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Title of the Thesis: A STUDY OF TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF PLAY-BASED LEARNING AND THEIR ROLE IN ITS IMPLEMENTATION AT FOUNDATIONAL STAGE

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ABSTRACT

The early years of life are critical for children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. In India, this is reflected in NEP 2020 and the NIPUN Bharat Mission, which emphasize play-based learning (PBL) in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). However, limited evidence exists on how Anganwadi Teachers (AWTs) understand and implement play in practice. As frontline workers in the ICDS programme, they provide foundational learning, especially for underprivileged children. Despite their importance, Anganwadis face challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, insufficient professional training, and limited systemic support, affecting the effective implementation of play-based learning.

The study adopted a mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative strand involved the administration of the Play-Based Learning Test for Teachers (PBLTT) to 123 Anganwadi teachers across five selected projects in South District of NCT Delhi. The PBLTT generated percentage scores across six domains: concept of play, benefits of play, kinds of play, teacher's role, play materials, and assessment through play. Besides data was also analysed in terms of statistical measures namely mean, median, SD, RSD and mean percentage score. Chi-square tests were applied to examine associations between PBL scores and demographic variables such as ECCE training, educational qualification, and years of professional experience. The qualitative strand comprised

observations using the Anganwadi Assessment Scale (AAS) in 21 Anganwadi Centres (AWCs), field notes documenting teaching-learning processes across indoor and outdoor settings, and semi-structured interviews with 21 teachers. Triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data sources was undertaken to achieve the study's objectives and to ensure validity and depth of interpretation.

The study concluded that Anganwadi teachers (AWTs) have a moderate level of conceptual understanding of PBL. Factors such as formal pre-service ECCE training, years of service, and higher educational qualification were found to significantly influence teachers' understanding of PBL. While national frameworks highlight play as the heart of early learning, Anganwadi centres remain constrained by the lack of professionally trained teachers, inadequate teacher preparation, limited resources, and systemic neglect of pedagogical mentoring. Unless supported by structural reforms and continuous training, play will remain peripheral rather than central to early childhood education in Anganwadi settings.

The findings of the present study have important implications for policy and practice. It suggested that structured ECCE training programmes should be scaled up and institutionalized to ensure that all Anganwadi teachers acquire the knowledge and skills required for PBL. Continuous in-service mentoring and supervision should be provided through classroom-level pedagogical support. Investments in safe, child-friendly infrastructure and adequate WASH facilities are essential to create enabling learning environments. Teachers' workload should be rationalized to allow adequate time for instructional preparation and engagement. Inclusive pedagogical strategies should be incorporated into training and monitoring frameworks so that children with disabilities and diverse linguistic backgrounds can participate meaningfully. Further, the effective measures should be taken to help teachers recognize and document children's cognitive, language physical-motor, social, and emotional learning through play. Together, these strategies can bridge the gap between policy intent and practice, ensuring that play becomes a transformative pedagogical approach in early childhood education.