and toys in structured environments and contexts to help them learn how to play effectively (Cardon, 2007; Lifter, Foster-Sanda, Arzamarski, Briesch & McClure 2011). However, teaching autistic children how to play is often a neglected practice in educational contexts (Holmes and Willoughby, 2005) and these children can suffer from staying behind their peers in terms of development (Lifter, Mason & Barton, 2011). Because "play" helps autistic children establish communication with peers, acquire new skills, and gain social acceptance as members of a particular group (Baker, 2000), it is important for teachers to teach autistic children to play or to teach them play skills as a learning outcome in individualized instructional programs (Lydon, Healy & Leader, 2011; Murdock, Ganz & Crittendon, 2013).

It is possible to access many studies focusing on autistic children's need to learn how to play in the related literature. These studies specifically deal with the teaching of the following skills: functional play (Lee, Lo & Lo, 2017); play builder (Besler & Kurt, 2016), plays with rules (Odluyurt, 2013) and symbolic play (D'Ateno, Mangiapanello & Taylor, 2003; Oncul 2015; Reagon, Higbee & Endicott, 2006; Sani-Bozkurt & Ozen, 2015; Ulke-Kurkcuglu, Bozkurt & Cuhadar, 2015). In addition, the following methods were

reported to be commonly employed in teaching autistic children how to play: discrete trial teaching (Garfinkle & Schwartz, 2002); teaching through activity schedules (Dettmer, Simpson, Myles, & Ganz., 2000; Rao & Gage, 2006), and teaching through live or video modeling (Besler & Kurt, 2016; Odluyurt, 2013; Oncul, 2015; Reagon, Higbee & Endicott, 2006; Sani-Bozkurt & Ozen, 2015). The common finding concluded in these studies is that the methods used in teaching autistic children how to play are remarkably effective and autistic children successfully acquire targeted play-related skills and behaviors at the end of the systematic teaching employed during this teaching.

Although there are numerous studies examining the effectiveness of play instruction for autistic children and many meta-analyses examining the results of similar studies on this topic (Saraç & Ulke-Kurkcuoglu, 2018; Kosyvakı & Papoudi, 2019), few studies-both in the national and international literature-focus on the opinions of teachers working with autistic children on play instruction (Senturk-Cesur & Odluyurt, 2019). The literature lists many studies dealing with perceptions, attitudes and opinions of preschool and primary school teachers regarding teaching play skills. In addition, the recent studies focus on teachers' opinions about definition of "play", the contribution of "play" to child development and learning, the role of teachers in plays and the use of play as a teaching tool (Aldhafeeri, Ioanna & Aderonke, 2016; Aras, 2015; Baker, 2014; Baker, 2015; Ebbeck, Yim, & Warriar 2019; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). However, the studies conducted with special education teachers are limited only to the national literature. Only three studies conducted with special education teachers - regardless of the students they work with - were accessible in the national literature: two studies examine self-efficacy of teachers in relation to teaching how to play (Celep, 2020; Pistav-Akmese & Kayhan, 2017), and one study focuses on the use of plays and songs in lessons (Yikmis, Terzioglu, Mehtap & Aktas, 2017). Only one study directly determines opinions of teachers teaching autistic children about plays and teaching how to play (Senturk-Cesur & Odluyurt, 2019).

The study conducted by Senturk-Cesur and Odluyurt (2019) aims to determine opinions of teachers teaching autistic children (3-7 years old) and their parents about "play" and play skills, teaching play skills to autistic children and materials needed for teaching. 15 parents and 15 teachers participated in the study, which was carried out by using "descriptive method". The data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews and analyzed descriptively. The findings show that both teachers and parents define "play" as an activity supporting child development, they believe that plays can be used while teaching various skills and concepts to autistic children. They need visual materials while teaching play skills to children with ASD.

Unfortunately, only one study focused on examining teachers' opinions dealing with autistic children about teaching play skills to these children. Given the importance of teaching autistic children to play, it is necessary to obtain information on how teachers of autistic children perceive and define "play," what opportunities they provide for their students in terms of "play," to what extent they integrate play into individualized instructional programs and, if so, how they implement them, and how they teach playful skills so that we can efficiently and effectively plan such an instructional process. If

teachers are unaware of the importance of play in child development and ignore play skills in individualized instructional programs by focusing more on academic skills (Lydon, Healy, and Leader, 2011; Murdock, Ganz, and Crittendon, 2013), autistic children may not benefit from the potential positive contributions of "play" to teaching and learning (Wolfberg & Schuler, 2006; Wong & Kasari, 2012), which could delay child development. Defining the existing situation is the first indispensable step before designing educational environments to support development of autistic children and preparing individualized teaching programs. Therefore, there is a growing need to conduct studies examining the opinions of teachers teaching autistic children about teaching play skills. Based on the above, this study aims to investigate how special education teachers working with autistic children define play skills, to determine their opinions on how to structure the teaching of play skills, and to determine their experiences in teaching play skills to autistic children so that it can make a valuable contribution to the literature by extending previous findings. The findings to be obtained are believed to provide valuable insights and guidance for teachers working with autistic children and researchers in this field.

Method

The current study uses phenomenology, which is a qualitative research method. Phenomenology aims to explore participants' experiences related to a phenomenon, their perceptions and meanings they attribute to these experiences. In this design, data are collected from individuals who have experiences about the phenomenon, and these experiences are described in a holistic way (Creswell, 2013; Ersoy, 2017).

This study was designed according to the principles of phenomenology to understand how special education teachers define play skills, determine their opinions about how to structure teaching autistic children play skills, and investigate their experiences in teaching play skills to children with ASD. The phenomenon was conceptualized and defined during the data analysis, and the findings were interpreted through references to the data collected from the participants (Yildirim & Simsek, 2011)

Participants

The study participants are 14 special education teachers working at a private special education application center located in a city in Marmara Region. The researchers applied to this special education application center to obtain the necessary permissions to collect the data and informed the teachers working in this school about the purpose of the study. Later, the teachers who volunteered to participate in the study were identified, and the interviews were conducted with these teachers. A bachelor's degree from the Department of Teaching Cognitive Impairment at any university was determined to be a prerequisite for interviewing as part of the study.. The demographic information about the participant teachers are displayed in Table 1.



Table 1.

Demographic Information about the Participants

Demographic Variables	F
Gender	
Female	9
Male	5
Experience	
1-5 year	5
6-10 year	7
11-15 year	2
Age	
21-25	4
26-30	3
31-35	4
36-40	2
41-45	1

According to Table 1, nine participant teachers are female, and five are male. The number of teachers with 1 to 5 years experience is 5 five while 7 teachers have worked 6 to 10 years and only two teachers have 11 to 15 years of experience in this occupation. The majority of teachers (n= 11) are in the age range of 21-35.

Data Collection Instrument

The data collection instrument used in this study is semi-structured interviews, consisting of written open-ended questions. For the purposes of the study, an interview form involving semi-structured questions was developed to carry out the interviews. Before the development of the interview form, the studies using interviews conducted with teachers of children displaying typical developments as a data collection instrument were examined from the literature. Accordingly, a data collection instrument, which consists of 8 open-ended questions, was developed based on the purpose of the study. Later, the instrument's content validity was also examined to determine whether the instrument measures the construct it is supposed to measure (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2012). To achieve this purpose, the developed data collection instrument was submitted to three experts in the field who have conducted studies focusing on teaching play skills to children with ASD so that they could provide feedback about the questions used in the instrument. Later, the instrument was finalized by making revisions based on the feedback received from these experts. These revisions included minor changes in the content of the questions and some revisions and corrections in spelling and meaning. The purpose of content validity analysis is to avoid researcher bias. This data collection

instrument also included an information form involving questions asked to the participant teachers to obtain demographic information about them. The questions in the data collection form are as follows:

1. "What comes to your mind when you are told "play skills"?"
2. What do you think about teaching play skills to children with ASD?
3. Which development areas do you think are affected by play skills teaching to children with ASD? Why do play skills, do you think, affect these areas?
4. Do you think there is a critical age limit in teaching play skills to children with ASD? If so, what is this critical age limit?
5. Where should play skills be taught to children with ASD? Why?
6. Who should be responsible for teaching play skills to children with ASD? Why? Could you explain your reason?
7. Should play skills be integrated into individualized teaching programs prepared for children with ASD? Could you explain your reason?
8. Do you integrate learning outcomes related to play skills into the individualized teaching programs of your students? If so, which methods do you employ while teaching play skills to children with ASD?

Data Collection

The steps followed in data collection process are as follows: obtaining necessary permissions, determining data collection principles, preparing a data collection manual according to these principles, and data collection. Firstly, the school principal where the data would be collected were interviewed face-to-face and informed about the purpose of the study and the demand to conduct interviews with several teachers working at the school and meeting the predetermined criteria. The principal was also told that the participation in the study would be on a voluntary basis, the data obtained will be used only for scientific purposes within the scope of the study, and the name of the participants and the school as well as other related information will be kept confidential.

After obtaining the necessary permissions, the researcher planned the schedule for the interviews he would conduct with the participating teachers. The data collection principles used in this study are as follows: (a) handing out the data collection form in written form, (b) obtaining written permission from the participants, (c) explaining the confidentiality agreement, (d) informing the participants that participation is on a voluntary basis, (e) asking for further clarification and information if any question is not answered satisfactorily, and (f) answering the participants' questions whenever necessary. The data were collected in the environments determined together with the participants such as teachers' room, classroom or workshop. Only written data were collected in the interviews since the first researcher had no experience and was not competent enough to conduct interviews.

The data were collected face-to-face between April 18 and 20, 2016 in the predetermined places with each participant. Prior to the data collection, the participant teachers were briefly informed about the aim of the interview. Later, they were reminded about the confidentiality statement and that participation is on a voluntary basis so that



their voluntary participation could be reconfirmed at this step. All the teachers signed the written informed consent form. The data collection form was given to the participant teachers as a written form, and they were asked to provide written replies to the questions in the form. The researcher was physically present near the participant during the data collection phase in order to make clarifications whenever necessary. The data collection procedure lasted 4 hours and 16 minutes; each interview taking 13 to 18 minutes in average. The participants were coded by giving each of them a number used during the data analyses instead of their real names. The data collection procedure was the same for each participant.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed descriptively. Since the data was written data, the researchers did not need to transcribe it. First, the answers given by the teachers were read twice and for each answer some meaningful units were formed and these units were explained conceptually. For the purposes of descriptive analysis, a thematic framework was established in parallel with the questions and the data were analyzed according to this framework. During this analysis, some revisions were made to the framework, e.g., some themes were merged or separated when necessary.. At the end of the analysis, the findings were defined and interpreted accordingly (Yildirim & Simsek, 2013). The replies provided by the participants were quoted while reporting the findings. Two researchers did the analysis in order to enhance the credibility of the results.

Research Credibility

The study's credibility was enhanced by doing an extensive literature review and obtaining expert opinion to ensure content validity after the preparation of the draft questions. Having read the data collected from the interviews, the first researcher asked the participants to confirm the data. At this point, the researcher shared the findings in a summary format with the participants and asked them to confirm that their replies were comprehended correctly. In addition, they were told whether they would like to add to or exclude any statement from these summarized findings. Moreover, the findings were presented directly without adding any comments and supported through direct quotations from the original replies of the participants. The data were also analyzed by the second researcher, who is experienced in qualitative research methods. The similar themes suggested by both researchers were kept as original, and they negotiated over the different themes they suggested and they eventually agreed on a common theme. To increase the repeatability of the study, the researchers made detailed descriptions, and the findings were presented in such a way that they can be checked for their consistency by using the participant codes.

Research Ethics

The appropriate ethical principles were followed in all phases of this study, from planning to publication. After the planning phase was completed, the necessary institutional approvals were obtained. Only written data were collected since the researcher did not have any experience and competence in conducting interviews. The participants were told that the participation in this study is voluntary and they were also informed about confidentiality statement as well the purpose of the study. Later, they were asked to sign the informed consent form. The name of the school where participating teachers work was kept anonymous, and participants were coded with numbers when reporting results rather than using their real names. Finally, the participants were asked to confirm the collected data and all the findings obtained were presented in the research report.

Findings

This section contains the results of opinions from special education teachers working with children with ASD about the definition of play skills, teaching play skills to children with ASD, the developmental areas that are affected when play skills are taught, and when, where, and by whom play skills should be taught.. The other findings also present information about whether these teachers teach play skills to their children or not and, if so, which methods they employ while teaching.

Definition of Play Skills

Of the 14 participant teachers, 12 replied the question “What comes to your mind when you are told “play skills”?” by defining “play skills” in their own words. The teachers define play skills as activities that allow children to have fun and to learn while having fun. 2 teachers emphasized the importance of communication skills while making their definitions of play skills and 3 teachers mentioned about “children’s ability to express themselves freely” in their definitions. In other words, these teachers defined play as “a functional skill” as we can understand from the following excerpts from the interview data:

What comes to mind is developing emotional and motor skills, learning social roles, and improving communication skills (Teacher 1), activities that involve interacting with peers, effective time management, and some skills such as taking responsibility and self-expression... (Teacher 2), I think it is an area where the child can express himself, discover his abilities and improve all the developmental areas (Teacher 12), and The skills based on certain rules or not structured with rules that contribute positively to child development in terms of the teaching process. that allow children to learn while having fun, and that are needed in the performance of a task or tasks-without being labeled as an activity just to fill free time-are called play skills (Teacher 14).



The Importance of Teaching Play Skills to Children with ASD

When the participant teachers were asked about their opinions regarding teaching play skills to children with ASD, they reported that teaching play skills to children with ASD is important due to socialization problems of autistic children. They also highlighted the importance of developing imitation skills for these children and the possibility of using plays while teaching them various skills especially communication and social skills and the challenging nature of these attempts. Teacher 2 emphasized that plays should be embedded into the daily life activities of autistic children, and their specific developmental features should be taken into account while doing this.

The plays designed in relation to different situations and environments are very beneficial for autistic individuals, especially for early age groups; however, there should be a variety of plays due to some obsessions of individuals with ASD. Teacher 2 also pointed out the importance of plays in the lives of every child by saying: Plays should play an important role in the lives of autistic children as they do in the lives of all other children. Both Teacher 3 and Teacher 9 focused on how plays contribute to learning as we can understand from the following sentences: The individuals who need play skills the most are autistic children (Teacher 3) and I believe that it might be easier to teach children through plays. Because they are auditory and based on experience (Teacher 9).

Similarly, Teacher 4 and Teacher 13 pointed out the effect of play skills teaching on social and emotional development by saying:

The most important problem of children with ASD is insufficient socialization. Teaching play skills to these children will help them socialize (Teacher 4), It is absolutely essential since it supports social development and helps them express themselves (Teacher 13).

Finally, Teacher 7 emphasized the importance of play for children with ASD with the following words:

When we consider the fact that autistic children are not interested in inanimate objects and living creatures, unwilling to participate in social activities, have insufficient eye-contact and imitation skills - which are basic concepts-, play skills are essential.

The Effects of Play Skills on the Development Areas of Children with ASD

When the teachers were asked which developmental areas teaching play skills to children with ASD affects, seven teachers told that all areas are affected, while five teachers said that social-emotional development is affected. Language and communication development was mentioned by three teachers, psychomotor development by three teachers and cognitive development area by one teacher. The following excerpts clearly reflect the idea that play skills affect all development areas of children with ASD.

It affects social, psychomotor and cognitive, in fact, all development areas. All the movements directly and positively affect psychomotor development. The plays played in groups help children to socialize. And all these together contribute to children's cognitive development. (Teacher 4), I witnessed that play skills have effects on all areas; mainly cognitive development as well as psychomotor, language and affective development areas. (Teacher 6), I believe it affects psychomotor, social, language, and cognitive development, in short, all areas of development (Teacher 7), and I believe it improves certain skills, such as learning rules for social life, getting to

know oneself and one's immediate environment, being able to use one's body and express oneself (Teacher 9).

When, Where and by Whom to Teach Play Skills to Children with ASD

Twelve teachers replied the question "Where, when and by whom should play skills be taught to children with ASD?" by stating that teaching these skills during the early child period would be the most appropriate option, regardless of the age, while two teachers clearly opined that there should not be any critical age limitations for teaching play skills to children with ASD. Some excerpts regarding this issue from the interview data are as follows:

Although play skills are commonly taught during early childhood period, there is not an age limit for play skills and, in fact, there should not be. (Teacher 2), I do not think education, regardless of its type and form, could be limited by biological age, and, as for play, individual and social development of individuals should be taken into account (Teacher 6), It might not be appropriate to tell a certain age limit. Each individual may have a unique readiness level and individual characteristics. On the whole, however, it is likely to be more productive in early childhood. (Teacher 14). In short, they suggested that play skills should be taught during early childhood period and not be delayed until later periods.

All the teachers provided similar responses to the question asking about the environments where play skills should be taught to children with ASD. The participant teachers stated the following ideas related to these environments: play skills might be taught to autistic children in every environment during their daily life; the play skill or skills to be taught are a determinant factor in the choice of the environment; it will be more appropriate to choose environments where they can be together with their peers; teaching environments should be safe; and principles of incidental teaching in natural environments should be implemented as much as possible. For instance, Teacher 1 emphasized incidental teaching by saying

The following participants suggested using natural environments for teaching and stressed the importance of "making generalisations for autistic children: In addition to the child's natural environment and daily surroundings, a structured environment should also be preferred. *There should be a variation in environments. The child should make generalizations. You know making generalizations is a difficult skill for our children to develop. The skill he learns should not be confined to one single environment* (Teacher 2), *The child's natural environments would be appropriate* (Teacher 8), and *Natural environment should be created* (Teacher 10). Teacher 4 and Teacher 6, on the other hand, thought that the lesson can be conducted in any environment, giving the following answers, *It can be conducted in any environment, but the necessary precautions should be taken* (Teacher 4) and *The decision may depend on the type of game, it will be conducted in any suitable environment* (Teacher 6).

When teachers were asked who should be responsible for teaching play skills to children with ASD, eleven teachers said that the teaching should be done by experts, teachers, as well as people close to them, such as family members or caregivers, while three teachers suggested that only experts and teachers should be responsible for this teaching. To illustrate, teacher 1, teacher 2, and teacher 7 said that these lessons should be conducted by experts, teachers, and people close to them, such as family members or caregivers.

Teaching autistic children play skills should be done by everybody in a child's life, expert, family, caregiver, immediate family.. (Teacher 1), and Family, educator, caregiver should provide this teaching" (Teacher 2), In play skills teaching, family members should also play a role under the supervision of special education teachers in order to minimize limitations (Teacher 7). On the other hand, the following excerpts report that these lessons should only be taught by experts and teachers: Play skills should be taught by experts in the field so that they can serve their purpose. (Teacher 11) and The lessons should be taught by professional educators who have experience with autistic children - I mean those who have at least a bachelor's degree in special education. (Teacher 14).

The Necessity to Integrate Play Skills to Individualized Teaching Programs of Children with ASD and the Reasons lying behind this Necessity

All the participant teachers replied the question related to the necessity to use play skills in individualized teaching programs of children with ASD and the reasons lying behind this necessity by telling that the skills should be a part of educational programs. The following excerpt clearly underlined the idea that play skills should absolutely be embedded in individualized teaching programs and listed some reasons about it.

Play skills affect other areas as well, play skills suitable for each development areas should be embedded in individualized teaching plans (Teacher 5), To me, play skills should be in an individualized teaching plan more than other learning goals (Teacher 6), Yes they should be, because the most important problem is lack of imagination and inadequacy of social areas. Therefore, play skills should be embedded in the plan to improve these areas. (Teacher 9), and Teaching through play skills should be well-planned and systematic. It should be embedded in individualized teaching programs (Teacher 12)

Integration of Play Skills in Individualized teaching Programs of Children with ASD and the Methods used in Teaching

Among the teachers replying to the question asking whether they include learning outcomes related to play skills in individualized teaching programs of autistic children, eleven teachers reported that they integrate play skills into these programs and three teachers said they do not. The following excerpts are from the replies of teachers reporting that they integrate play skills into these programs:

I have incorporated the results of play-based skills into the individualized instruction programs. Colors, rhythmic counting, money, shopping. For example, I used playful skills for some topics, such as how much a notebook costs (Teacher 1), I tried to incorporate them as much as the curriculum of the Ministry of National Education allows (Teacher 7), I incorporated playful skills when I worked for the private sector, but not for the Ministry of National Education (Teacher 10).

In contrast, Teacher 3 and Teacher 13 reported that they did not include play skills in individualized teaching programs of children with ASD and explained their reasons for that situation:

I could not do it because I do not consider myself competent in terms of playing skills. I am still improving (Teacher 3), I did not teach play skills as part of a planned individualized instruction program. I have mildly autistic children in my class, my class is overcrowded and we have limited instructional time (Teacher 13). Ten participant teachers provided answers to the questions asking which methods they employ if they include play skills in individualized teaching programs while other teachers did not answer this question since they do not include play skills in such programs.

Of the teachers who responded to this question, seven teachers indicated that they use peer teaching, five teachers teach through video modeling, five teachers teach through dramatization, three teachers teach through live modeling, two teachers teach error-free, and two teachers teach incidentally. Some of the responses related to the methods used are as follows: I think the answer changes from student to student... While video modeling is used for a student, another student is taught these skills through dramatisation and peer teaching. We cannot talk about a certain method (for all) (Teacher 14), In the previous semester, my students were severely autistic. It was challenging but I managed to cope with the problem by using video modeling. (Teacher 10), I use dramatization model (Teacher 11), I teach through modeling. Peer teaching is also effective in reaching the objectives. I also often use drama method. I mean it depends on the level of each student (Teacher 4), It might be incidental teaching or in his natural environment. It does not matter. In my opinion, it is an effective method and I used it with my students in the past. Also, errorless teaching methods are used (Teacher 5).

Conclusion, Discussion and Suggestions

It is commonly acknowledged in education world that plays are an indispensable part of children's lives. Teachers participate in many trainings throughout their education which emphasize the importance of plays in children's lives. Unfortunately, the literature about plays, which are believed to be a way to understand a child's world, is limited to the studies focusing on determining the contribution of plays to child development. This study explores how teachers of children with ASD define play skills, to determine their opinions about teaching play skills to autistic children and how to structure this teaching. The findings revealed that the teachers define play skills as activities that allow children to have fun and to learn while having fun, they find teaching play skills to children with ASD important and necessary and think that plays positively affect autistic children's development in psychomotor, language and communication, social-emotional and cognitive areas and it is possible for teachers, parents and caregivers to teach these skills in every environment regardless of their ages. The findings also showed that the majority of teachers integrate play skills into individualized teaching programs and employ the following methods while teaching these skills: peer teaching, teaching through video modeling or live modelling, dramatization, errorless teaching and incidental teaching.

The study's first finding is about teachers' definitions regarding play skills. The participant teachers defined play as "activities that allow children to have fun and learn while having fun" just like in the literature. They also emphasized the importance of communication skills and expressing oneself freely and plays as functional activities that support social development. These findings are consistent with the definitions made by primary school or preschool teachers in the previous studies. Teachers define plays as "activities that provide opportunities for learning and development and allow children to explore the natural world and support areas of development (Baker, 2000; Taylor et.al., 2004; Machalicek, Shogren, Lang, Rispoli, O'Reilly, Franco & Sigafos, 2009; Nelson et.al, 2007; Senturk-Cesur & Odluyurt, 2019); they also consider plays as "a natural need of children" and associate plays with "positive feelings such as happiness, freedom, comfort, and excitement" (Baker, 2015; Boutot, Guenther & Crozier, 2005; Tekin & Tekin, 2007). It is clear that definitions and perceptions of teachers are quite similar to those reported

in the previous studies and the current study. For example, teachers perceive play as fun and educational activities that support development and consider it a need for children.

The study's findings show that teachers find teaching of play skills important and believe that a lot of skills can be taught through plays. This finding is well supported by the findings of the previous studies reporting that teachers think that lack of plays might lead to emotional and cognitive problems for children (Gunes & Tugrul, 2012). It is also parallel with the study's finding, which suggests that play is significant since it supports development areas of children (Senturk-Cesur & Odluyurt, 2019). When the findings from the current study and the previous studies are concerned, we can conclude that teachers consider plays as a need and a tool to support development; therefore, it can be said that embedding play in teaching children with ASD just like other children displaying normal development is important and essential.

According to the results of the study, the teachers believe that teaching play skills to children with ASD positively affect all development areas, especially social-emotional, psychomotor, language and communication. This finding is consistent with the theoretical knowledge which suggests that each play activity contributes to child's development areas, children whose need for playing plays are successfully satisfied will be individuals that are strong enough in terms of knowledge, skill and personality in the future, and children lacking play activities might encounter physical, mental and psychological problems (Duralp & Aral, 2010; Pehlivan, 2005). In addition, the findings obtained from the current study are parallel with those of the previous studies examining the effects of playing has on each development area separately or its overall effects on these areas (Aras, 2015; Ayan, Memis, Eynur & Kabakçı., 2012; Aronstam & Braund, 2015; Bowdon, 2015; Dagbasi, 2007; Durualp & Aral, 2010; Ersan, 2006; Gozalan, 2013; Marais, 2016; Pyle Danniels, 2017; Senturk-Cesur & Odluyurt, 2019; Turkmenoglu, 2005; Turkoglu & Uslu, 2016). Teachers can have the opportunity to support students' learning and development by providing feedback and reinforcements when they observe and take part in while children are playing. Moreover, they help children to solve problems or conflicts encountered during the play in a collaborative way, which is essential in terms of solutions to problems without disturbing the nature of plays and supporting and reinforcing children's learning and development (Aras, 2015; Broadhead, 2006; Tarman & Tarman, 2011; Tsai, 2015; Tugrul, Aslan, Erturk & Altinkaynak 2014). In summary, plays should be considered as activities that positively affect all children's development and contribute to their learning.

According to another finding of the study, the teachers think there is no critical age limit for teaching play skills to children with ASD; however, they believe that preschool period might be the most suitable time for this teaching. This finding is well supported by theoretical knowledge suggesting that learning how to play occurs in early childhood period and there is not an age limit for playing or teaching play skills (Dilekmen & Bozan-Tuzun, 2018; Turkoglu & Uslu, 2016). The teachers opined that play skills can be taught in every environment, which is consistent with the findings stated in the related literature, and this teaching should be done in natural environments as much as possible (Kircaaliftar, Kurkcuglu & Kurt, 2014), and play skills teaching should be taught by experts and

teachers as well as family members and caregivers. In addition, teachers can provide opportunities for their students and use plays for “learning” purposes when they are aware of its importance in child development and competent enough in supporting learning and development through plays (Tufekcioglu, 2013). Therefore, all pre-service teacher training programs should offer courses with a content related to play skill teaching. Also, the role of family members and caregivers of children with ASD in play skills teaching cannot be ignored although their teachers are primarily responsible for this teaching. The finding that the teaching of play skills could be taught by experts and teachers as well as family members and caregivers is consistent with the findings in the literature that family members and caregivers are responsible for teaching and should help children with ASD to develop appropriate behaviors as they are responsible for supporting their children's development and learning as they know them best and spend the most time with them in daily life (Oezdemir & Ramazan, 2012; Tugrul et.al., 2014).

Still another finding of the study shows that all the teachers believe that play skills should be embedded into individualized teaching programs of autistic children; however only some of these teachers include play skills in these programs. The teachers who do not have play skills in individualized teaching programs provide the following reasons for this situation: not being competent enough, inappropriate student profile and crowded classroom. In fact, there are special courses for this issue in special education programs (Tugrul, Aslan, Erturk, & Altinkaynak). Moreover, it should be considered that playful skills should be one of the basic skills to be taught to children with ASD, just like other skills such as psychomotor, daily living, language and communication, social-emotional or cognitive skills (Kircaali-Iftar et.al., 2014).

The last finding of the study revealed that teachers use or might use more than one teaching methods while teaching play skills to autistic children. In parallel with the findings stated in the literature, the participant teachers use the following methods while doing this type of teaching: natural teaching (Garfinkle & Schwartz, 2002), teaching through activity schedules (Dettmer et.al., 2000; Rao & Gagie, 2006) and teaching through video or live modeling (Besler & Kurt, 2016; Odluyurt, 2013; Oncul, 2015; Reagon et.al., 2006; Sani-Bozkurt & Ozen, 2015; Ulke-Kurkcuglu, Bozkurt & Cuhadar, 2015). Teachers also indicated that the methods they use depend on certain factors-in a manner appropriate to the nature of special education-such as the characteristics of the students, their age, and the extent to which they are affected by an ASD condition, implying an emphasis on individualized instruction. This study is believed to contribute to the literature by rediscovering the importance of play in supporting development and learning of children with ASD. The findings obtained in the study not only provided valuable insights for the literature, but also supported the findings reported in previous similar studies by expanding their scope as they showed that special education teachers consider play important, integrate play skills instruction into their programs, and use evidence-based practices in teaching play skills (Senturk-Cesur & Odluyurt, 2019). Taking the findings of this study into consideration and teaching play skills in frequently revised and updated education programs prepared for children with ASD might be an important step to take. One limitation of the study is that the only written



data were collected instead of conducting interviews because it is likely to collect more in-depth data through interviews.

It is evident that plays have a remarkable effect on learning through experience. Teachers should be aware of this problem and strike an appropriate balance in the classroom. In other words, they should present the lesson like a play, but not plays as a lesson. When we consider the importance of this balance as well as the findings of the current study and the previous studies, it is possible to make some suggestions for similar implementations or studies to be carried out in the future. Firstly, in-service training sessions or seminars can be organized to inform teachers about teaching play skills to children with ASD. Secondly, teacher can be encouraged and supported to include learning outcomes related to play skills while preparing individualized teaching programs for autistic children. Thirdly, pre-service teachers of special education can be given more opportunities for practical applications related to play skill teaching in both theoretical and practical courses offering content related to teaching play skills. In addition, this study can be repeated with different groups of experts such as teacher's aides, teachers teaching different subjects (physics, biology, maths etc) and pre-service teachers or with other groups of participants such as parents, caregiver or siblings etc. Finally, action research can be designed to provide guidance for special education teachers while planning and teaching play skills.

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