

Early Childhood Teachers' Perception of Play

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“Play is often talked about as if it were relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.” ~Fred Rogers

01. Introduction

Problem: Societal and policy shifts have had cascading effects on early childhood classroom use of play. This can impact children and their ability to interact with peers, actively learn, and develop skills that are cemented in the early learning years.

Purpose: Examine early childhood teachers' perceptions on the value of play in early childhood settings and their implementation and quality of play in their classrooms while balancing competing priorities spurred by the current societal shift away from play.

Significance: Contribute to the wider conversation on research on societal and policy implications for early childhood play practices and teacher experiences regarding play implementation and practices.

Research has shown there has been a loss of play not only in early childhood settings but also in society throughout recent history (Jarvis et al., 2014; Bassok et al., 2016; Christakis, 2015; Singer et al., 2009). Research also supports the need for free play in early learning settings and its importance to child development (Miller & Almon, 2009; Aras, 2015). The goal of this study is to understand if those on the front line of early learning see this loss the same way researchers do and what experiences related to barriers or loss of play they have had.

02. Research Questions

This study was designed to examine the early childhood teachers' perceptions on the value of play in early childhood settings and their implementation and quality of play in their classrooms while balancing competing priorities spurred by the current societal shift away from play. The independent variable in this study is the teacher perceptions. The dependent variables are play as a teaching tool and implementation.

Research Questions:

- 1) What are teacher's perceptions of the value of play as a teaching tool in their classroom?
- 2) What factors do they identify as barriers to implementing play-based learning?
- 3) How do teachers implement play as they balance competing priorities?

03. Methodology

Participants were recruited from 3 different early childhood programs: private, public, and government funded.

Instruments:

Survey: 23 questions to gather demographic and other background information. Participants (n=13): government funded=2; public=9; private=2

Interview: 15 question interview separated into “classroom set-up” (5 questions) and “personal views” (10 questions).

Participants (n=8): government funded=2; public=3; private=1

Observations: 4 hours of observation was conducted per classroom using two environmental assessment tools. Participants (n=6): government funded=2; public=4; private=1

Early Childhood Teacher Demographics (N = 13)

Factor	n	%
Gender		
Male	13	100
Female	-	-
Non-binary / other	-	-
Race/ethnicity		
White	2	15
Hispanic	-	-
Black or African American	-	-
Asian Pacific Islander	-	-
Latino or Hispanic	13	100
Native American/Alaska	-	-
Other	-	-
Age		
18-20	-	-
21-25	4	31
26-30	2	15
31-35	2	15
36-40	2	15
41-45	2	15
46-50	-	-
50+	2	15
Prefer not to say	-	-
Level of Education		
High School/GED	-	-
Some college/CDA	1	8
Associate's degree	2	15
Bachelor's degree	8	62
Master's degree	2	15
Other	-	-
Subsiding in Play		
None	2	15
A little	1	8
Some	6	46
A lot	4	31
A great deal	1	8

Observation Tools:

- Prekindergarten Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)
- Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS), Third Edition

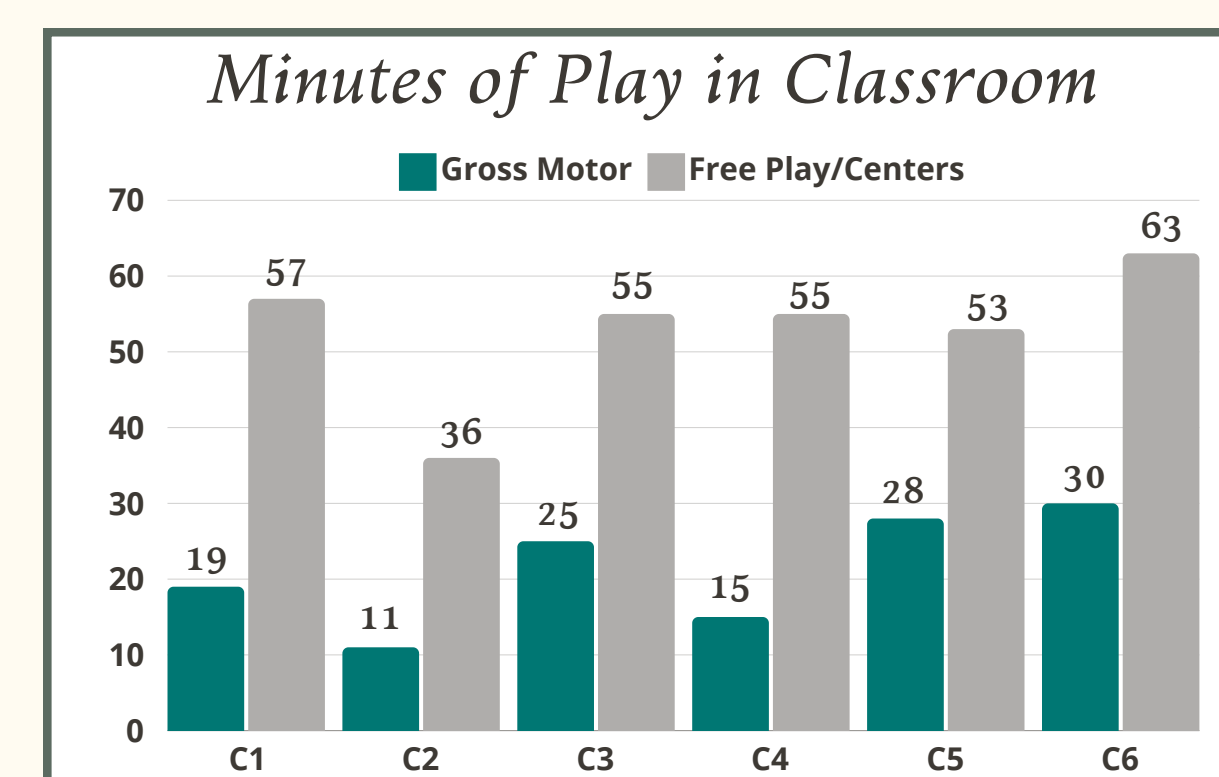
Table 2
Teacher Perception of the Value of Play (Survey Results)

Factor	n	%
How important do you think play is for early childhood classrooms?		
Not at all important	-	-
Slightly important	-	-
Moderately important	1	8
Very important	4	31
Extremely important	8	62
To what extent do you feel you use play in your classroom?		
Not enough	2	15
Enough the right amount	9	69
More than enough	2	15
To more than you wish you could do differently regarding play in your classroom?		
More time	5	38
Communication	2	15
Classroom Organization	4	31
None	2	15

Table 4
Perceived barriers to play (Survey Results)

Factor	n	%
Do you feel there are barriers to implementing play in your classroom?		
Yes	2	15
No	4	31
Some	9	69
What barriers do you see to play in your classroom? (check all that apply)		
Curriculum	4	31
Administration	2	15
Parental/social attitudes	2	15
Lack of time	10	77
Policy	1	8
Other*	1	8
None	2	15

*Children not knowing how to play



05. Results/Findings

Survey

- Teachers averaged 11 years working in early childhood
- More time was the most cited (38%) issue teachers would change regarding play in their classroom.
 - followed closely (31%) by the desire to have more play and intentional teaching through play in their curriculums
- Most participants (69%) indicated at least some barriers to play in their classrooms.
- The most common barrier reported by teachers (77%) was a lack of time in the school day, distantly followed by curriculum (31%).

Interview

- All seven (100%) interviewees said they felt play held a vital role in early childhood education and believed critical skills are learned through play.
- All participants (100%) emphatically expressed that they felt play enhances academics.
- Many (57%) of the teachers cited a shift in academics specifically in Kindergarten
 - Two teachers (29%) said this has caused a “trickle down” effect into preschool rooms.
- Cited shift (n=3) in the need teach kids how to play at the beginning of the year
- The teachers' personal definitions of play:
 - Four (57%) saying play means using their imagination with three (43%) adding that this means a freedom to explore.
- Six teachers (85%) indicated time as the main barrier to play in their classrooms and trying to balance all their classroom responsibilities

- Questions used in the Qualitative Interview
1. Could you tell me a bit about what a typical day in your classroom looks like?
 2. How do you use play in your classroom?
 3. If you use center-based play in your classroom, what are the teachers in the classroom's role at this time?
 4. Do you feel any constraints to implementing play in your classroom?
 5. Do you think play and academics are evenly balanced in your classroom?
 6. What is your definition of play? What is the role of play in your classroom?
 7. How would you explain the role of play to a parent?
 8. In your time as an educator do you feel there has been a shift in the expectation of play in the classroom?
 9. Do you think there are enough opportunities for play in your classroom?
 10. Have you experienced any push towards implementing more academics in your classroom?
 11. Do you think play enhances or detracts from academics?
 12. How does play fit into today's academic environment?
 13. How much emphasis is put on “kindergarten readiness” in your program?
 14. Do you feel like this puts more pressure on you to focus on academic achievement?
 15. Do you feel any stress balancing the different aspects of teaching such as curriculum, best practices, personal wants, and expectations?

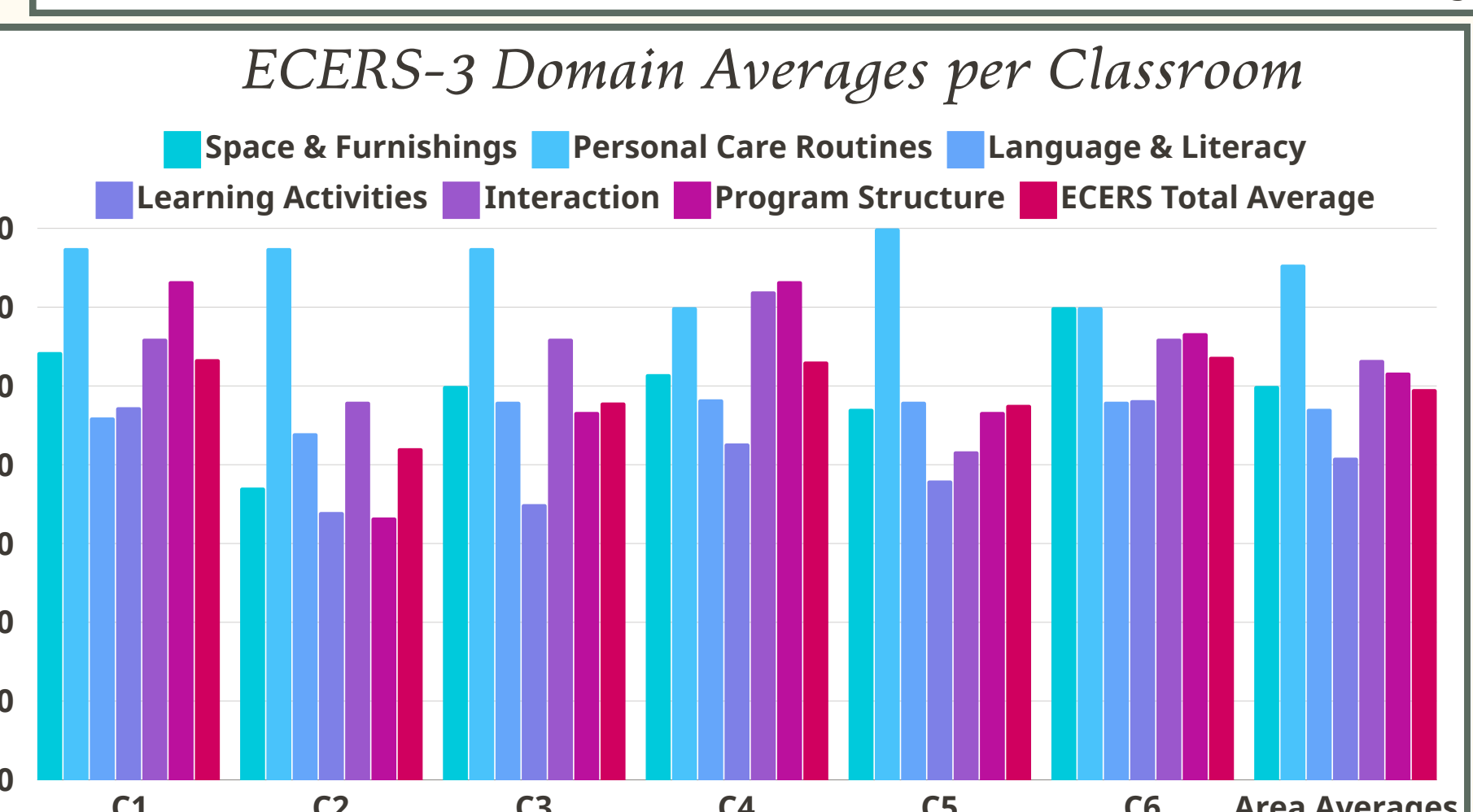
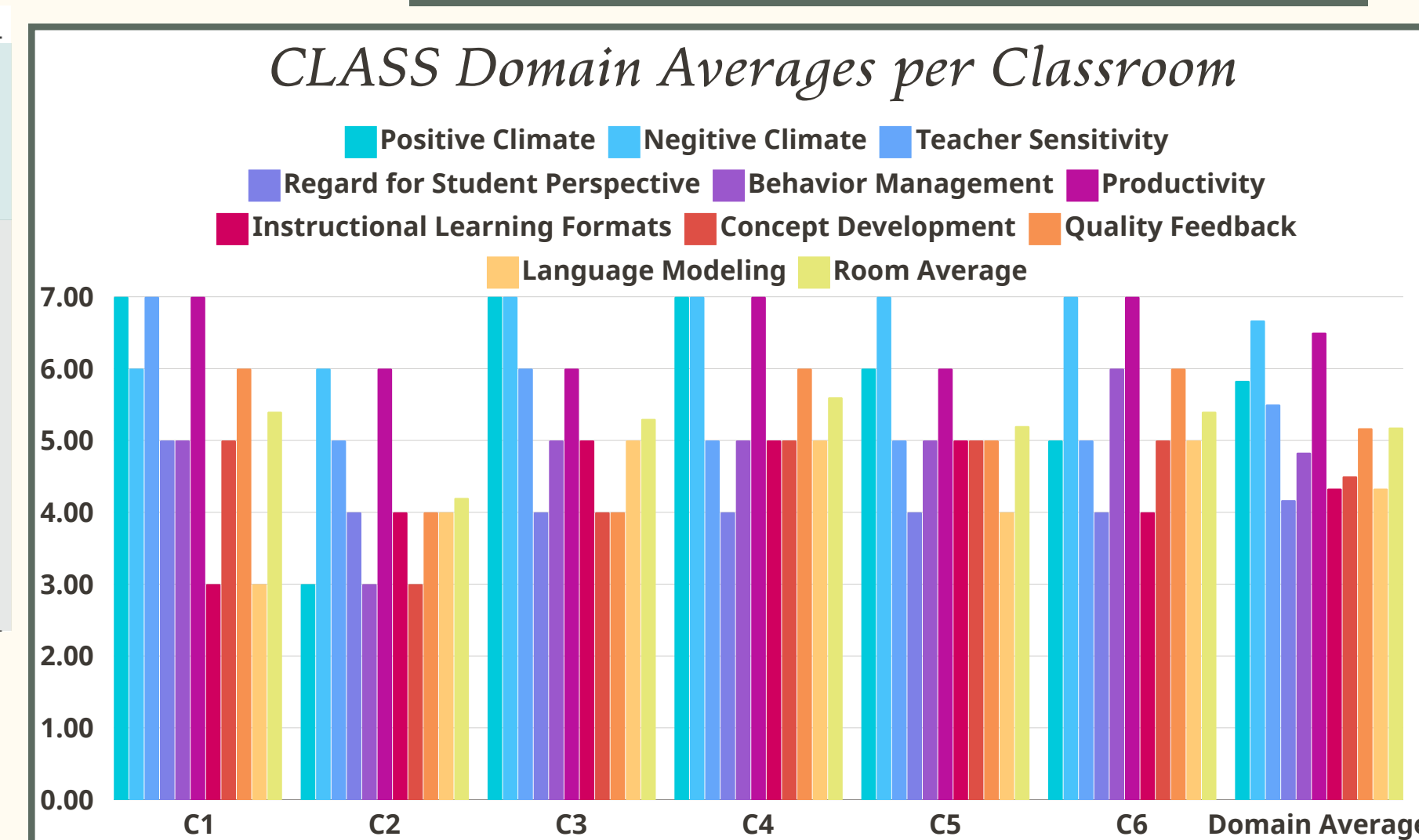
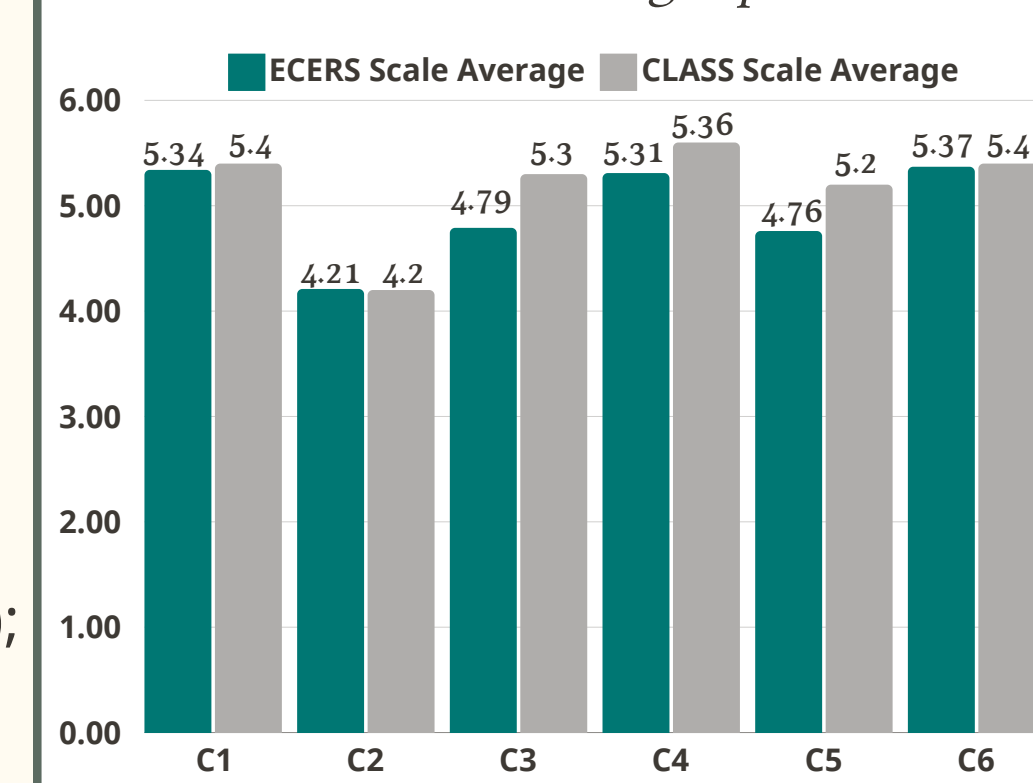
“It's just crazy that we can't hold their engagement really, you know, [because] there's no screen time”

“Time, not time in general, but like time balanced with everything else that you're supposed to fit in a day nowadays”.

“Then they get to like the elementary ages you have like the test scores and all of that stuff that you have to get done. So, like when I went to kindergarten, we still had center time, but they don't have that now”

“I feel like elementary school has increased their expectations so much, especially prior to the last 10 to 20 years. It's almost like that trickledown effect then, to what the kindergarten teachers want to see, more preschoolers coming in with more skills that they used to teach [in kindergarten] and so you feel that pressure”

ECERS-3 vs CLASS averages per classroom



04. Analysis

The statistical analysis was conducted using both Excel spreadsheets and SPSS to evaluate the observation data. Using SPSS descriptive statistics as well as Pearson Correlation comparing the ECERS and CLASS total classroom averages for the six classroom observations completed in this study. Excel was used to create the average values as well as compare the classroom averages across the six ECERS and ten CLASS domains as well as their total average score across the entire assessment.

Table 6
Correlation between ECERS and CLASS Average

	ECERS Average	CLASS Average
ECERS Average	1	.894*
Pearson Correlation		.016
Sig. (2-tailed)		
N	6	6
CLASS Average	.894*	1
Pearson Correlation		.016
Sig. (2-tailed)		
N	6	6

R=.894

High positive correlation across six classroom scores on ECERS and CLASS

Standard Deviation < .5

Variation: .213 (ECERS) and .250 (CLASS)

- Statistically similar

Table 7
Statistical significance of ECERS and CLASS

	ECERS Average	CLASS Average
N	6	6
Valid	1	1
Missing	6	6
Mean	4.9633	5.183
Std. Deviation	.46181	.4997
Variance	.213	.250

06. Conclusion

The biggest common thread throughout this study was **lack of time**.

Classrooms that were observed as a part of this study scored similarly between the two assessment measures used. The ECERS and the CLASS were designed to be highly correlated with each other, therefore this was an expected outcome and gave the ratings further validity. Both scales use a 7-point Likert scale, the classrooms were scoring averages that fell within the 'Medium' and 'Good' (4-5 and 3-5) on the ECERS and CLASS respectively.

The two government funded programs had the two lowest averages on both the ECERS (4.21 and 4.76) and CLASS (4.2 and 5.2) Additionally, they had the two lowest minutes of free play/centers in their classroom (36 and 53 minutes). The classroom that scored the lowest on average for both the ECERS and CLASS also had the lowest rate of gross motor time (11 minutes).

Future Recommendations

- Further studies to increase number of participants and diversify sample population
- Evaluate role of technology as a contributing factor for low levels of classroom engagement and reduction in creativity and imaginative play

Implications

Parents- Recognize as an issue that may need to be addressed at home. Rise of technology as a form of entertainment may be negatively affecting kids.
Teachers- Teachers are aware of these inequities, but are overloaded with balancing responsibilities.
Administration- Curriculums that are being picked may be negatively affecting both teachers and students. Allow more ownership for teachers to pick classroom activities, practices, and/or curriculum.